



DAVID'S

A Clean Heart

DESIRE

By Bryan E. Beyer

IN PSALM 51:10, KING DAVID PLEADED WITH God to give him a “clean heart.” Many Scripture passages record David as a man who followed the Lord and served well in his generation (Acts 13:36). David wrote almost half the psalms we have in the Book of Psalms. He made Jerusalem Israel’s political and spiritual capital (2 Sam. 5–6) and later helped his son Solomon make preparations for building the temple (1 Chron. 28–29). Yet, Psalm 51 reveals David as a broken man—broken by what he had done. He desperately needed God’s healing touch and restoration, and he cried out to Him.

This article will focus on three areas. First, we will examine the background to Psalm 51 to highlight the context out of which David wrote it. Second, we will explore the meaning of key words in Psalm 51:10 to clarify how the Hebrews would have understood David’s plea. Third, we will look at key New Testament passages to discern how the New Testament addresses David’s appeal and how the Lord will respond to us if we confess our sin to Him.

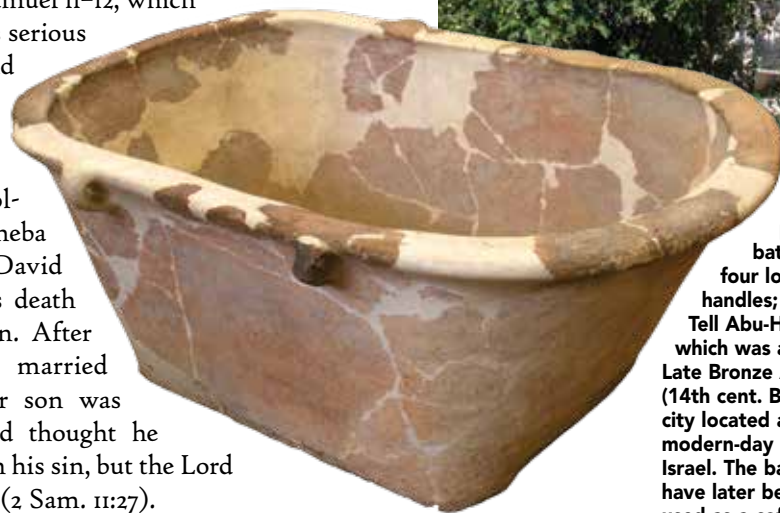
Background

The heading to Psalm 51 reads “A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.”¹ These words place the writing of this psalm in the context of 2 Samuel 11–12, which records King David’s serious moral failure. David committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of David’s best soldiers. When Bathsheba became pregnant, David arranged for Uriah’s death to cover his own sin. After Uriah died, David married Bathsheba and their son was born. Perhaps David thought he had gotten away with his sin, but the Lord had seen everything (2 Sam. 11:27).

God confronted David through Nathan the prophet. God had blessed David incredibly, but David had violated God’s law. Israel’s king at last came to repentance and experienced God’s forgiveness, but the consequences of his sin haunted him the rest of his life. Three of David’s sons would die before David did, and another died shortly thereafter.

David poured out his heart to the Lord as he wrote Psalm 51, dedicating his words for the choir director that others might learn from his failure. He prayed for restoration (Ps. 51:1–2), confessed his transgressions (vv. 3–6), and then continued his plea for restoration (vv. 7–12). Finally, David

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Left: A pottery bath with four loop handles; from Tell Abu-Hawam, which was a small Late Bronze Age (14th cent. B.C.) city located at modern-day Haifa, Israel. The bath may have later been used as a coffin.

Above: The Stepped Stone structure is one of the largest Iron Age structures in Israel. Located in the City of David at Jerusalem, its exact purpose has been debated; some believe it supported a royal building, maybe David’s palace.

offered thanksgiving to God as he looked to a day when restoration would come to David and to Jerusalem (vv. 13–19).

Key Words in Psalm 51:10

Psalm 51:10 contains rich theological words that reflect the depth of David’s plea. We will consider each below:

Create—The Hebrew word *bara* appears several times in Genesis 1–2 to describe God’s creative power in making the heavens and earth (Gen. 1:1,21,27; 2:3). Just as God created the universe and everything in it, He needed

BATH: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BRENT BRUCE / ROCKEFELLER MUSEUM / JERUSALEM (1228)

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Left: Scene on a Book of the Dead scroll of Khonsu-renpe (the priest of Amun) shows his coming to judgment before Osiris. Khonsu-renpe's heart is weighed to discover the nature of his conduct while alive. Khonsu-renpe was given the opportunity to declare his innocence in a series of 42 misdemeanors. Against his testimony, his heart was weighed on the right against the image of Maat, the Egyptian notion of right or truth. Near the scales, Khonsu-renpe kneels as

the jackal-headed Anubis makes adjustments. The monster Ammut, "Devourer of the Dead," crouched beneath the balance so he can swallow the heart should the weighing indicate the Khonsu-renpe lived a wicked life. At the left, the ibis-headed Thoth, the scribe of the gods, records the outcome.

Right: From the library of Assyria's King Ashurbanipal (r. ca. 669-631 B.C.), this Babylonian creation myth describes how the god Anshar summoned the other gods together to celebrate Marduk after his defeat of Tiamat, which was considered to be the primeval Chaos. From the body of Tiamat, Marduk created the heavens and the earth.



Right: Gold scarab in the shape of a dung beetle. From the 17th Dynasty until Roman times, Egyptians would place with a mummy a scarab that covered the heart. These heart scarabs were to ensure by their magical power that the deceased person's heart did not give evidence

against him when Osiris weighed it in the balance. Hieroglyphic inscriptions at the base of the scarab frequently had the names and titles of the dead person plus part of the text from the Book of the Dead: "My heart of my mother! My heart of my mother! My heart of my

different forms! Do not stand up against me as witness; do not make opposition against me among the assessors. Do not weight heavy against me in the presence of Keeper of the balance. Thou art my soul which is in my body, the Khnum (i.e. creator) who maintains my limbs."

to do a creative work in David. David required God's supernatural touch to restore him from his broken state.² God's creative power in Genesis 1-2 also brought order to the universe He created. David needed God to re-order his life after he strayed so far from Him.

Clean—The Hebrew word *tahor* designates more than outward cleanliness. It also denotes a moral cleanliness, and also can mean "pure" (NIV). It described the quality of gold to furnish the tabernacle—clean and without impurity (Ex. 25:11,17,24, "pure"). It also described pure words, pleasant to offer (Prov. 15:26, "pure"). Under the Law of Moses, people often brought sacrifices or offerings to the Lord as a demonstration of their desire for purity, but the offering itself did not purify the worshiper (Heb. 10:4). David expressed this sentiment later in the psalm (Ps. 51:16-17); God ultimately desired inner purity and cleanliness over an external sacrifice.

Heart—The Hebrew word *leb* represented the seat of one's intellect, emotion, and will.³ The heart guided people to make the right decisions, but David's heart had become spiritually hardened. Now, he saw clearly the ugliness of his sin. David returned to the image of the heart in verse 17: "You will not despise a broken and humbled heart." He had to humble himself to find mercy and grace with God. The prophet Isaiah also described God as one who favored those who recognized His sovereignty and trembled humbly at His Word (Isa. 66:2).

Renew—The Hebrew word *chadash* provides an interesting complement to the word "create" earlier in the verse. Creation typically implies bringing something into existence that did not exist prior to that time. In contrast, to renew something means to refresh or restore something that already exists. Probably the ideas came together in David's mind because he wanted God's help to start over with a renewed heart and spirit.

Steadfast—The Hebrew word *nakhon* comes from a root that means "be firm."⁴ It elsewhere described the earth that is "firmly established" by God (Ps. 93:1).



Upper right: In Amman, Jordan, visitors approach the ruins of a Byzantine church, which was con-

structed inside what had been the citadel at ancient Ammon. Uriah the Hittite was killed while storming the citadel at Ammon.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BOB SCHATZ (8/4/9)

Ironically, it also described David's throne that God had promised to establish forever (2 Sam. 7:16, "established"). The biblical writers also often used the word in a spiritual or moral sense to denote firmness of belief, conviction, or attitude. David used it to describe his own heart that was confidently established in the Lord when David was hiding from King Saul (Ps. 57:7, "confident"). How he had strayed from that attitude!

Spirit—The Hebrew word *ruach* here denoted David's moral character. He also used this word again in verse 17 when he described the "broken spirit" God desired. David's brokenness would please God more than any sacrifice he could bring. He needed to become as nothing so God could become everything to him again.⁵


When the ancient Hebrews heard David's plea, they naturally would have interpreted it through what they knew of the Law of Moses. Sinners normally brought sacrifices as expressions of their sorrow and repentance. At the same time, David's cry for an internal change of heart and mind would have provided a powerful example of the life God truly wanted. Later prophets such as Isaiah and Micah echoed this theme: God had much

more delight in faithful obedience and in humble brokenness than in offerings that did not express a contrite heart (Isa. 1:11-15; Mic. 6:6-8).

The New Testament and David's Appeal

The New Testament takes the concept of the inner relationship with God even further. Jesus told Nicodemus, a religious leader, that he needed to be born again, born of the Spirit, to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3-7). All the external religion anyone could offer would not substitute for the new birth God offered.

Further, the apostle Paul described anyone who turned to Christ as a new creation; the old had passed away, and God was doing a new work in that person (2 Cor. 5:17). Many in the Corinthian church had committed great evils, but Paul reminded them they had experienced God's cleansing and renewal when they turned to Jesus (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

David understood God's grace; he knew that if God would forgive him, God could still use him to reach others (Ps. 51:12-13). This truth stands today; God's grace can reach anyone who turns to Him. 

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
 2. John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 133.
 3. "לֵב" (*leb*, heart) in Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon [BDB]* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 524-25.
 4. "כּוּן" (*kun*, firm) in BDB, 465-67.
 5. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, vol. 5: Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 141.

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