

Create In Me
a Clean
Heart

What Real Repentance Sounds Like: Psalm 51

“10 **Create** in me a **clean** heart, O God, And **Renew** a **steadfast** spirit within me. 11 **Do not cast me away** from Your presence and **do not take Your Holy Spirit** from me. 12 **Restore** to me the joy of Your salvation And **Sustain** me with a **willing** spirit. 13 **THEN** I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You.” (Ps 51:10-13)

Ah, the sound (and doctrine) of *true* repentance! Far more than a mere academic pursuit, the truth of what real repentance consists of, is a necessary, fundamental truth for the child of God.

Part I. The Condition Which Necessitates The Plea

The specific historical context of the Psalm centres on David’s repentance after his adultery with Bathsheba and his orchestrating the murder of her husband Uriah. The principles have for millennia been applicable to all believers, not just those guilty of actual adultery or murder. From popular songs of worship to multitudes of sermons and exhortations verbal and in print, this serves as a reference for all who like David, see in themselves the ruin of their own sinfulness and the hope in what only God can provide.

Acknowledged inability gives rise to Divine creativity

David is here pleading with God to do something in him...in his very thoughts, intents, desires *and will*. In biblical terminology, “the heart” comprises the mind/reason, emotions and volition. It is a desperate, “Please God! *Change* me!” plea. David is not asking that God would merely *initiate* these qualities and then leave it to David to develop them. Far from it! Rather, he cries out that God would both *create* and *sustain* these qualities in him as the verbs he intentionally used demonstrate.

✚ By such a prayer, David expresses an admission of *complete* spiritual bankruptcy. He brings *none* of these qualities with him to the equation.

Consider the verbs he used carefully; they each tell quite a story. They each paint a picture of *true* spiritual renewal – not mere outward pretense. They graphically illustrate true repentance...penned by a truly godly man ... after the greatest moral, spiritual collapse of his life.

✚ They therefore teach us *necessary* doctrine - about ourselves and God. What *He alone* can do, and therefore, what we ourselves *cannot*.

“O how I love Your law!”

Prior to his sin with Bathsheba, David - like so many sincere, but truly misinformed (or sadly, misguided people today), had made *many* promises to God. Did he sincerely *mean* them? Absolutely. But as David would discover, sincerity is *not* enough. Had mere human resolve or will-power been enough, then *surely* the “man after God's own heart”, the giant-killer, the beloved of the Lord, the “great king” whose expressions of yearning, worship and longing have inspired countless millions through the centuries, would have been able to overcome his greatest test.

Promises, promises...but no brokenness:

So much modern “worship” expresses people, just like David did, promising God what they will or will not do, be, surrender, decide, etc.

God *knows* the true from the false. He *knows* when confidence is in self, verses wholly in Him. He knows who is broken and contrite in spirit and who is proud - even though they affirm many correct things about God or His word. The Pharisee of Luke 18 was a monotheist and began his 'prayer' by saying “God, I *thank You* that I am unlike other men...for I ...”. But Jesus wasn't fooled by that man's lip-service to God. For underneath the veneer of orthodoxy and thanksgiving, was a very proud heart. God, however, *looks to* those who are broken and contrite.

“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isa. 57:15)

“Heaven is My throne and earth is My footstool, but this is the one I will look to, he who is broken and contrite and trembles at My word.” (Isa. 66:2)

Did you catch it? God *dwells* with the broken and contrite. And He loves to revive them. So *why* is this brokenness so important to the thrice-holy, all-knowing, omnipotent God? *Because “He knows our frame. He remembers we are dust”* (Ps 103:14). The difference between those broken and contrite and proud in heart can be summarized thus:

- ✚ **The proud in heart say much.** Self-righteousness occupies much in their thinking, their theology, and their boasting.
- ✚ **The broken and contrite however seek much!** Grace and Christ occupy much in their thinking.

You promised the world and performed in the gutter

David’s “talk” changed after his sin with Uriah, Bathsheba. It *had* to! What do you do after you had promised God supreme devotion, endless praise, passionate love, complete surrender ...only to still plunge headlong into adultery, murder, and deceit? And to remain in this state for close to, or more than a year! What do you promise *then?* To try to do better next time? ... such is the mindset of the truly religious...but alas, the truly un-spiritual person. Convinced that *true* righteousness is within their own power if they will simply choose it, they persist in the deception of *works*-based, *self*-righteous thinking - that they themselves can overcome their own inherent sinfulness, just by choosing so.

What About “Him Who Overcomes”?

But surely scripture speaks about and to “overcomers” who overcome, right? Indeed, it does! *“Everyone born of God overcomes the world”* John said (1 John 5:4). However, it is our faith in Christ that so overcomes – *“And this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith”* (1 John 5:4). Our faith *in* the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:24-25) – hence the cross, death, resurrection, ascension, glorification, exaltation and intercession of Christ (Heb. 7:25; 10:14; Rom. 8:33-34).

There is none good but God

“There is *none* good but God” Jesus said (Mk. 10:18). He *meant* it! The *only* source of goodness is Him and what He not merely makes possible but gives - *both by the imputation of righteousness by faith alone in Christ and His atoning death and resurrection alone, and by impartation to the human heart.*

How does God change the sinner, corrupt, filthy in their sinful state to something else? He,

- *imputes* righteousness through faith alone (Rom. 1:17, 3:22, 25-26, 4:1-8).
- *creates* righteousness in the heart by His grace and Spirit alone (Ps. 51, 86:11).
- “*works in* them to *both* will and to do His will” (Phil. 2:13)
- “*gives* them a heart to know Him” (Jer. 24:7)
- “*removes* their heart of stone and *gives* a heart of flesh” (Eze. 36:24-26)

Jesus said, “For apart from Me, you can do *nothing*”, (Jn 15:5). He said this in the context of bearing good fruit. His statement is comprehensive, categorical and devastating to all human assumptions of unqualified “free will”. According to Psalm 51, what God does produces *true, lasting change* in the life. It *all* comes from Him. He *alone* can produce it. Otherwise, David's prayer here is meaningless, empty, irrelevant, and misleading. Consider David's words in this Psalm.

Part II: The Psalm Itself

1. The Sacrifices Of God Are A Broken Contrite Heart

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Ps. 51:17)

What does God look for? Not promises, promises. But brokenness. Humble acknowledgment of what we, in our own fallenness, *truly* are.

Why not simply just “decide” to repent, “learn the lesson”, move forward, become a “God-chaser” once more? Just “choose to obey” again? Such is the pervasive lingo of the modern church. Passionate, sincere no doubt...and sadly, sincerely mistaken! *What* did David *now* know that he did not know prior? Just like so many who strive to be like him in “worship”, evidently do not seem to know?

“I was born in sin”

Something caused David to pray words like we see in Psalm 51. Words he had *not* used previously. What was it? The awful realization now rang true with incredible clarity

within him. It could no longer be ignored, trivialized...*denied*: “I was born *in* sin.” This is *not* David shirking personal responsibility for his sin, as I have heard some try to suggest. It is not David being evasive or disingenuous. Nor is it David suggesting he was born out of wedlock. It is David now being *fully* transparently *honest!* The full weight of the fact of his real depravity in sin, *from* conception itself, *now* weighted down on him. David is *finally* coming to terms with what God had *always* said was true of fallen humanity in sin from before the flood, after the flood and ever since, “*The heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all things and who can know it?*” (Jer. 17:9). Therefore, it was precisely the heart which was and is the problem. Have you ever read Jer. 24:7; Eze 36:24-27 in *this* light before? If not, do so...humbly, reverently.

For David, after Bathsheba, there could be no more sincere, but *self*-boasting promises made to God anymore. Those who do so, like David prior to Bathsheba, are no doubt sincere. They just do not grasp the full weight of their sinfulness. They still assume that goodness, be it ever so small an amount, comes from *self*. Thus, they declare, promise, assert.

✚ **The mantra of all self-boasters is “*I have decided...!*” The confession of all the truly broken and contrite before the Lord is, “*By the grace of God I have ...*” (1 Cor 15:10)**

The answer is the truth of brokenness! The sacrifices of God are not promises, promises. But rather brokenness. Not “Lord, I decide, choose, strive, will do”. But “O Lord *save, deliver, create within, sustain, empower!*” This is the language of the “poor in spirit” and it is diametrically opposed to the proud in heart.

✚ **The *only* cries that “get God’s attention” are the humble cry of the broken and contrite. “The proud He knows from *afar*” (Ps. 138:6).**

2. “Then Will I Teach Sinners Your Ways”

Note the logical progression: After God has done His re-creative work *in, for, to* him, *then* David will teach sinners. Teach them what? Merely the letter of His word? Did that prevent David from his total collapse? No. He will teach them God's *ways*: What God alone does and must do for true righteousness to be formed in us.

Many assume they know God's ways, because they can quote His word. Or know some theology. This is quite far from the truth though. You see, had David *only* gone by the word, he would have merely perpetuated the “Do, Do Not Do” mentality of

the Law. Sadly, most professing Christians adopt the same mentality to truth of the gospel and life under grace.

“He made known His WAYS to Moses, His ACTS to the children of Israel.” (Ps. 103:7).

Q. *How* will sinners be truly “converted” to God?

When having been through the same *process* whereby they have abandoned all hope of self-reform in any way. In brokenness admitting only personal weakness (what we *cannot* do in our own strength, by our own will alone) and then look not inward but *upward to God* pleading for what only He can and *must* do!

“Make every effort to add ...”

This is *how* we “make every effort to add to our faith” the character virtues Peter admonished in 2 Peter 1: 5-13.

✚ We make every effort *in prayer...humbly seeking from His hand everything we need.*

Those who *assume* they are growing in godly character and virtue, but who persistently boast of self, may be greatly amazed when they stand before Him to see what they thought was “gold, silver, precious stones” reduced by the fire of His holiness to mere “wood, stubble” (1 Cor. 3:12-15). Or worse still...what about the *many* whom Jesus said will stand before Him with orthodox confession, professing *their own* “many wonderful works” done in His name? To whom He will say the most fearful words possible “Depart from Me! I never knew you!”

- Rom 9:16; Titus 3:5; Rom 4:1-8; Eph 2:8-9 *expressly* refute all grounds of boasting in self for any reason!

To the degree we extol ourselves, to that degree we diminish and ultimately deny the grace of God. To the degree we “boast in the Lord”, we diminish and deny self any credit or praise.


“One plants, one waters, but GOD *caused* the growth. So then neither the one who plans or waters is anything, but GOD who *causes* the growth.” (1 Cor 3:7-8).

Does the principle articulated by Paul pertain solely to himself and Apollos? Is such a limited interpretation truly the intended meaning of Paul's statement? This seems unlikely. Nevertheless, even under that assumption, the central argument remains - neither Paul nor Apollos determined the outcome; only God did. Therefore, unless the reader assumes they possess greater faithfulness, devotion, or diligence in their service to the Lord than Paul or Apollos, the point Paul presents is clear.

“Does the ax raise itself above the person who swings it, or the saw boast against the one who uses it? As if a rod were to wield the person who lifts it up, or a club brandish the one who is not wood!” (Isa. 10:15). The Lord’s metaphor is painfully obvious here.

3. Sustain Me with A Willing Spirit:

But surely, the will to even pray like this must *first* be supplied by us, right? Read the prayer again...David is here openly asking God to keep him *by giving* him a “willing spirit”. The word "Sustain" is key. David is not asking God for a one moment in time willingness. He is asking God to *sustain* him with such!

 **How else would or could anyone believe Jesus had the ability to heal the sick until He first began to demonstrate it? In like manner, God had to *inspire* the words David used in Psalm 51 (and elsewhere) for the multitudes since who would read and learn what they also can ask for.**

The principle is clear: God *must* “work in us *both* to WILL and to DO His will” (Phil 2:13), before any of us can “work OUT our salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). The writer of Hebrews agrees, “May *He* work in us what is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ” (Heb 13:21).

The Greek word “work” in Heb. 13:21 is different from the word used in Phil. 2:13, though the practical meaning is the same. It is the word ποιέω, and means “I Do, MAKE, CAUSE, manufacture, construct”. The word in Phil 2:13 is ἐνεργέω. It means “to be at work, to work, to do”.

These verses teach that the very willingness to do God’s will is the result of God’s “working” (lit. His act, action, doing, accomplishment) the same *in* us.

✚ Ps 86:11 “*Give me an undivided heart that I may fear Your name*”.

Repeatedly in scripture, the absolute sovereignty of God is affirmed...yet multitudes of self-boasters rob God of His glory, denying the obvious as they boast of self.

David understood now what his son Solomon would write many years later “Guard your *heart* with all diligence, for *from it* proceed all the issues of life.” (Prov. 4:23). But David's heart had collapsed when truly put to the test.

✚ **David now understood that to *truly obey* required something *new and lasting* from God. Something God would have to *create and sustain!***

Paul summed it up this way “Had a Law been given which *could* impart life, *then* righteousness *would* have been by the Law.” (Gal. 3:21).

If perchance some might be tempted to misunderstand what David was actually asking here, let's examine this from a few different English versions. A few other renderings of Ps 51:12:

“Grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.” (NIV)

“And *make me willing* to obey you.” (NLT)

“Give me a willing spirit.” (Holeman)

“Sustain me by *giving* me the desire to obey!” (NET)

“Uphold me *with* a willing spirit.” (New Heart)

“And *let* a willing spirit uphold me.” (JPS Tanakh 1917)

Even if it were allowed for the sake of argument but David had to first ask God for this, the point still remains - David is asking God to sustain him, to *uphold or sustain* him with a willing spirit. This is not a “one moment thing” David is asking for - he is not praying here “God please for the next 5 minutes give me a willing spirit.” He's asking for a *permanent* willing spirit hereafter. To ignore or suppress or deny this obvious fact, misses the point entirely.

- ✚ Whether David is asking that God “sustain” his *own* willingness or that God *supply* sustained willingness – either way, the same end result remains. IF David can later undo either his own “willingness” which God then sustained, or undo God’s gift of a willing spirit, then the prayer is reduced to meaningless babble.

Therefore, any objection which might suggest that David was still in control of the willingness after God gives the willingness is impossibly circular in its argument and is refuted by what I just said. The theology of “self” must do everything and anything in its power to minimize the force of text like these. But these texts are in the scripture for a reason, they teach what they teach and they mean what they teach - and they absolutely affect the outcome in a practical demonstrable manner. If they did not all such prayers and all such promises from God are absolutely meaningless because the moment the person falters, they would be back asking, “God again please give me another clean heart... please grant me another willing spirit...” add infinitum.

God said, “I will *give* them a ‘heart’ to know Me” (Jer 24:7). *Why* is this rather significant truth so rarely, if *ever* proclaimed from so many pulpits? As if it is trivial? Or irrelevant? *As if God would waste His time saying He would give something that was less than sufficient to see it through?*

Part III: The Proof Is in The Pudding:

How could David thereafter know that God *had* in fact answered this prayer? What would be the tangible, practical evidence God had done so if not that these qualities were afterward truly in him?

- ✚ Where did David get the idea to even make such a request? There is no command in the Torah that said, “If you lack capacity for obedience, ask for it.”

The answer, I believe is that the Spirit of God revealed to him by inference based on Deut 29:4 - “Yet to this day the LORD has *not given* you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.”

Forty years in the wilderness with Israel led Moses the “servant of God” to this one, final, ultimate conclusion. And this conclusion while it does not remove their persistent stubbornness and rebellion, *does* still affirm the entire premise of sovereign-

grace – *all true faithfulness is the result of what God gives. If He withholds it, only sin remains.*

The theology of self-boasting must get self in the mix, even a little. This is the antithesis of the broken and contrite spirit God requires. Insist on boasting of self? Ok, but be warned “Whoever exalts himself *will be humbled*” (Lk 18:14), Jesus said.

Conclusion:

Your testimony, teaching *will be the evidence* to all who are spiritually mature of whether you are a self-boaster. Or truly “In Christ *alone*” boaster.

The grace of God would forever thereafter change David...and his testimony would now corroborate that truth. If your preaching, teaching, counselling is “Just do, choose, be better!”, then you are a self-boaster. *If you were truly broken and contrite before the Lord, your counsel would be Pray more! Pray desperately! Seek earnestly!*