

PSALM 51:8–9

October 31, 2021

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. As I told you several weeks ago, this psalm has three sections. They're found in verses 1–9, 10–17, and 18–19. I'm calling the first one "confession," the second one "restoration," and the third one "intercession." So far we've covered the first seven verses, and today we'll be finishing the first section. What's happening in the first section is that we have a confession sandwich. Strictly speaking we only see the theme of confession in verses 3–6, which are found in the very center of this section. But in verses 1–2 David made four requests to God in which he was basically asking God to forgive him. Then in verses 7–9 he returned to this theme and once again requested forgiveness from God. After David confessed his sin, it was appropriate for him to repeat his request to be forgiven.

Last week we looked at verse 7, where David wrote, "Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." There are two parallel statements in this verse. Each one starts with a request and ends with the result that would come if the request was granted. So David's first request in verse 7 was for God to purify him. The Hebrew verb here normally means "to sin," and it's the same one that we saw in verse 4 where David confessed his sin. But when this Hebrew verb is used in a special stem called the piel stem, it refers to the absence or removal of sin. And this is the stem that David used in verse 7. He was asking God to purify him from sin, and he explained how by adding the phrase "with hyssop."

Hyssop is a small, bushy plant that can grow to be about four feet tall. It's valuable because it produces a form of oregano, which is still a very common herb today. It was used in cleansing ceremonies to sprinkle water or blood. It was also used in connection with the very first Passover meal right before the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. Exodus 12 tells us that the Israelites used a cluster of hyssop to brush their doorframes with blood from the slaughtered Passover animal. And of course we know that the blood points forward to the death of Jesus on the cross when he shed his blood to pay the penalty for our sins. But blood isn't the only connection between the Passover and the crucifixion. When Jesus said that he was thirsty on the cross, John 19:29 tells us that some people "fixed a sponge full of sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it up to his mouth." In God's providence a hyssop branch was used so we could see that the same God who rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt also rescued us from slavery to sin through the death of his Son.

So in Psalm 51:7 David asked God to purify him with hyssop. But this doesn't mean that he was hoping God would sprinkle blood on him using a literal hyssop branch. He was speaking metaphorically and using ceremonial language to refer to a spiritual issue. He was unclean morally and needed God to purify

him of his sin. And he knew that if God granted his request, he would be clean. The Hebrew word for clean is the same term that David used back in verse 2, where he asked God to cleanse him from his sin. But this term is also used multiple times in the book of Leviticus to refer to being cleansed from a skin disease. Once again David was using ceremonial language to refer to moral purity.

So David's first request in Psalm 51:7 was for God to purify him so that he would be clean. But then David made a second request. He said, "Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." The Hebrew word for wash is the same one that we saw back in verse 2, where David asked God to completely wash away his guilt. This term is also used in Exodus 19, where it refers to washing clothes. So when David asked God to wash him, he was picturing himself as a set of dirty clothes that needed to be cleaned. And that sounds pretty straightforward to us, because these days if we want to get our clothes cleaned, we just throw them in the washing machine. But David couldn't get himself cleaned that easily. In fact, there was nothing he could do to clean himself. He knew that God was the only one who could wash him. That's why he asked God not just once but twice in this psalm to wash him. And here in verse 7 he said that if God washed him, he would be whiter than snow.

It was exactly 30 years ago today that I experienced the biggest blizzard of my life. It started snowing on Halloween in the evening, and by morning we had almost three feet of snow! I can still remember waking up and being amazed at how white things were outside. And this is the picture that David wanted us to imagine in verse 7. He said that he would be even whiter than snow if God washed him. We also see this image in Isaiah 1:18. Listen to this verse: "Come, let us settle this," says the LORD. "Though your sins are scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are crimson red, they will be like wool." This verse has the same two Hebrew words for white and snow that David used in Psalm 51:7. And in both places the image is referring to moral purity. It's a picture of being forgiven by God.

Now in some places the Hebrew word for snow is used negatively to refer to a skin disease. For example, when Miriam spoke against her brother Moses in Numbers 12, verse 10 says that her "skin suddenly became diseased, resembling snow." God was punishing her for selfishly opposing his chosen leader without a legitimate reason. So ironically snow sometimes pictures a condition that requires cleansing! But normally snow has a positive connotation in Scripture and represents the condition of someone who has been cleansed. In fact, it even refers to Jesus in Daniel 7. This chapter has a description of a vision that Daniel saw. And in verse 9 he said, "As I kept watching, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white like snow."

So the white clothing in this verse shows us that Jesus was morally pure. He has never once committed sin, even after he took on human flesh. He was certainly tempted in every way that we are when he was on earth, but he never gave in to temptation. He remained perfect and sinless. And so Jesus didn't just pay the penalty of our sins so that we can be forgiven. He certainly washes our sins away and makes us whiter than snow when we confess our sins like David did. But Jesus is also our model and shows us how to be pure. Listen to 1 John 3:2-3: "We know that when he appears, we will be like him because we will see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure." So as we look forward to the return of Jesus, let's follow his example and live in obedience to God.

Now let's move on to Psalm 51:8 and look at some new material. Here's what David wrote in verse 8: "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice." So in verse 7 David presented two requests to God, and here we have two more requests. But the requests are a bit different in verse 8. In verse 7 David basically asked God to forgive him, but in verse 8 the focus is on the result of being forgiven. David wanted to experience the joy of forgiveness. This is a theme that he talked about in another psalm. Listen to what he wrote in Psalm 32:1-2: "How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How joyful is a person whom the LORD does not charge with iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit!" So David knew that we experience great joy when God has forgiven our sins.

But in Psalm 51:8 David began not by talking about his own joy but the joy of others. He said, "Let me hear joy and gladness." The Hebrew word for hear is very common in the Old Testament and appears over a thousand times. David used it over and over in the Book of Psalms to talk about God hearing him. For example, in Psalm 27:7 he said, "LORD, hear my voice when I call; be gracious to me and answer me." And in Psalm 28:6 he said, "Blessed be the LORD, for he has heard the sound of my pleading." But in Psalm 51:8 David wasn't talking about God hearing him. Instead he was talking about God causing him to hear. He used the hiphil stem for the Hebrew verb, which normally has the nuance of causing an action. That's why the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the New International Version have the phrase "let me hear." The New American Standard Bible has the very similar phrase "make me to hear."

But whether the Hebrew verb for hear is used in the regular stem, the hiphil stem, or some other stem, it almost always refers to someone listening to others. Now of course we can certainly hear the sound of our own voice. But that's not really the point of having ears, is it? God didn't give us ears so that we could enjoy listening to ourselves talk. We don't need to talk out loud to know what we're thinking. But we do need to listen to others talk if we're going to understand them. God gave us ears and the ability to hear primarily so that we can listen to others.

But why did David need to ask God to let him hear? Did he suddenly become deaf when he sinned with Bathsheba? The answer is of course "no." David wasn't talking about hearing other people in general. He was talking about hearing joy and gladness from others. But now it sounds like David just had an issue with selective hearing. This is a problem that we all experience to various degrees, especially when we're kids. When our mom told us that it was time for dessert, we would come running to the kitchen in a flash. But when our mom told us to clean our room, suddenly our hearing wasn't so good! Somehow our ears would pick out the word "dessert" very easily, but the word "clean" just didn't stand out.

So did David have selective hearing? Was he unable to hear joy and gladness from others after he sinned with Bathsheba? I seriously doubt it. I think it's more likely that he was talking about a specific kind of joy and gladness. It's the kind of joy that we read about in 2 Samuel 6:12, which says that "David went and had the ark of God brought up from Obed-edom's house to the city of David with rejoicing." The Hebrew word for rejoicing there is the same word translated "gladness" in Psalm 51:8. There was great joy when David moved the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, because then the Israelites could worship God together at their capital city. David talked about this kind of joy in Psalm 122:1. Listen to what he wrote in

this verse: “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD.’” The Hebrew verb translated “rejoiced” in that verse comes from the same root as the Hebrew noun for gladness in our verse. David was talking about a special joy that people experienced when they worshiped God together at the tabernacle.

We see the same theme in Psalm 42:4, where the psalmist wrote, “I remember this as I pour out my heart: how I walked with many, leading the festive procession to the house of God, with joyful and thankful shouts.” The writer here was talking about the joy of traveling with fellow believers to God’s house in Jerusalem to worship him together. I believe this is the same kind of joy that David was referring to in Psalm 51:8. He was talking about the joy that comes from participating in corporate worship. And he emphasized this joy by using two synonymous Hebrew terms, which are translated with the words “joy” and “gladness” in the Christian Standard Bible and most other translations. Together these terms communicate the deep joy that we experience when we worship God with fellow believers.

This is a joy that we so easily take for granted. When we get into the routine of coming to church week after week, we can start to lose sight of how important corporate worship is. In many ways the COVID pandemic was a blessing in disguise, and this is one of them. When we couldn’t worship together in person for several months, we gained a new appreciation for the blessing of that joyful experience. But a global pandemic isn’t the only way that we can lose the chance to worship corporately. When we fall into unrepentant sin, the result should be that we’re put under church discipline. And David was facing something similar until God forgave him. He was excluded from corporate worship at the tabernacle because of his sin with Bathsheba.

So when David asked God to let him hear joy and gladness in Psalm 51:8, he was pointing to the result of forgiveness. Until God forgave him, he wasn’t permitted to hear the joy and gladness of corporate worship. He wasn’t just separated from fellowship with God because of his sin; he was also separated from fellowship God’s people and wasn’t allowed to worship with them. Then in the second half of verse 8, David made another request. He asked God, “Let the bones you have crushed rejoice.” The Hebrew word for bones normally refers to the entire skeletal structure. So David was picturing himself as a person who had been physically beaten. He felt as though God had taken a club and had struck him over and over.

Now of course there’s no basis for thinking that God literally crushed David’s bones. We should understand this statement in light of the context. In verse 3 David said, “I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.” So in verse 8 I think David was probably making a figurative reference to his bones. He was saying that his bones represented who he was as a person. God was crushing David’s bones in the sense that he was reminding David constantly about his sin. But we know from other passages that there’s an element of physical suffering we sometimes experience when we sin. In Psalm 32 David described what happened to him on one occasion when he didn’t confess his sin. Listen to what he said in verses 3-4: “When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was drained as in the summer’s heat.”

David said something similar in Psalm 38. Listen to what he wrote in verse 3: “There is no soundness in

my body because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.” So in both of these passages David used the same Hebrew word for bones that we have in our passage. And it’s clear that he was referring to physical suffering as a result of his sin in those passages. We even see this theme in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul warned his readers not to participate in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner. Then in verse 30 he said, “This is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep.” So Paul taught very clearly that when we sin, we sometimes experience physical difficulties as a result of God’s discipline.

Now we have to be careful not to go too far here. Not all suffering is a direct result of sin. This is the mistaken assumption that Job’s friends made about him. Even the disciples of Jesus had some bad theology here. When they saw a blind man in John 9:1, they asked Jesus in verse 2, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” In verse 3 Jesus responded by saying, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” He said that “this came about so that God’s works might be displayed in him.” So not all suffering comes because we’ve sinned. But sometimes our sin does lead to suffering. The main impact is on our inner person, but inner pain can have physical effects. From time to time you’ve probably experienced the physical toll that your sin can bring on you. Maybe you get a headache, or you can’t sleep at night, or you feel like you’re carrying a heavy burden on your back.

Now we don’t know how much David was suffering in Psalm 51. We know that he was suffering on the inside, and perhaps he was suffering on the outside as well. But however he was suffering from his sin, he didn’t want to experience it anymore. That’s why he asked God in verse 8, “Let the bones you have crushed rejoice.” The Hebrew word for rejoice comes from a root that literally means “circle.” The idea probably has to do with circling or whirling around in joy. We have a word for that; we call it “dancing.” And that’s exactly how David expressed his joy when he transported the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. We already read 2 Samuel 6:12, which says that “David went and had the ark of God brought up from Obed-edom’s house to the city of David with rejoicing.” Then verse 14 says that “David was dancing with all his might before the LORD.” His joy was so exuberant that he couldn’t contain himself; he had to express his joy physically. And I suspect that he was talking about something similar in Psalm 51.

So in verse 8 of this psalm, David was basically asking God to forgive him by focusing on the result of forgiveness. First of all, he wanted to hear his fellow believers rejoice. He wanted to be part of corporate worship with them. But he didn’t just want to hear others rejoice in worship. He also wanted to rejoice along with them. Then in verse 9 we see two final requests in the opening section of this psalm. In this verse David wrote, “Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt.” So in verses 1-2 we saw that David made four requests to God, and now in verses 7-9 we have six more requests for a total of 10 requests in this section.

But in the original Hebrew the requests are not precisely parallel. In verses 1-2 David used four imperative verbs to convey his requests. We tend to think of an imperative as a command, and that’s often the case. But Hebrew imperatives could be used for making a request, and that’s what David was doing in those verses. Then in verse 7 we saw that David just used regular verbs that are normally found in declarative statements. And I didn’t comment on it earlier, but David did exactly the same thing in verse 8.

However, as I mentioned last week, the Hebrew verbal system has a lot of flexibility, and sometimes these regular verbs are used to make a request. That's how all the major translations interpret the verbs in verses 7-8, and this interpretation makes the most sense in the context. We can't say for sure why David switched his approach to making requests, but perhaps he was just being a little less bold in these verses.

Now we might think that David would have continued using regular verbs in verse 9 like he did in verses 7-8. But he didn't; he switched back to using imperatives like he did in verses 1-2. Once again it's hard to know for certain why he did that. My best guess is that he just wanted to create a chiasm here. In other words, he was returning full circle to how he started this section. And that's not the only way that David gave us a chiasm here. In verse 1 David asked God to blot out his rebellion, and in verse 9 he ended with the same Hebrew verb. He asked God to blot out all his guilt. As we've already seen, this Hebrew verb just means to wipe something clean. It's also used in Isaiah 25:8, which says that "the LORD God will wipe away the tears from every face and remove his people's disgrace from the whole earth." We know from Revelation 21:4 that this promise will be fulfilled after Satan and his followers are thrown into the lake of fire.

But at the beginning of Psalm 51:9, David used a new verb. He asked God to turn his face away from David's sins. The Hebrew verb here for turn literally means "to hide." The English Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version are more literal here. They all have the phrase "hide your face from my sins." Now when we see this verb with the Hebrew word for "face" in the Book of Psalms, there's usually a negative connotation. In Psalm 13:1 David said, "How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" In Psalm 27:9 David said, "Do not hide your face from me; do not turn your servant away in anger. You have been my helper; do not leave or abandon me, God of my salvation."

So when God hid his face from David, he believed that God was angry with him. And he felt like God had rejected him and abandoned him. In Psalm 30:7 David went even further and said, "When you hid your face, I was terrified." It was not a pleasant experience at all when God hid his face from David! But of course here in Psalm 51:9 David wasn't asking God to hide his face from him but from his sins. He didn't want God to look at his sins or pay attention to them. He basically didn't want God to take his sins into account on judgment day. The Hebrew word for sins is the same one that we already saw in verses 2, 3, and 5. It comes from a root that means "to miss a mark or a goal." The idea is that we miss the mark of God's perfect standard. But this is the first time in the psalm that David used this word in the plural. He was emphasizing the multitude of times that he had failed to live in obedience to God.

Then at the end of verse 9 David switched to a different word that refers to his disobedience. He asked God to blot out all his guilt. When he used this verb in verse 1, he followed it with the word "rebellion." But here he used the word "guilt" instead. We already saw this Hebrew word back in verses 2 and 5. It comes from a root that means "to bend" or "to twist." If you take something that's straight and bend it, then it becomes crooked. The image here is a straight path of righteousness, and when we sin, we leave that path. We veer to the side and go astray. We depart from the standard of behavior that God has set up for us. So a more literal translation here would be the word "crookedness."

So David used a variety of words in this psalm that refer to his disobedience. But it wasn't until verse 9 that he used the word "all." He didn't just ask God to blot out his guilt but all his guilt. This statement follows perfectly on the heels of the plural word "sins" earlier in the verse. Once again he was emphasizing that he had disobeyed God many times. David was probably thinking about all the sins he had committed recently. He didn't just commit adultery with Bathsheba; he also arranged for her husband to be murdered. And those were just the big sins; there were plenty of other sins that were part of the equation. David needed to be forgiven for all these sins.

And David stressed this point by giving us another chiasm here. We've already talked about the chiasm that covers verses 1–9. But there's also a chiasm right here in verse 9. In the original Hebrew text David started this verse with the verb for hide, and he ended this verse with the verb translated "blot out." But in a chiasm the emphasis isn't usually on the beginning and the end. Instead it's normally found in the very center. For example, we could think about a sandwich, which is sort of like a chiasm. We have two slices of bread: one on the top and one on the bottom. But the best part of a sandwich is not the bread on the outside but the meat on the inside. The bread's there mainly to hold everything together.

So the chiasm in verse 9 stresses the parallel phrases in the middle, which are focused on David's sins and all his guilt. The lesson here for us is that we need to be forgiven of all our sins, whether big or small. Now it's true that at the moment of salvation God forgives us of all our sins—past, present, and future. But that's in a judicial sense; as Christians we still need forgiveness in a parental sense. Our sin harms our relationship with our heavenly Father. We don't stop being his child, but we need to be restored to him. So whenever we sin, we need to pause and confess it to God. And the sooner we do it, the better! Otherwise we run the risk of experiencing some physical suffering as a result of our Father's loving discipline. It's much better to experience the joy of receiving his parental forgiveness and have a restored relationship with him. Let's close in prayer and thank God for the joy of forgiveness.