

“Create in Me a Clean Heart”

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March 17, 2024

For the Leader. A Psalm of David;

When Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba:

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. (Psalm 51:1-10)

Few if any psalms speak more plainly about sin than this one. This text is always recommended for reading at the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday, a day that is devoted to confession and repentance, and punctuated by the imposition of black ashes on our foreheads with the ominous reminder to “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Recognizing that Psalm 51 is infused with feelings of shame, regret, and guilt, the preacher Charles Spurgeon would often refer to this psalm as “The Sinner’s Guide” – a lesson on what true repentance looks, sounds, and feels like.

It all reminds me of that time when I literally took candy from a baby. Not really a baby -- Jack was eight – but he was a young child. And, in my defense... he had some Peeps.

I know that this is one of the great divides in the candy world. Very few are ambivalent on the issue; people tend to either love or detest these sweet, fluffy marshmallow confections that are molded into all kinds of wonderful shapes, then coated with a colorful shell of concentrated corn syrup and sugar. Some people dislike the gooey texture; others treasure the simple, airy symphonies of flavor that Peeps provide.

Can you guess which side of this debate I am on?

Regardless of your own stance, you cannot avoid them at this time of year. After all, they are, people say, the number one “non-chocolate Easter candy,” which I know could be a little like being the best non-athletic basketball player on the team. Still, the manufacturer of Peeps, the Just Born company, claims that they produce enough Peeps every year to circle the Earth twice. Two billion Peeps can’t be wrong.¹

So flash back with me to a certain February about 7 or 8 years ago, when we were visiting Jack’s family and staying at their house. We always sleep in their basement, which

¹ <https://www.hardings.com/2018/03/20/peeps-love-them-or-hate-them/>



has a guest room and a pullout sofa for the girls. It is also the playroom. During our stay, I happened to be passing through the playroom on my way to somewhere or something, and I was certainly minding my own business. But I happened to catch out of the corner of my eye an opened package of Peeps sitting next to the couch. They were red Valentine heart Peeps, and only two had been eaten.

I will admit that what happened next is all a bit hazy. I don't remember thinking at all about how the package could have come to be in that place at that time... about who might have started eating the package and somehow stopped at only two (which is, to me, inconceivable)... or who might claim actual ownership of the partially depleted cornucopia of sweetness. What I do know is that I ate one. I also know that, about two minutes later, from another room, I heard eight-year-old Jack yell out, "Who ate one of my Peeps?!?" And I also know that, on most holidays since that day, we have given Jack multiple packs of Peeps. This is penance for my sin, and a constant reminder of my sinful nature.

Now, I am clearly making light of this, and I also know that, in the grand scheme of sins and sinning, this was no biggie. At the same time, the Parable of the Peeps does give us a glimpse into the reality of sin in our lives. If you think about it, what happened to me with the Peeps is not all that different from the story of Adam and Eve, who every day had to pass by that tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden and that delicious looking fruit just hanging right there. Eventually, something just got the best of them. Nobody's looking, they figured. It couldn't hurt to just have one bite, they thought. So they gave in.

The Parable of the Peeps also lines up with Psalm 51. Although the psalm does not expressly tell us why King David is so self-critical and ashamed, it does give a very strong hint. This happens to be one of the psalms that includes a superscription, or a Hebrew introduction at the beginning. This superscription specifically says that this is "*A Psalm of David; When Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*"

That's it, right there. If we want to understand why David was in anguish over his sinfulness and corruption, and begging for God's mercy, all we have to do is remember the time when King David happened to see the beautiful Bathsheba bathing on a rooftop. All he could see was something he wanted. It was complicated, because she was married. But there were ways around that. Not good ways... not honorable ways... but he could make some things happen that removed that obstacle. No one would dare question his motives.

So David just took what he wanted, and he figured that would be that, until the prophet Nathan came to the king behind closed doors and forced him to confront what he had done. Only then could David see clearly just how deplorable and inexcusable his actions had been. In the days that follow, David is overcome with shame and regret as the tragic consequences of his sin crash in upon him.²

Tradition holds that, in this period of conviction and repentance, David picks up a pen and composes Psalm 51. As the 18th Century British preacher Matthew Henry wrote, "David now saw, more than ever, what an unclean heart he had, and sadly laments it; but he [also] sees [that] it is not in his own power to amend it, and therefore begs God [to] create in him a clean heart."³

The key point is that David realized that he was so broken – so far gone -- that he was beyond any capacity to fix himself. His heart did not merely need a cleaning or

² If you are interested in the full story, you can find it in the book of Second Samuel, Chapters 11 and 12.

³ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/mhc/psalms/51.htm>

reorganizing. He needed a completely new heart. In the same way, his spirit was not merely misdirected, or in need of some slight adjustments. He needed a complete do-over. And David knew that this was not human work. It wasn't something that he could do, or something that he and some key advisors could tackle. Only the Creator of heaven and earth could do for David what needed to be done. So David directs his plea to the only One who could give him a new heart and a new, unblemished way of living that focused not on the temptations of the world, but on God. "*Create in me a clean heart,*" David pleads, "*and put a new and right spirit within me.*"⁴

This truth – that we, as human beings, cannot achieve true righteousness on our own – has always been tough for us to admit. 1500 years ago, two prominent Christian leaders went head-to-head over this very question. Pelagius, a monk teaching in Rome, argued that we human beings, if we just work hard enough and use our natural God-given gifts, can transform ourselves into good upright people. The problem is not original sin, he said, it's moral laziness. Pelagius was opposed strenuously by Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa, who said that Pelagius was full of it -- that we can never attain righteousness by our own efforts... that we are totally dependent upon the grace of God. In the end, Augustine's view prevailed. Augustine was sainted and Pelagius was excommunicated in 418.⁵

Even so, we are still debating this ancient question. There is no doubt that human beings, when we put our minds to it, can do some pretty incredible things. The ancient Egyptians built the pyramids, Emperor Qin Shi Huang envisioned and began construction of the Great Wall of China, America put men on the surface of the moon and brought them back safely. Humanism, the philosophy that stresses the amazing potential and inherent goodness of human beings, is very much alive and well. But take that trip to the moon, for example. We still say things like, "We put a man on the moon, so why can't we cure the common cold?" We continue to make great strides out in the world, but there are still significant limits on what we can accomplish in our own hearts and our own spirits. That is why David's lament still speaks to us, that's why we can understand how David felt when he confronted his own failings, his selfishness, his lack of concern for others.

And that's why every time I see Peeps, no matter how much I enjoy them, there's a little sadness too, because they remind me of my limitations. I can't understand why I didn't find it odd that there was a pack of Peeps just sitting there. I wasn't even in my own house! Who wouldn't ask themselves some preliminary questions?

We all have memories of times when we have hurt someone else, or treated someone unkindly or unfairly. We all have regrets. King David certainly had his. Adam and Eve had theirs. You and I, we have ours. And that's OK, because regrets are a part of every human life. It doesn't matter how hard we work at being good, and kind, and generous. To be human is to be limited in certain ways, and one of those limitations is an inborn weakness, a predisposition to make mistakes and have regrets. And when it comes to those, I love what the Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau once wrote. "Make the most of your regrets," he said; "never smother your sorrow." Instead, Thoreau recommends that

⁴ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/psalms/51.htm>

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pelagianism>

we let them grow, like a plant in a garden. Tend your regrets, he said. Let them be and see what comes of them. Even cherish them. "To regret deeply," is wrote, "is to live afresh."⁶

That's what David wanted. He had sinned greatly, and that sin brought him to his knees. He knew he could not fix what he had done, and he knew he could not fix himself. He turned to the only place, and the only One, who could restore what had been broken and turn that darkness into light. Confessing his guilt, and making no excuses for it, he asked for the only thing that could make things right.

May the sacred request that he made, be ours as well: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*" **Amen.**

⁶ www.brainyquote.com/topics/regret-quotes