

Renewing the Free Heart

“Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

Psalm 51:9–10

I know of a man who had everything going for him. He was a military veteran who rose through the ranks, led his soldiers to many victories on the battlefield, championed the oppressed, and became the popular leader of his people. This man was also an accomplished musician and poet. Most important of all, he had a passion for the Lord and was dedicated to serving God.

Despite all of this, however, the man stumbled badly. In fact, he broke four of the final five of God’s Ten Commandments. After admiring the beautiful wife of one of his officers (covetousness), this man sent for the woman, slept with her (adultery), arranged for her husband to be killed in battle (murder), and then married her (theft). It sounds like a bad made-for-TV movie, yet it was all too real.

The man I’m talking about was the biblical David, the shepherd boy who rose up to become king of Judah and Israel. In many ways, David lived a storybook life. He was a “man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). But then—just as we all do—he confronted the unmistakable reality of his own sin. Suddenly, one of the heroes of his people and of the faith was dealing with defeat and despair. David was deeply troubled. He needed to renew his heart.

Does any of this sound familiar? Have you ever had life going in the direction you wanted when you suddenly, for reasons you may not have even understood, made a foolish wrong turn? If so, it’s time for us to talk about how to renew *your* heart.

Dealing with Failure

No matter how diligent you are about guarding and nurturing your heart, there will still be times when you mess up. Each of us is human, and each of us is imperfect. As long as we are in the flesh, the possibility of sinning exists.

As a seminary student, I once went to a meeting at a church where people were sharing their testimonies and giving praise to the Lord. I will never forget one woman who stood and announced with pride, “I want to thank God tonight that I have not sinned in word, thought, or deed for twenty years.” The only explanation I could think of for her comment was that she must have just awakened from a coma!

Contrary to what some people believe, our old selfish nature will never be completely eradicated. When we invite Christ into our lives and grow in Him, we should expect to sin less and less, but we will never be *sinless*. Only Jesus walked on this earth without sin.

When you fail and offend God, if your sin is not processed quickly and biblically, your fellowship with the Lord and others will be damaged. You will likely experience frustration, anxiety, guilt, and much more. You will feel—as David did after his transgressions and I did after mine—like a failure.

We can choose from many books in stores and libraries that explain how to be successful. It’s much harder to find good advice on how to deal with failure. Yet failure is common to all of us. How do we turn that failure back into success? In God’s eyes, successful people are those who apply *His* remedy for failure. It begins with acknowledging our errors.

Realize Your Sin

After David’s marriage to Bathsheba, wife of the loyal officer he arranged to have killed, the prophet Nathan confronted David: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says... ‘Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?’” (2 Samuel 12:7, 9).

David was a king. He could have had Nathan thrown out of his chambers. He could have denied Nathan’s accusations or had him discredited or killed. He could have

sunk even deeper into his sin. But David knew that he had strayed from God, and that his only hope for renewal was to accept full responsibility for his mistakes. When Nathan finished speaking, David's response was short and sweeping: "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13).

No excuses. No delays. In an instant, David acknowledged his culpability in a terrible string of actions that would have lasting and tragic repercussions for David's family. He knew the road ahead would not be easy, yet he realized he had to openly admit to what he'd done in order to restore his heart and his relationship with the Lord.

Most of us do not easily "fess up" to our worst mistakes. Even when confronted, we tend to avoid the truth. We distort the facts. We evade. We out-and-out lie. And we throw up more and more obstacles between us and the Lord.

David did more than acknowledge his sin. He wrote a poignant prayer that asked the Lord for forgiveness and cleansing. Today, Psalm 51 is a model for us on how to deal with sin. It begins this way:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

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.
Surely I was sinful at birth,

sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;

you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

(vv. 1–6)

David's pleas for mercy are based on God's unfailing love and great compassion. David takes full responsibility for his sin: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (v. 3). We too should adopt this humble approach to the Lord. God isn't interested in our excuses, explanations, and rationalizations. He knows why we do what we do. But He is a marvelous listener to our confessions.

Author Eugene Peterson has this view: "Confession of sin isn't a groveling admission that I am a terrible person; it doesn't require what's sometimes described as 'beating yourself up.' Insiders to the Gospel know that the sentence, 'I have sinned against the Lord' is a sentence full of hope because it is a sentence full of God."¹

Confession involves three specific actions:

- **Agreement**—God, You are right! Scripture says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).
- **Acknowledgment**—I have sinned. I am responsible! David's penitent psalm contains thirty-five personal pronouns. He leaves no doubt that he is taking the blame for his errors. The Lord clearly expects this from us: "Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me, declares the LORD." (Jeremiah 3:13).
- **Abandonment**—I will, by Your grace, forsake my sin! Confession involves more than acknowledging our mistakes, then going out and making the same ones again. We must turn away from the old ways to renew our hearts. Then we will discover the amazing grace of God: "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

David's response to the Lord in Psalm 51 is genuine. It is from the heart. It is a plea not only for mercy, but also for help in turning away from sin. This is the kind of prayer God delights in answering.

I remember vividly when God, in an unusual way, answered one of my own prayers of confession and pleas for mercy. I'd gone to a bed and breakfast in the small town of Jacksonville, Oregon, to try to process my recent failures and sort out my thinking. When I checked in, I was relieved to learn that no one else was staying there. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone—I just wanted to be alone with the Lord and my Bible.

The next morning, I sat alone in a wicker chair in the inn's sunroom. I prayed and confessed, but it was difficult. I stumbled over the words. I felt ashamed and worthless in God's eyes. The sunlight pouring through the glass ceiling seemed a false promise of hope.

That's when a large man in a white polo shirt suddenly strode into the room. Without any introduction, he said in a booming voice, "Have you ever heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? I just read the most interesting statement from him. He said that when you sin boldly, pray more boldly still because the Scriptures tell us to come boldly before the throne of grace. Isn't that terrific?"

With that, the man turned and walked out of the room. I never saw him again. Stunned, I sat there and felt myself bathed anew in God's love, forgiveness, grace, and acceptance.

It really is a throne of grace. David found it so, and so did I. You can too. No matter how badly or how often you have failed, He is still the God of all grace. When you acknowledge your sin to Him, He will by His grace forgive you and cleanse you from *all* your sin.

Recognize God's Forgiveness

We've said it before in this book, but for many of us it's a difficult concept to accept: God forgives completely. No sin is too great for His love to overcome. No sin is so evil that He cannot remove the stain from our hearts.

David understood that his actions were inexcusable—but not unforgivable. Through his confession and the prayer that became Psalm 51, he sought to wipe away the awful mistakes of his past and bathe instead in the cleansing shower of God's love.

David put it this way in the middle section of Psalm 51:

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

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.
(vv. 7–12)

When we look closer at this passage, we find promises that should encourage the most miserable sinner. Theft? Adultery? Deceit? Murder? God can take it all away. There will still be consequences for your actions, but your heart *can* be renewed. When confession is genuine, you can say:

- “I will be cleansed” (v. 7).
- “I will be whiter than snow” (v. 7).

- “I will hear joy and gladness” (v. 8).
- “I will have a new sense of wholeness and wellbeing” (v. 8).
- “I will have all my sins completely and finally removed” (v. 9).
- “I will have a pure heart” (v. 10).
- “I will have inward stability” (v. 10).
- “I will have a new sense of God’s presence” (v. 11).
- “I will have a new empowerment of God’s Spirit” (v. 11).
- “I will have a fresh appreciation of my salvation” (v. 12).
- “I will have a new desire to live a life of obedience to God” (v. 12).

When we deal seriously with our sin, God deals gently with us. It is vitally important that we understand how completely the Lord cleanses us from *all* sin. If we fail to realize that God’s forgiveness is total, we give the enemy a great foothold in our lives and our hearts remain troubled. We tend to repeat sins we feel guilty about. Guilt leads to failure, and failure to more guilt.

In his classic book *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis vividly describes Satan’s strategy: he gets Christians to become preoccupied with their failures. Once that happens, the battle is won. The devil is particularly adept at using our past to ruin our future. He perpetuates two lies. Before you sin, he whispers, “No big deal. You can recover. God will forgive you. You belong to Jesus, so you’re perfectly safe even if you do sin.” After you sin, he shouts, “It’s hopeless! You really blew it. There is no way back. You can’t belong to Jesus because if you did, you wouldn’t have sinned!”

We tend to lean toward one of two extremes when we sin. Either we attempt to justify our actions through excuses, rationalizations, and blaming others or we condemn ourselves with hopeless thoughts: *I’m a failure. I always mess up.*

Neither of those extremes works. The only answer is to confess and accept God’s complete forgiveness. His grace is greater than we can even imagine. According to Eugene Peterson, “David’s sin, enormous as it was, was wildly outdone by God’s grace. David’s sin cannot, must not, be minimized, but it’s miniscule compared to God’s

salvation from it. It's always a mistake to concentrate attention on our sins; it's God's work on our sins—that's the main event."²

Our sins are uninteresting and unimportant. But God's response? It's more than interesting. It's awesome.

Restore Your Effectiveness

For years, one of my best friends, Rick, had been a schoolteacher in Modesto, California. He had a wife and two children and was heavily involved in ministry at our church. He led worship at services, directed the choir, and often sang moving solos in his beautiful baritone voice. I had great respect for him and for his passion for the Lord.

That's why I was so shocked when Rick announced to his wife, Colleen, that he was leaving her. He'd met a woman, also married with children, while taking a class to extend his teaching credentials. They'd been involved for eight months. Both Rick and his new companion planned to divorce their spouses and marry.

As a pastor and a person who saw a best friend heading down the wrong path, I called Rick into my office and confronted him. There was no denial about what he'd done, but plenty of rationalizing. "So what if I'm leaving Colleen?" he said. "I'm in love with Claire now. God's going to forgive me later. You'll see. God's going to make this okay. It's going to work." He was angry and wanted nothing to do with my counsel.

Rick went ahead with his plans. He and Claire went on a vacation to Hawaii. They drew up divorce papers. They bought a new house and new furniture, and planned to move in together.

Then, on a night about eighteen months after our first meeting, I got a phone call. "Dennis," the voice said. "It's Rick. I've got to see you."

We met once again at my office. This wasn't the defiant guy I'd encountered a year-and-a-half before. His voice was quiet, his head down, his shoulders slumped. He was broken. We sat down and over the next two hours went through a box of Kleenex together. God had penetrated Rick's defenses. The rationalizations were gone. Rick knew he'd blown it. As we read through Psalm 51 together, Rick confessed his transgressions.

That evening in my office, after more than two years of blatant sin that had torn apart his family, Rick was restored to the Lord.

I asked Rick to go before the congregation and confess his sins and ask the forgiveness of the church body. At the service, Rick began by reading Psalm 32: “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered...Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’S unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.”

His wife wasn’t sure if her own love was as unfailing. Colleen’s trust had been betrayed, her heart broken. She didn’t know what to do. But after much prayer, Colleen decided to join Rick in marriage counseling. They lived apart at first, but God began to miraculously heal their relationship. God granted her the ability to extend His amazing grace through her to Rick. And six months later, in front of hundreds of people, I had the privilege of officiating at a recommitment wedding ceremony for Rick and Colleen at our church. Their teenage son was best man. When Rick and Colleen repeated their vows to each other, I doubt there was a dry eye in the place.

The story doesn’t end there. Rick sat in church each Sunday, but no longer sang with the choir or served with the worship team. Finally, I went to him. “Rick, it’s great to have you back,” I said. “God wants to use you. You need to get back in the choir.”

I could see the doubt on his face. “After what I’ve done?” he said. “Would they want me back?”

“Sure,” I said. “Just take it one step at a time.”

So Rick asked to rejoin the choir, and was quickly welcomed back into the fold. The opportunity to sing again before God and his Christian brothers and sisters meant everything to my old friend. When Rick sang, tears ran down his face. Before long, he was back in our men’s quartet. Then came the day when he performed a solo, “To God Be the Glory.” Once again, the tears flowed.

Rick and I no longer live in the same city, but we still keep in touch. This man who was so angry with me while in the midst of his sin called recently. “Dennis, I’m on the way to the hospital for a knee surgery,” he said. “I just wanted to hear your voice before I go in and tell you that I love you.”

Rick's relationships with his family and his friends are restored. His heart is renewed. But it all started with realizing his sin and recognizing God's forgiveness. Today, because of the difficult journey he's traveled, Rick is a more compassionate and effective Christian than ever. People listen to him because they know he has seen both sides of life. They sense he is a man who suffered the deep pain of losing everything, of being broken, and then, through the Lord's grace and mercy, discovered the joy of gaining it all back. They sense his humility and gratitude. These days, when Rick sings "To God Be the Glory," people know he means every word.

David's experience was similar to Rick's. He and his family suffered greatly, but God took David's terrible mistakes and his brokenness and molded him into an even more effective warrior for His kingdom. David wrote some of his most powerful psalms after his sin with Bathsheba and restoration with the Lord. Among them is Psalm 51, which ends with these words:

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.
(vv. 13–19)

In this passage, David tells us that even if we stumble, when God renews our hearts, our impact on others for God can be effective and powerful: “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you” (v. 13). He teaches that with a renewed heart, the praise and worship we offer the Lord can still be fresh and authentic: “My tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (v. 14–15). He promises that our lives can still be marked by genuine humility: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (v. 17).

When Satan shouts that it’s over for you, that you’re damaged goods, don’t listen to him. God can take your sin and pain and turn them into new weapons in His arsenal. If you believe that and give Him the chance, God will restore your ability to bring Him glory.

Starting Over

What we’ve been talking about in this chapter boils down to this: after you’ve blown it, it’s time to start over. You can let your sin defeat you or use it to make you even more effective than before. Remember that the longer you wait to allow God to renew your heart, the harder it will be to regain your freedom. Deal quickly and decisively with sin. As soon as you become aware of its presence, take it to the Lord. Keep short accounts with God and with others.

Starting over can be daunting. I know—I’ve been there! Yet it’s always possible to start over if you join hands with your heavenly Father. Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). When you act alone, you are destined for a troubled heart. But when you rely on God’s love, grace, and forgiveness—and one more critical element

that we'll discuss in the next chapter—you will be restored and renewed. You will be ready to again bring Him glory.

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A Thought to Remember

As long as we are in the flesh, the possibility of sinning exists.

A Verse to Review

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” Psalm 51:10

A Question for Reflection

Is there some area of your heart that needs to be renewed?