

RESTORE SALVATION'S JOY

SERIES: "YOU ARE THE MAN"

by Steve Zeisler

This is the season for productions of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The story of Ebenezer Scrooge gets done in different clothing every year. The Muppets have a version of the Scrooge story. There's a cowboy version and any number of other ways that famous account is retold. But all of them have a central theme that revolves around this question: Is it possible to break with the past? Can a person really change, or does one's failure in the past and the hardness of heart achieved over time inevitably color the future?

We're coming to the end of a series of studies on the time in David's life when he was most actively rebellious against God, when he sinned with a high hand. He was finally exposed and he repented. We're concluding our study of David in Psalm 51. This psalm is the distillation of what David learned in all his dealings with God as a rebel and as one forgiven. We considered verses 1-9 in the last message. They have a refrain of honest confession and a call for cleansing and pardon. Verses 3-4, for instance, say,

**"For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge."**

David goes through a recitation of his sins, not quickly or dismissively, but agonizingly. They are real, he is guilty, and he calls out to God for soiled garments to be cleaned and broken bones to be set; he asks for the judge to pronounce the end of legal jeopardy.

Then the question of *A Christmas Carol* must be raised: Can the one who is pardoned and newly clean have hope that he will be different in the future? Does being pardoned inevitably lead to change, or might old patterns return?

Remember, when Scrooge was approached the first time it was by Jacob Marley, his old partner. Marley came in chains, rattling them and moaning his eternal condition as a ghost who was doomed to wander throughout the world after death, incessantly dragging the heavy chains of his sin. He explained to Scrooge, "I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard...would you know the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself?" (1) But the message of Psalm 51 is that God strikes the chains off. He doesn't hold us guilty for what we've done, and we don't have to drag the sins around anymore.

In verses 9-10 David moves on from looking back and acknowledging the problems of the past, and he looks forward to something that God might do in the future. There is hope that people like us can be different. (It turns out that there's no other kind but people like us, people who have pasts of which they are ashamed. There is no other material God will draw from and use to do good except for people like us.) Let's read these verses:

**Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.**

**Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.
Save me from bloodguilt, O God,
the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.**

**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.**

David prays for God to act to make him different. Verses 10-12 are an account of specific, thoughtful prayers to be made a new person. The answers to these prayers are important to observe as well. First, he has something to say to transgressors who are like he once was. The great opportunity to speak God's truth to needy hearts comes because he has been changed by the love of God. Second, authentic worship that pleases God comes from those who have been renewed, who have been changed from rebels into disciples. And third, he speaks of an influence that strengthens the surrounding society.

Let's consider David's prayers in verses 10-12, and then we'll look at what flows from them.

A CLEAN HEART AND A STEADFAST SPIRIT

Verse 10: "Create in me a pure [or clean] heart, O God...." What David does here is go back to the language of the creation itself in the first chapters of Genesis. The word "create" used here is the word *bara'* in Hebrew. It is used only of God in the Bible. It means to create something out of nothing. Human beings are allowed to fashion, arrange, or remodel things. But human beings never have this term used of them. We can't bring into being something that never existed before. But God can: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). David's request is similar: "Create in me what has never existed before: a clean heart." I think he imagines himself as a work of art. Remember, God used clay and his own breath to make Adam. The first human was his great creative work, his masterpiece. So is one who is restored from sin.

The second half of verse 10 parallels the first half: "...And renew a steadfast spirit within me." Lacking steadfastness, frequently failing, cyclically being weak in the same way over and over again, are also the concern of David's prayer. Again, we see God the Creator bringing into being something that never existed before: a steadfast spirit. Renewal is not a patch on worn cloth, but a remaking of the garment.

What does David have in mind as he is calling out to God for a clean heart? Hebrew thought conceived of human physiology differently from the way we do. We usually think of the heart as the seat of emotions. But what David is really praying for is a clean mind (for those in Biblical times the heart in one's chest was the organ of thought). Now that's a remarkable request, isn't it? Think of all the habitual patterns that you long to have removed from your mind. Think of memories of the bad scenes that replay themselves over and over again, that not only were hurtful in their own day but that have the possibility of influencing you again, dragging you down paths you don't want to take. To pray for a clean mind is to call for the cleaning out of the memories of abuse, self-pity, lust, hurts, failures. A clean mind is a new capacity to think, see, react, and judge, not the old one that's covered with muck from the past.

Let's consider what a steadfast spirit might be. We all have some bad habits, and most of them we got over time. Most people who have trouble with smoking cigarettes, for example, didn't like cigarettes the first time they smoked one. Having smoked just one cigarette, almost nobody would have any difficulty saying, "I'm going to give this up. I'm determined never to smoke again." But once smoking has become a habit, it's very difficult to stop. Most people with prejudices didn't start out with them. You have to learn to hate people for their skin color or their accent or their level of education. But once it has become a habit, it's hard to stop. Gossip, too-paying attention to the failures and inadequacies of another person-is an acquired taste.

On New Year's Day people make New Year's resolutions: "I'm going to deal with my bad habits this year." Yet the old habits seem so strong. A few days later their resolutions seem to have faded. David is praying for a steadfast spirit that can be strong enough so that the old, bad habits don't have command anymore. "Make me strong where I'm weak. Make me able to say no to things that are unhealthy to me. I don't want to be what I used to be."

INTIMACY WITH OUR CREATOR

Verse 11 adds a personal note to this. As I said, David is thinking of himself as a new person God is creating. But he also wants a relationship with the Creator. He doesn't want God to create a clean heart and then step back and leave it to him. He is saying, "I also need a love relationship with the One who renews me. Don't take your Holy Spirit from me. I need you all the time, every day."

You may remember the Greek legend of Pygmalion, an artist who was the king of Cyprus. He was lonely. He carved out of marble an extraordinarily beautiful statue of Aphrodite, and he fell in love with it. At his prayer it came to life, and he married his own creation. George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1913), which was made into the musical *My Fair Lady* (1956), is based on that story. Eventually a love relationship existed between the artist and what he had made. In *My Fair Lady* Eliza Doolittle was an unwanted and abandoned cockney flower girl, but she became a refined and elegant woman because she learned to speak the way educated, cultured people did. Her relationship with Professor Higgins was filled with friction and selfishness and foolishness. But recall the song at the end in which Eliza Doolittle is surprised to have fallen in love with this man who shaped her speech and opened a new world to her.

David's prayer is similar. "Having made me right, be my companion. I need for my Maker to be my Sustainer."

JOY AND A WILLING SPIRIT

The prayer "do not take your Holy Spirit from me" may seem odd to New-Testament believers. We are taught, and rightly, that in Christ, we are the residence of the Holy Spirit, children of God. These realities last forever. The Holy Spirit will not leave. Once we are born again, our life in Christ is sealed for eternity.

But the problem, in the language of the New Testament, is that we don't believe it. We don't live as if we know for sure that we're loved by God and that we have his power available to us. A restatement of David's words in New Testament is "that the eyes of our heart would be enlightened" (Ephesians 1:18), that we would see the truth of what we don't yet believe.

That's what David says in verse 12:

**"Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."**

What he means is, "Remove every impediment to joyful certainty of your presence." And that's obviously appropriate for us as well, because we have temptations, habits, feelings, bad thinking, blindness. We can be children of God and not live as if we are. We need God to work to take away the impediments so that we are joyful instead of grumpy, fearful, and self-serving so that we are willing rather than resistant. We can pray like David for a willing spirit: "Help me *want* to love my neighbor, so that there is nothing I would rather do than what God wants me to do." David is asking that the truth overtake him and that every obstacle be done away with.

I was listening to a talk on prayer by Ben Patterson recently. He mentioned that he had once prayed at great length for something to be given to him. He didn't say what it was or how long he prayed, but he realized over a long period of time that God was being good in withholding the thing from him, because he was coming to enjoy the experience of prayer more than he would have enjoyed getting what it was he was praying for. God finally gave him what he asked for, but by then it was of little importance. The sweetness of time spent with God had led him to become a man of prayer.

WE HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

So what comes from this? Do people who grow deep with God find themselves immediately translated into heaven? Do they climb to the top of some hill and hold hands with other people who know God in the same way they do? Not at all. What happens next is witness. Verse 13:

**"Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you."**

The verb "turn back" is the same as the verb at the beginning of verse 12: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation...." David is tying together his joyfulness with his ability to influence those around him. We have something to say to transgressors whose hearts are broken, who know failure. They may have a facade of confidence, but inside they are not confident. They need help. We can say, "I was like that. I once was blind, but I now can see. And God can meet your need as well."

Pointedly, David does not talk about religion. He talks about God's ways. Too often Christians talk about church membership or other external behaviors. We don't witness very well because we talk about everything else but God. David says, "I will teach your ways. I will say what I know is true of God-his commitment to people, his unfailing love, his power. I will speak of God's ways, and outsiders will want to hear it, and their lives will be transformed."

At times in my life I've thought that the more you grow in the Lord, the less you are like the world you came from, and the more distant you are from it. But David is suggesting something else. Maturity is enthusiasm for the role of being a beggar who can tell other beggars where to find bread, in the words of the old saying.

THE CHANGED PERSON IS A WORSHIPPING PERSON

The changed, new person is a worshipping person, and verses 14-17 tell us some very helpful things about the nature of worship. First of all, worship is always a response. We sometimes get this backward. We think to ourselves that we will enter a special place and engage in worship, and then the very act of worshipping will create a willingness to listen. We try to change our thinking by engaging in worship. But David says it's just the opposite. It's God's display of himself that leads us to worship. Look at verse 14: "Save me...and my tongue will sing..." Verse 15: "...Open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." God acts first. It is having my eyes opened to something that is true about God-his actions, his being, his glory-that leads me to worship.

In verse 16 David goes on to say that the form worship takes is of very little importance without a right heart. There are debates in Christian circles about what constitutes authentic worship. Does it involve candles and quietness and cathedrals

with vaulted stone arches? Does worship occur with bands and drums and loud hosannas and swaying to the music? Does it happen when we're gathered around the sacraments, ingesting the body and blood of the Lord, swept away by what he did for us on the cross? In a home fellowship when we hold hands and spontaneously begin to pray aloud as God moves us? And if any one of those is authentic, are the others inauthentic? But David says the form is unimportant. He speaks of the sacrificial system in Jerusalem that all Jews would be familiar with: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it...." God is not interested in our activity. What he is interested in is the heart that precedes the activity. Verse 17:

**"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise."**

If I am humble, coming before God to know him as he is, to be known by him, to speak back to him what is true of him, then it doesn't matter what form my worship takes, whether it's candles or communion or praise music or great hymns or Latin or English.

CHANGING OUR CULTURE

Finally, in verses 18-19 David says even the nation or the culture will change. Many of us are concerned about our culture. We feel as if our nation is "going to hell in a handbasket" and the world is falling apart at a miserable rate. Our first instinct is to say, "We've got to change this. We've got to throw those rascals out and get other people into power." We think we need to somehow fix the schools or change the economy or whatever. But the insight here is that the change happens individual by individual. That's what David means when he writes, "...Make Zion prosper, build up the walls of Jerusalem." When David wrote this, there was nothing wrong with the walls of Jerusalem; they were perfectly sturdy. But he knew that no place would stay strong for long without the renewal of heart that makes men and women who they ought to be.

He speaks of outward religious expression, the offering of bulls on the altar and so on. Choices need to be made, but for the right reasons, on the right basis, by right-hearted people. And so the way to change the church or society is for souls to be renewed.

There is a clear answer to the question posed by Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. We can be changed from what we once were. Say in your heart these words of David: "I believe you can fix me, and I long to be fixed so that I can witness and worship, so that you will use who I am in Christ to bless the world I live in."

NOTES

1. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, ©1962 by Scholastic Magazines, Inc. New York, NY. P. 22.

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