

Psalm 51:10-19

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[0 : 01] Well, it is that time of year again, time for New Year resolutions, and even as I say that, New Year resolutions, I'm very conscious that to speak of New Year resolutions is hardly original on the 31st of December.

It's maybe even verging on the boringly predictable. But nonetheless, it is the case that as we come to the close of a year and as we approach the start of a new year, it is a good opportunity to pause, to take stock, and to look ahead.

And we've been trying to do that today in the light of Psalm 51. Again, for the benefit of those who are visiting with us this evening, just a couple of weeks ago, we were looking at David's sin with Bathsheba.

We were really looking at the women who are mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, one of whom is Bathsheba. And so, we were giving thought to David's sin with Bathsheba.

And of course, this psalm is very much related to that in that it is the product of that sin, of David's conviction of sin, and of his repentance.

[1 : 20] And we're given this very intimate glimpse into the heart of a repentant sinner. But what we are also seeing and noticing is that the very fact that God has seen fit to include this psalm within the canon of Scripture is because it serves not only as something that we can, as it were, as spectators, see how another responded, but can serve as a model for us who also are called to have repentant hearts in the light of our many sins.

So, we're thinking about this matter of reflection in the light of this psalm. And what we did this morning is we noticed that there are three movements or three stages in David's repentance.

Conviction of sin, we gave some thought this morning to some of the characteristics, some of the aspects of the conviction of sin that David describes in this psalm. But then the next step, if you wish, is David's cry for mercy.

In the light of his conviction, the light of his recognizing the gravity of his sin, he cries to God for mercy. And we noticed how that cry for mercy was grounded in God's unfailing love, in God's great compassion, as David expresses it at the very beginning of the psalm.

And that cry for mercy was involved in a craving for God's favor, and very particularly in the matter of being forgiven.

[2 : 57] And so, we gave some thought to that, the grounds of this cry for mercy and that which David sought. And we are sure, though in the psalm itself, of course, it's looking ahead, but we know he received God's forgiveness.

Now, the third element in this model of repentance we've described as a commitment to renewal. So, it begins with conviction of sin.

It results in a cry for mercy. But then there is also this commitment on the part of the repentant sinner, on the part of David, a commitment to renewal.

Of course, biblical repentance is never only about turning from sin. It is always also about turning to God, turning to God for mercy, but also turning to God for commissioning, for new service for Him.

And this third aspect of repentance is something that we can pick up on towards the end of the psalm, or perhaps from verse 10 and what follows.

[4 : 02] So, from verse 10, really right through to the end, we won't think about everything that is said in that section of the psalm, but that's where we'll be focusing our attention. As I say, we're describing the second half of the psalm under this phrase, a commitment to renewal.

We might also call it a desire for a new beginning. Or maybe we could pose the matter in the form of a question. What does David really want?

Having been brought to the place of repentance, and as he looks ahead, what is it that he really wants? What above all else do you really want?

I think David's desire for a fresh start or new beginning can be traced in three directions, inward, upward, and outward.

And let me explain what I mean by that. Well, first of all, his desire for a new beginning can be traced in an inward direction in the sense of his desire for a heart molded by God.

[5 : 13] There in verse 10, create in me a pure heart. So this new beginning, this commitment to renewal, it can be traced in that direction, inwards. The desire for a new heart, a pure heart.

But there's also an upward direction of what I'm describing as an upward direction, and that is David's desire for a deeper communion or friendship with God.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Don't take your Holy Spirit from me. As I look ahead and as I would forge a new beginning, I want it to be one where I enjoy nearness with God.

And so there's the inward aspect of a heart molded by God. There's this upward aspect of seeking a closer friendship and communion with God.

But there's also an outward aspect to it, an outward direction if you wish. And that is David's desire for a life lived to the glory of God. And we see that especially from verse 13 where at the beginning of that verse we read, then I will teach transgressors your way, and he goes on.

[6 : 25] There's this commitment to service for God. So let's think about this commitment to renewal, this desire for a new beginning in these three directions that I've outlined.

First of all then, David's desire for a heart molded by God. We've already referenced verse 10, Create in me a pure heart, O God.

Similar language is found in the second half of that verse, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. If we jump to verse 12, what do we read?

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. Now all of these are actions of God on behalf of David.

It is God who will create this pure heart. It's God who will renew this steadfast spirit and grant this willing spirit. These are all things that God would do for David, that David desires God to do for him.

[7 : 29] David can't mold his own heart. David can't create by his own efforts a pure heart. And in this regard, maybe we could especially notice the verb that David employs in verse 10, Create in me a pure heart.

And the Hebrew word there translated create is a verb that is only ever used with God as its subject. It's the verb that we have at the very beginning of the Bible.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. A verb, as I say, that is only ever used with God as its subject. This is something that we can't do.

Only God can create in the manner that this verb implies. And so David is saying to God, This is something you must do for me. I've seen my heart. I've seen something of my heart.

And I want a pure heart. And only you can grant me this pure heart. Only you can create in me this pure heart that I so desire. Well, what kind of heart does David desire?

[8 : 35] How would he have God mold his heart? Well, we've noticed the language that is used here. He is anxious for, he is desirous of a pure heart.

What a difficult thing to have a pure heart. Maybe at a push, we can manage a pure tongue for a spell. Maybe when others are listening in, we can bite our tongue and make sure we don't say something impure.

Maybe somebody can listen to our conversation for a few minutes and might say, Well, there's nothing impure in what that person said. I don't know how long we can maintain that.

But perhaps we can at least have a bash. But a pure heart. That's another matter altogether. Only God can create such a heart in his children.

But he can and he does. This is the work that he is doing in us. So a pure heart. Is that what you desire? As you look ahead to the year that is about to dawn.

[9 : 39] Is it your desire that your heart would be a pure heart? But he also speaks of a steadfast spirit. I think here it's clear that the word heart and spirit are being used synonymously.

Certainly in this psalm. We see that very clearly, I think, in verse 17. Where we read, The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart. O God, you will not despise.

I think it's evident that David is using these words interchangeably. And so he desires a steadfast heart or a steadfast spirit. There's a sense in which it was the absence of steadfastness that led David into sin.

He got careless. He was ill-disciplined in his life. And that led to this precipitous fall into sin. And so he sees the need for a steadfast spirit.

We need steadfast hearts if we're going to render steadfast obedience. In the absence of a steadfast, faithful heart, then we will not be able to render obedience of that character.

[10 : 54] Is that what you desire? Is your desire that God would grant to you, renewing you a steadfast spirit. But he also speaks of a willing spirit or a willing heart.

You know, when it comes to the matter of an obedient life, of obeying God, of being faithful to God, it's one thing to obey out of a sense of duty.

And there's a place for that, of course. There is a sense in which we are duty-bound to obey God. And that is true. And it is good to have a sense of duty in our walk with and for God.

But it's another thing, quite another thing, to obey God out of genuine desire. The desire to obey and please God. The desire to live a holy life.

And I think this willing spirit is the best antidote to temptation. The desire to do God's will. Where the very thought of doing that which is displeasing to God is a repugnant thought.

[12 : 04] Where that's the last thing we would want to do. We want to please God. We want to be obedient. We want to live lives that are pleasing to Him and a blessing to others. A willing spirit.

As David says, that willing spirit to sustain me. When it's tough, when it's difficult. That desire, that willing spirit sustaining me in the way of obedience.

Is that what you desire? A pure heart. A steadfast spirit. A willing spirit. When we think of these descriptions, if you wish, of a heart, whose heart fits that description.

Who is the one who has a pure heart and a steadfast, faithful heart? A willing heart. This is the heart of God. This is the heart of Jesus. When we look at Jesus, we find one whose heart was altogether pure.

Whose service was altogether steadfast. Ever willing to do God's will. It was his delight to do God's will. And so there's a sense, if we are to take to ourselves this prayer of David, and if we're to do so in the light of the coming of Jesus, we could perhaps pose the prayer in this way.

[13 : 19] Father, create in me the heart of your dear Son. David prayed, create in me a pure heart. And we could pray, Father, create in us the heart of your Son.

So David's commitment to renewal is, in the first instance, one that we can trace in this direction, inward. His desire for a heart molded by God.

There's also this upward direction, or that's the way I'm describing it, and that's David's desire for a deeper communion or friendship with God. Verse 11 we read, Do not cast from me your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Don't cast me from your presence. Rather, come ever closer to me, or help me to experience an ever greater sense of your closeness.

You know, there is a sense in which God's nearness is a given. You know, whatever our own subjective experience is, God is near to His people. So there's a sense here in what we're asking for isn't really for God to be near to us, because He is near to us, but that we would have a sense of His nearness.

[14 : 35] That we would be conscious of His closeness to us. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me, cries out David.

Now, when we see the language that David uses here, and the prospect that he seems to be presenting of being deprived of God's Spirit, I think it's something where we need to be careful.

It would be unwise to try and construct a theology of the Holy Spirit from this verse. In the light of the New Testament, we know that the Spirit permanently indwells every believer.

But the reference here is most probably to the experience of Saul, who had been king before David, from whom it is said that God withdrew His presence. And David is saying, Don't let that be my experience.

David's desire is to know the near and felt presence and power of God in his life. And I suppose the question that I pose to you this evening, is this your desire?

[15 : 35] Is this what you really want? A deeper friendship with God, a greater sense of God's presence with you.

If that's what you want, then it's also something you need to seek out. Seek out God's presence in prayer, as you meditate on God's Word, as you serve God, find and experience God's nearness to you.

Then there's also the third direction, if you wish, in which David is expressing his commitment to renewal. David's desire for a life lived to the glory of God.

And as we think about this third outward direction, notice the preposition that verse 13 begins with, Then I will teach transgressors your way.

The pure heart created by God and the near and empowering presence of God will, David anticipates, enable him to live his life to the glory of God.

[16 : 44] In the absence of a pure heart, he won't be able to do it. In the absence of God's empowering presence, he won't be able to do it. But if God creates a pure heart in him, if he grants him his near presence, then he says, then I will be able to live a life that is pleasing to you and useful in your service.

A life lived to the glory of God. And what does that life look like? Well, let's just notice three aspects of it, certainly as David anticipates living that life in this new beginning, this new chapter in his life.

What does it involve? Well, what's the first thing that he says there in verse 13? Then I will teach transgressors your way and sinners will turn back to you.

It involves teaching others about God, seeking to draw others back to God. The ministry to others of a repentant and restored David reminds me of the words of Jesus directed to Peter as Jesus anticipated, not only his fall, but also his restoration.

And so in that sense, there's a parallel with the experience of David. In Luke chapter 22, and in verse 32, we read, this is before Peter's denial of Jesus, and Jesus is addressing Peter, and he says, but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.

[18 : 11] But then especially these words, and when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. When you've been restored, when you've been lifted up, when you have repented and been forgiven, then this is the job that I'm giving you to do, strengthen your brothers.

And David sees things in a similar light. When you grant me this pure heart, when you restore to me your presence, then this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to serve others.

I'm going to build up your church. I'm going to draw others to yourself. And David's teaching will be marked, I think, by two things, or two things that I want to highlight.

It will be marked, I'm sure, by humility and by hope. The humility of one who has fallen and been restored. David won't be reaching out to others and teaching others from some position of imagined superiority, but rather he will be doing so as one who knows what it is to have fallen so low and yet to have been lifted up.

And from that position of humility, he will reach out to others and he'll say, Look, I know where you are. I was there also. But I was restored. You too can be restored. God forgave me.

[19 : 23] He can forgive you as well. And so he'll humbly reach out and draw others back to God. But I'm also struck by the confidence of David as to this task that he will perform.

We read there in verse 13, And then I will teach transgressors your way and sinners will turn back to you. He doesn't say, Oh, hopefully sinners will turn back to you. No, sinners will turn back to you.

There's no doubt in his mind that the God who turned him back will turn others back. And he will be an instrument in this as he brings the good news of God's unfailing love, of his great compassion, indeed of his own experience, of God's restoration, teaching others about God.

Is that your desire as we enter into 2018? That you would reach out to others and share with others something of this good news of our forgiving God. So teaching others about God.

But this life lived to the glory of God is also to be marked by praising God. Notice what we read there in verses 14 and 15. Save me from blood guilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

[20 : 36] O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. The language used here very much is the language of public expressions of praise to God.

And it's interesting that even the language David uses suggests that David has two audiences in mind as he anticipates opening his mouth in the way described. At one level, of course, God is his audience.

He's directing praise to God. Praise is to God, the only one worthy of praise. But there's also a very clear sense in which he has in mind that others will be listening in. When he uses this language, my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

Does that not suggest that his hope is that others will be listening in and discovering of the righteousness of God as he praises God? As he declares God's praise, God's praiseworthiness, others will hear, others will be persuaded, and others might join with him in praising God.

Is this your desire as we enter into 2018? That this year that is about to begin would be marked by these public expressions of praise to God.

[21 : 51] But then there's one other element that I want to just mention of this desire of David for a life lived to the glory of God. And that is the building up of God's church.

And that takes us to the final two verses of the psalm. We read there, In your good pleasure, make Zion prosper. Build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you.

Then bulls will be offered on your altar. Especially the first of the two verses there, verse 18. Now these two verses at the end of the psalm are the subject of some debate as to whether they are original to the psalm, whether they were authored by David.

And there does seem to be a tentative consensus that these verses rather were added to the psalm at a later time. And the language of these two verses suggests that the exile or the return from exile seems a likely period when these verses were added to the psalm.

You see the reference there or the prayer to God of building up the walls of Jerusalem. And that certainly would tie in with that period of the return from exile. We know how the walls were all cast down and this caused great discouragement.

[23 : 09] The prayer of Ezra and Nehemiah was that the walls would be built up again. So it is quite possible that these are indeed verses that have been added to the psalm.

But whether they were written by David or by a subsequent inspired author matters little with respect to the truth that they speak of.

Namely, the desire to see Zion built up and prosperous. And yet, when we think of this in the context of a life lived to the glory of God, the author of these two verses clearly sees this as something that God will do.

This is really a prayer. In your good pleasure, make Zion prosper. Build up the walls of Jerusalem. If this is something that God will do, then what part do we have to play other than joining with the psalmist in this prayer, praying to God that he would build up his church, that he would prosper his church?

Well, if these verses do date to the return from exile, which I'm suggesting is likely the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, what light does that shed on the subject?

[24 : 21] Well, I think as we reflect on the events around the building of Jerusalem or the rebuilding of Jerusalem at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, we realize, of course, that this was something that was both prayed for, but also something that the people of God engaged in.

Nehemiah prayed to God that he would build up the walls of Jerusalem, but he also built the walls. Chapter 3 of Nehemiah is a very fascinating chapter.

You know the one where you have all this description, all the different families, each doing their part in building up the wall. The sons of this fellow and the sons of the other and the goldsmiths and the priests and the Levites, all building the wall.

And so on the one hand, God's people were praying to God, prosper Jerusalem, build up the walls of Jerusalem, but they were also doing the building. They saw no contradiction there between praying for this outcome and engaging in the achieving of this outcome.

And so it is with us as we would be involved in the building up of God's church. Of course, we pray to God. We pray that God would prosper His cause, that God would build up the walls of Zion, of His church, here in Aberdeen and indeed to the ends of the earth.

[25 : 44] But as we pray, so we also build, so we also work towards that end. The people prayed and they work and so too with us.

Is this your desire as we enter into a new year? And if it is, in what way will your work or in what way will you work toward the building up of the church of Christ, of this congregation or the congregation of which you form a part in the year that is about to begin?

What brick will you place in the wall that is being built up? As we come to the close of this year, let's do so with a thankful heart.

Let's do so also with a repentant heart, acknowledging our sin, crying out to God for mercy and committed to renewal, a renewed heart, a renewed relationship with God and a renewed commitment to His service.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the psalm that we've been able to give some thought to today.

[26 : 57] We thank You that as David so long ago experienced the restoration of joy as He cried out to God for forgiveness and was granted forgiveness full and free.

We pray that we too would know that in our experience. And we pray that our repentance would also be marked by this commitment to renewal, that it would be our desire that You would create in us a pure heart, a steadfast and willing spirit, that it would be our desire, our experience of enjoying in the year ahead a closer walk with You, a nearer sense of Your presence.

We would also in the year that is about to begin seek to live a life to Your glory. Help us in all of these things we pray and we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.