



WHITER THAN SNOW¹

SERIES: KING DAVID

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Psalm 51

19th Message

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Graduation season is upon us. The focus is on our graduates and their growing achievements. Teary-eyed parents watch their children take the stage. Graduation is the time when all our yearnings for them break through the surface. What do we want for our children? If we are honest, we must admit we long for them to be the best—the best athletes, the best scholars. These are the things that appeal to the pride in all of us, especially in this extremely competitive part of the world.

It is traditional to invite dignitaries to address graduating students and challenge them to be the best they can be. I wondered what David, the greatest King in Israel and forerunner to the Messiah, would say to our graduates today if he were asked to address one of our graduating classes. What incidents from his life would he memorialize as the things that shaped his soul? I think he would chose the words of Psalm 51, which he authored, for his text.

Let's imagine that David is delivering the commencement address at one of our local high schools or universities. As his eyes rest upon the graduating class, and the thousands of parents and friends assembled, David begins his remarks by describing how he had found life's greatest secret, the thing that would draw the very best out of them. He says that he even wrote a poem about it and set it to music, a work that had become a centerpiece for worship in Israel.

But the students and the audience alike are taken aback when David reads the title of his poem:

For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

The superscription² is a permanent public reminder that God sent the prophet Nathan to enter David's soul, just when David entered into Bathsheba. Every time this psalm was sung at the temple it would be a public reminder of the king's sin and the prophet's word. It was at this point in his life that David learned that the greatest secret in life is the grace of God. This was what the King of Israel experienced when he came face to face with his own depravity.

Psalm 51 has four major divisions: an appeal, a confession, a prayer of restoration, and then these three are climaxed by the king's vows. Tacked on at the end (vv 18-19) is an addendum, written by an unknown poet during Israel's exile. These forsaken exiles found David's penitent words so fitting to their own condition, they appropriated Psalm 51 for the circumstances which they were facing and then added a prayer of their own. In doing so they set a wonderful example for how we should view these psalms: We should memorize them and personalize them. This is essential for our own healing.

The psalm opens with David's appeal to God.

I. The Appeal (51:1-3)

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness
(loyal-love);
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my
transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.

**For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.** (NASB)

After you have taken a wrong turn in life and you are lying in the filth of your own making, how do you make your appeal to God? How do you approach a Holy Being who has treated you with grace, but whom you have despised? Do you fall on your knees and recite a rosary or some other litany of formal prayers to prove your sincerity? Do you make a vow never to fall into sin again? How do you begin to speak? Notice that David doesn't say very much. His prayer is short, but it is wonderfully crafted, and it is offered in the right spirit. His psalm, spoken with humility, passion and creativity, gets to the heart of the matter.

David's first word (in Hebrew: *channeni*, "Be gracious to me, O God") signifies that he has nothing to give, so he asks God to give him something he does not deserve. What does David appeal to within the heart of God that might move him to be gracious? This man who is so well acquainted with God draws upon the deepest part of God's heart and appeals his loyal-love (that oath of covenantal loyalty) and compassion. You can always get God's attention when you speak to him about his covenantal promises. He will respond with tender warmth (Kidner).

Secondly, notice how David's appeal is bathed in a spirit of humility. He takes full ownership for his sin. He uses the whole range of Hebrew vocabulary for sin, grasping each word unequivocally as his own, using the personal possessive pronoun "my": *My* transgressions, *my* iniquity, *my* sin, *my* transgressions, *my* sin.

Thirdly, David confesses that what is really driving him is his need. Sin is having a terrible effect upon him. He selects a verb ("to know") and a preposition ("before"). The first time these words are used together in the Bible they describe a wife whom her husband *knows* intimately (a sexual term, Gen 4:1), one who was created to be his constant companion in his presence (Gen 2:20). Now David cries out in his pain that though his acts of sin are over, their memory is very much alive. They have given birth to a living memory which looms out of the past and hovers over him in the present. The memory penetrates so deeply, he cannot probe it. It is ever before him. He cannot escape it. This is what terrorizes him and drives him to appeal for grace. When a needy, desperate sinner who takes full responsibility for his sin approaches God in this way, God is always moved to help.

David's appeal is followed with a confession that comes from a new understanding.

II. Confession With a New Understanding (51:4-5)

**Against You, You only, I have sinned,
And done what is evil in Your sight (eyes),
So that You are justified when You speak,
And blameless when You judge.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.**

David's terrible memories of his adultery and murder have left him with a deep understanding about God and himself. God was fully in the right. David was fully in the wrong. So when God judged, David deserved whatever he got. Note that the five

"You's" are David's answer to God's five "I's" of 2 Samuel 12:7-8: "I anointed you, I delivered you," etc.

In the poem David uses every Hebrew term for sin to describe his depravity: sin, transgression, iniquity, evil; he had sinned; he had missed the mark; he did not do what he should have done (i.e. gone to battle); he had transgressed; he had done what was wrong, in a high handed manner, flaunting his wrongdoing in the eyes of his God. "Iniquity" speaks of the perversions and twisted wreckage of lives and relationships left behind. David had perverted the office of king for personal gain, and the office of commander-in-chief to cover up a murder. He had twisted the sacred bonds of friendship to shed blood. But, when he said glibly to Joab: "Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes," he had reached the depths. When David renamed that which was evil and called it good, it was then that all heaven was provoked into decisive action. His tragic experience taught him with poignant severity that he was capable of anything.

But even more painful to David was this new realization that his propensity to sin was not the exception. It was not a rare fit and flurry of unbridled passion and anger. Sin was always present with him. It lived just below the surface; it had been with him since birth. All that was needed was the right set of circumstances to bring it to the surface. Sin was part of his character. He was inbred with it. Thus, David moves from saying, "I sinned," to "I am a sinner." This is the same understanding that dawned upon Martin Luther and the Reformers in Europe. When we come to the same knowledge, then we, too, become candidates for new revelations of grace.

In the third part of David's poem, the prayer of restoration, the sobering knowledge of the depth of his depravity now forces the king to new heights of creativity.

III. Prayer of Restoration (51:6-13)

The heart of David's poem comprises four couplets. In these verses the poet reaches the pinnacle of genius. This is where David gets a doctoral degree for new developments in the theology of grace. This is where he makes daring, outrageous statements that had never before been attempted. He utilizes only four words for sin, but more than twenty metaphors for how God cleanses the sinner from sin and its effects. With astonishing freedom, David pushes the limits of grace to infinity. David, the Einstein of grace, a thousand years before the time of Christ, anticipates the New Covenant in all its majestic beauty. His prayer is profoundly simple, like Einstein's $E=mc^2$, yet it is a work of absolute genius. David throws himself headlong upon the mercy of God, risking everything in the process.

The first of his four petitions is, "Wash me."

(a) Wash me

**Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.
Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.** (51:6-7)

God desires truth "in the innermost being," but as David probed the hidden parts of his soul he saw that he was a spiritual leper. The image, "Purify me with hyssop," was used for the purification rights of a leper (see Lev 14:6-7; Mark 1:40-45). David needed to be opened up, to be washed and scrubbed clean by God. Then, he says, "I shall be whiter than snow." This is a new metaphor for cleansing, a David original. The prophet Isaiah would adopt it and turn it into orthodox theology, saying: "Though your sins are as scarlet they will be as white as snow" (Isa 1:18). It is significant that in Mark 1:40-45, Jesus cleanses a leper; and following the Lord's resurrection, an angel sat on the stone which had sealed the tomb, and his appearance was like lightning, his clothes were "as white as snow" (Matt 28:3).

If that were not enough, David asks for more. Once God had washed him, then God had to take the initiative to teach him wis-

dom in his innermost being. God would have to act if that were to happen ("You will make me to know"). And David had confidence that God would indeed take the initiative. It did not depend on David to get truth into his heart. What a bold request!

David's second request for restoration is for God to heal him.

(b) Heal me

**Make me to hear joy and gladness,
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.
Hide Your face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.** (51:8-9)

David's sins had made him deaf to joy; and they had made him lame, so that he had no delight in his step. He needed God's miraculous, healing touch to make him well again.

There are interesting implications here concerning the miracles of Jesus. When our Lord healed the deaf and the lame, he said to them: "your sins are forgiven." Verse 9 of the psalm is radical: "Hide your face from my sins, and blot out my iniquities." Up to this point in OT history, the verb "to blot out" was used to describe what God does to sinners.³ In Gen 6:7, God said he would "blot out" all mankind in the flood. "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot him out of my book" (Exod 32:33). David even used this verb in his prayers: "may [the wicked] be blotted out of the book of life" (Ps 69:28). But here, in Psalm 51, David is the wicked one. Now what does he do?

Notice the change. Here he says to God, in effect: "Instead of blotting out my name from the book of life, will you redirect your energy and passion to blot out my iniquities?" This is daring stuff. David was the first OT author to use the term this way. Later, the prophet Isaiah would use it to anticipate the New Covenant in Christ: "the Lord God will wipe (blot out) tears away from all faces" (Isa 25:8). This is astonishing theology, coming from a layman, and a sinner at that.

So David prays, "wash me, heal me."

Thirdly, he petitions, "recreate me."

(c) Recreate me

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.** (51:10-11)

David knows full well that he deserves the same fate as Saul. There was a time when the Holy Spirit rushed mightily upon Saul, but then the king was cast away, permanently removed from the presence of God. David confesses that that is what he too deserves, yet he boldly asks God to work a miracle so that he may not suffer the same fate.

David reaches to the most powerful, God-activating verb in the Bible (*bara*) to make his request. This is the very first verb used in Genesis to describe God's creation of the world out of chaos and void. David knew that his heart could not be reformed. He was doomed if God did not perform in him a new creative work on par with his work in the original creation. If God granted his prayer, then his inner spirit would be permanently fixed, established to participate in eternal life.

Later, the prophets would pick up, anticipate and detail what David longs and prays for (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:17-20; 36:25-31). The apostle Paul refers to this creative act as having been fulfilled in Christ, so that it becomes the life-giving miracle of every conversion: "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Cor 5:17). And David's longing for this creative act to have permanent results on our spirits is verified, when Paul says that believers are "sealed" by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13).

Thus David prays to be washed, healed and recreated.

Finally, he prays for restoration.

(d) Restore me

Restore (*shuv*, turn, return) **to me the joy of Your salvation,
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners will be converted** (*shuv*, turn, return) **to You.**
(51:12-13)

Soon after the assassination of President Kennedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was part of Kennedy's administration, was asked about resuming life after that terrible event. He replied: "We may laugh again, but we will never be young again."⁴ Restoration can only go so far. But that is not enough for David. Remembering the joy of his youthful, eager spirit, he prays that he might laugh again, *and* that he might be young again. David has vivid memories of what it was like to rush headlong into the thick of the battle, anticipating Yahweh's salvation. So he asks God to restore that to him. But not just for his own satisfaction. He prays to be restored so that he could restore others. Then life would be meaningful again. Knowing what life was like when he was a broken sinner himself, he would have even more to offer.

After three thousand years, God is still answering that prayer. Who teaches you the road to recovery? Who gives your soul words to shape your grief? Who grasps your thoughts and places them on the sacred page, so that when you read them they become wet with your tears? It is this man, David. He had the courage to pray for the impossible, to dream the improbable. I confess I do not learn much from the valedictorians of success. David is my teacher. I love this man. He was broken, crushed and empty, yet he dared to appeal to God for his grace, a thousand years before Christ.

David's ends his prayer with vows of thanks.

IV. Vows of Thanks (51:14-17)

**Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation;
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
That my mouth may declare Your praise.
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.**

In the land of Israel, when God answered prayers, it was a sin to fail to offer public praise. For the king, these moments of praise were filled with anticipation. David asks God to not let him die in his sins, and he asks for opportunity to praise God before the nation. Normally, an OT vow consisted of two parts, a poem of praise and an animal sacrifice. The king would write a poem of thanksgiving, a work carefully crafted to unlock emotions of joy and jubilation, memorializing the event for all time; and this was followed by a sacrifice, which was a peace offering. One-third of the sacrifice was placed on the altar, one-third was given to the priest, and one-third was dedicated for three days of feasting in celebration for what God had done. So David keeps his vow and crafts a poem, Psalm 51, a work which would be read for all time.

But, as David approaches the place of worship, carrying his lamb, he is struck with a lightning bolt of insight. This revelation unfolds for him the significance of Israel's sacrificial system, the mystery of the lamb. The insight is this: All that God was seeking was a broken spirit! His spirit crushed, David chants his poem and leaves the lamb and goes home. There was no need for sacrifice. This was a first. And God does not despise it.⁵ David walks away in the freedom anticipated by Jesus, worshiping God "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24).

Three years ago, Marty Brill, a Jew, told me that he had been looking for God for twenty-five years. As he related his story to me, he said that after years of failure he was utterly broken, and

thus he felt he was disqualified from ever finding God. I asked him to read Psalm 51. He didn't know it, but he had been quoting this psalm as he shared with me. Reading Psalm 51 lifted his burden and led him to the Lord. At the end of my message, Marty will come and share with us the poem that he wrote following his conversion to Christ.

Now we come to the addendum to Psalm 51, which was written by an unknown poet during the time of the exile.

V. Addendum from Exile (51:18-19)

**By Your favor do good to Zion;
Build the walls of Jerusalem.
Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices,
In burnt offering and whole burnt offering;
Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.**

In these verses we see how powerful David's psalm was to the Jews. Almost five hundred years after he wrote these words they were picked up and appropriated as being the exact sentiments of the Jews who were living in exile during the days of Haggai or Zechariah. The words of the king became the words of the nation in their darkest hour, expressing their yearning for national restoration from exile⁶ and the rebuilding of God's city.

David's words ought to be an inspiration to us, too. Let us memorize this classic psalm and offer it as our own prayer. Even in the New Testament, nothing surpasses Psalm 51 in its profound spiritual piety and language of repentance. So let us allow David's powerful metaphors to penetrate bone and marrow, and then let us write our own personal addendum.

Finally, notice that David's freedom may have been too much for the exiles to handle. That is why they are quick to add these words about God "delighting in righteous sacrifice." David's insight and genius for expressions of grace may have been too much for the exiles to enter into. Indeed, David's freedom is so radical, not many are able to fully enter into it.

So how do we enter into the love of God and his grace? Do we have to commit the terrible sins of murder and adultery to do so? No, we do not. But at some point we may have to be broken and crushed. There is no other way. If that is where you find yourself today, if your spirit is broken, and if you have a contrite heart, then you, too, may be on the very edge of the greatest discovery of your life. Recite the inspired words of King David's Psalm 51 for your prayer as you come to Christ.

Marty Brill:

God reached down to me through Psalm 51 and welcomed me home as a failure. What a shock to my rational thinking! Failure equals no good, disqualified. Yet I was welcomed and embraced by pure grace.

Here is a brief summary of my life prior to accepting Messiah, September 23rd, 1993. I grew up in a driven New York Jewish home, the third of three children. Success was expected. Yet I never felt quite good enough. I achieved, but never enough. The standards were always so high. I was an all-star third baseman in Little League, but my brother was the MVP. I graduated first in my graduate school class with a masters degree, but only from a state school. My brothers graduated from Columbia and Yale Law Schools.

By age 12 I had an ulcer. I knew there must be another way. So in college I turned to psychology, and then New Age spirituality. I was tempted and seduced by false idols. For twenty-five years I have searched, through ashrams, EST, and sacred medicines, through three marriages, looking for intimacy, striving the best I knew how. Three years ago, I was in crisis. Life was unraveling in front of me. I kept trying to hold it together until I couldn't anymore. Circumstances overwhelmed me. My car exploded and burned up in my garage. My body was aging,

my hair gray and thinning, my memory fading. I was dragged into a lawsuit. I was changing my job. But the blow that threw me into overload was when my wife said move out, and I heard "divorce." Three strikes, you're out. I was devastated, defeated, depressed, and broken. Why go on?

Psalm 51 welcomed me. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. Now, almost three years later, only because of God's will, Kate and I are not divorced. Our marriage is still rough, but we both have hope in God's strength. I am beginning to get some clues as to what it means to be God's man.

I wrote this poem as a thank offering to God and to the men of this church.

What a gift of life, since September 29th, at 3:15 p.m.
It seemed all over. Why go on? My walls were falling.
Then Kate said, "Divorce," and I had no strength to go on.
And so in desperation I got down on my knees and prayed,
"God, come in, help me, please, if you are there."
Swiftly You answered and guided my steps,
And screamed so I couldn't not hear
You are here, and You are here for me.
You sent your servant Brian to welcome me
And give me the good news
That my falling apart was what You were waiting for
It was something to celebrate, not to mourn
In my weakness, God could enter
While I was strong, there was no room.
He welcomed me, son of Abraham, son of David.
My Father welcomed me home as a Jew.
I felt exalted and honored
The depression and burden lifted.
He provided strong fellowship.
That first Wednesday at 6:30 a.m.
I couldn't hold it together
Brothers prayed for me
What a comfort. I had never had that before
My wonderful brother Thomas walking with me and pouring
 God's Word down me
Reading, and feeling a deep thirst for His Word, His teaching.
Since my way doesn't work, I cling to hope that He is the way.
What is that way?
So I read and read, Old and New, and a Psalm a day
And I begin to learn how to pray, to talk to God
A retreat at Pajaro Dunes
Friendship, walking on the beach
Welcomed in special ways
Brian prayed that we would come away with a friend
And my soul connected with Roger
I shared and listened to Greg and Stu and you and you and
 you
Another retreat. Five hundred men to deepen me
It was designed for me.
Could I really be a Jew and have Jesus die for me?
Yes, I need to give my sexual desires to Him, too
What a blessing to give Him your secrets.
I'm learning about David
It's OK to be in the desert
It's good to be in the desert
What a comfort, since I'm in the desert, too
When it hurts the most and I'm all alone
I cry to God and I discover
This King of the Jews did so too
All He had was God to lean on
It's OK to say, "Listen to my cry, hear my prayer
Give me wisdom, teach me how to speak."

And it's OK to cry the tears of love for You
They are cleaning me.
I trust You are guiding my steps
And You will continue to walk with me and Kate
To take me to the Promised Land, filled with Your love
And a promise, a covenant, with me, to remember
He forgave me, and redeemed
And I was baptized, too.
Remember to love my Lord with all my heart
And all my soul and all my might.
Thank you, brothers, for loving me
Through this difficult time and precious time.
And God bless each of you in a very special way.

1. *Whiter than Snow*: title taken from Derek Kidner's title to this psalm in his superb commentary, *Psalms 1-72*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1973), 189.

2. This may also give us a hint as to when David penned this classic. In 2 Sam 12:13, after the prophet came to him, David said to Nathan, "I have sinned." This may be the time when he penned these words. The language of verses 2, 8, 9, 14, suggests that he had not yet heard the word of forgiveness; also, the Massoretes placed the letter *samek* after David's words, indicating a pause in the reading of the text.

3. For "blot out," see Gen 6:7; 7:4, 23; Exod 7:14; 32:32, 33; Deut 9:14; 25:19; 29:19; Isa 25:8; 43:25; 44:22; Ps 9:6; 69:28.

4. Quote taken from Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth In Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 63.

5. *despised* - note the play on words from 12:6, David *despised* God's word (12:9), God broke his spirit, David offers that crushed spirit, God does not *despise* it.

6. see Neh 12:43 for the answer to this prayer.

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