

Old Testament Religion

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Psalm 51:12 *"Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation."*

From these words, it may seem as if David escaped the consequences of his crime too easily. We may read the narrative and fail to notice the signs of that deep contrition which such hideous wickedness, once recognised, surely must engender. There is the story of the sin, drawn in all its shocking detail. Then Nathan comes in with his beautiful allegory of the ewe lamb and its powerful application. And then we read simply: "And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin."

After that, only the story remains of how the child of sin was smitten, how David besought the Lord for its life, and how he finally acquiesced in the Divine judgment. One is apt to feel that David was more concerned to escape the consequences of his sin than to offer the Lord the sacrifices of a broken and a contrite heart. Does David's simple acknowledgement of his sin and the Lord's immediate remission of it not seem cold and external to us?

We have only to turn to David's penitential Psalms to learn the depths of repentance that wrung this great and sensitive soul. These Psalms sound the depths of the sinful soul's self-torment and longing for recovery. Taken in sequence, they present a complete portrayal of the course of repentance in the heart, from its inception in the contrite review of the past and the remorseful biting back of the awakened heart, through its culmination in a true return to God in humble love and trusting confidence, and then to the establishment of a new relation of obedience to God and a new richness of grateful service to Him.

Let us look at these four Psalms: 6, 38, 51, and 32.

- **In Psalm 6**, the note of remorse sounds—it is the torment of a soul's perception of its sin that is here prominently brought to our observation.
- **In Psalm 38**, the note of hope, which is not absent from

Psa. 6, becomes dominant here. The sorrow and hatred of sin are coloured by a pervasive tone of relief.

- **In Psalm 51**, while there is no lessening of the repentance, there is, along with the deep sense of the guilt and pollution of sin, also a note of triumph over the sin, which aspires to a clean heart and a steadfast spirit and a happy service of God in purity of life.
- **In Psalm 32**, the sense of forgiveness, the experience of joy in the Lord, and the exercises of holy and joyful service overlie all else.

Here we trace David's penitent soul through all its experiences: his remorseful contemplation, his passionate reaching out to the salvation of God, the gradual return of his experience of that salvation, and finally, the full glory of its complete realisation.

In some respects, the most remarkable of this group of pictures of a penitent soul is that of Psa. 51. It draws back the veil for us and permits us to look on the most characteristic act of repentance, just at the turning point, as it turns from its sin to God.

This passage reveals a sense of sin so intense and a perception of God's grace so uplifting that it captures the profound transformation needed in sinful man to truly become a servant of God. It makes one wonder what additional Christian experience could contribute beyond what a saint under the Old Testament already experienced in turning from sin to God.

The wonderful depth of the religious experience and the remarkable richness of religious conception embodied in this Psalm have proved a snare to critics. "David could not have had these ideas," says Prof. T. C. Cheyne. These ideas are distinctly Christian, and they could not have originated naturally in a purely human heart. This highlights an important value of the Psalm: it reveals the fundamentally Christian nature of Israel's religion. It allows us to observe the thoughts and feelings of a Spirit-led child of God from the past, illustrating his genuine Christian character in his battle with sin and his longing for God. In doing so, it also helps us understand the supernatural guidance of God's people throughout history.

Consider for a moment the conception of God present throughout the passionate language of this Psalm.

- It depicts God as a righteous being who will not tolerate sin, guiding all events, even the emergence of sinful acts, to demonstrate justice and fairness in His judgments.
- It portrays a holy God whose Spirit cannot dwell in unclean hearts.
- It also describes a powerful God who governs everything according to His divine plans.
- Most notably, it emphasises a gracious God, full of love and compassion, whose greatest pleasure is salvation.

This depiction aligns closely with Exodus 34:6, which describes God as "full of compassion and gracious, abundant in loving kindness and truth; keeping loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." The Psalm's language clearly draws from this divine revelation, but it is not spoken by Jehovah Himself; rather, it is expressed from the heart of the repentant sinner, who reflects on the nature of God with whom he must reckon.

The Sinfulness of Sin

This passage reveals a deep and honest recognition of sin. The speaker's self-accusation is exhaustive, connecting their transgressions—rebellion against God, distortion of life, and missing the mark—to an inner corruption inherited from ancestors. They reflect that their sinful acts are outward expressions of an inner, corrupt nature, emphasising that these acts are not separate but manifestations of what lies within, as allowed by God's law. The text underscores that God's desire extends beyond outward purity, seeking truth and wisdom internally.

The Psalmist views sin not just as individual acts but as an immense ocean of unrighteousness within us, with sinful actions being just the waves breaking over it. Commentators often note that this passage presents original sin more vividly than any other in the Old Testament. The later revelations didn't deepen this understanding of sin's nature—though they expanded on its details and expression.

The Change Needed

Therefore, the idea that a radical change is needed for the Psalmist's deliverance from sin is fully developed. A superficial fix cannot eliminate a sin that is ingrained in our very nature. That is why the passionate plea: "Create—it requires a divine act—create

in me a clean heart." The heart represents the totality of inner life, and the request also asks for a continual renewal of spirit—a spirit that will no longer turn away from Thee. Only such a complete transformation, akin to the concept of rebirth in the New Testament, can make a person who recognizes himself as the Psalmist does—not just because of outward sins, which are merely manifestations of his inner nature, but because of his fundamental character—acceptable to God, who desires truth in the inward parts. Indeed, nothing less than this total renewal can grant him the steadfast spirit that will protect his outward actions from shame.

The Psalmist does not assume he can live solely by his own strength in his new life. A notable aspect of the Psalm's doctrinal system is its clear acknowledgment of the essential role the Holy Spirit plays in cleansing the life through His constant presence and activity. "Take not thy holy Spirit from me and uphold me with a spirit of willingness." The psalmist recognizes that it is God's to lead and his to follow—not independence but obedience that defines the religious life. The Old Testament pays little attention to the Spirit's work in moral and ethical areas; when mentioned, it is mainly in the context of promises for the Messianic era.

Here, David not only prays for them personally but also reflects on their experience in both the past and present. He suggests that his ability to stand firm depends on the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit within him, fostering a spirit of willingness. This highlights how, in its understanding of God, sin, and salvation, this Psalm represents a pinnacle of Old Testament revelation. David's journey to know God and himself was difficult, yet it led him to a deep and comprehensive understanding of both his own heart and the God of grace—an insight that is difficult to find elsewhere.

The Fullness of Joy in Salvation

David's knowledge was not just theoretical but experiential. He understood sin firsthand, having touched the unclean and explored the depths of iniquity. He knew himself because he had walked his own flawed path and learned its thickets, morasses, and final outcome. His understanding of God came from tasting and seeing that the Lord is gracious, experiencing God's preciousness firsthand. David had experienced salvation and its joy, but he never fully knew the joy of salvation until he lost it. This

gives special poignancy to his repentance: it was not just that of a sinner, but of a saint who had sinned.

Only a saint truly understands what sin is, because only they perceive it in contrast to salvation, which they have experienced and comprehended. Conversely, it is only the saint who sins who grasps the meaning of salvation: for the joy that is lost and then regained is fully appreciated. David's profound knowledge, especially his deep perceptions of God, sin, and salvation—surpassing the typical religious awareness of his time—can be explained by these insights. Having known God's salvation and basked in its joy, he came to understand sin through his severe transgression and its terrible consequences. This painful experience revealed to him what salvation's joy truly is—the joy lost and only restorable through God's grace. In his intense remorse, everything becomes clear: his sinful nature, God's goodness, his need for the Spirit, and the joy of being accepted and living with God. This leads to his deep self-disgust and urgent longing for purity to see God, culminating in his prayer: "Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation."