

Psalm 51:7 – “Hyssop and White Snow”

A chapel by Dr. Jason Van Vliet

Sing: Psalm 51:1,2

Read: Psalm 51:1-12

Sing: Psalm 51:3

This past summer our family had the privilege of travelling to BC. My parents celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary. And it was a great blessing to be there and share in their joy.

One of the things we did while we were there was to drive up to the top of Mt. Baker in the State of Washington. Wow! What a sight! What a view of the Cascade Range of mountains! What a view... period!

And the snow. Mt. Baker holds the world record for the most snowfall in one skiing season: 1,140 inches which equals 95 feet which equals 29 metres. That’s a lot of snow. So much in fact that when we went up to the highest point that you can reach by car, people were still snowboarding... on July 31, when the temperature was well above 20 degrees Celsius at the top of the mountain.

Now even though that snowpack was several months old... the combination of that white snow and the summer sun was almost blinding. Sunglasses were more of a necessary protection than a fashion statement for anyone spending a few hours up there.

Brilliantly, blindingly white snow... as we stood there on the top of Mt. Baker, my mind wandered to Psalm 51:7, “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than *snow*.”

Whiter even than snow? Really? That clean? That brilliantly, blindingly clean? Is that kind of forgiveness even possible? It almost seems too good to be true.

And another thing: what does hyssop have to do with it all? Standing there at the top of Mt. Baker I could not help but think of that because on the last day of July, there’s not only a lot of snow up at the very top, but a little ways down the mountain there are the most spectacular alpine meadows, with all kinds of hardy, yet beautiful, flowering, shrubs, along with grasses and other alpine plants.

I don’t think there was any hyssop up there. If there was, I certainly didn’t have enough knowledge to recognize it. But the question was still there: why cleanse me *with hyssop*? Why not with soap... or bleach? Wouldn’t that be more effective?

Well, let's take a closer look at King David's prayer and see not only what exactly he was asking from God but also how this connects to the task of preaching the gospel, today... to sinners... both those with whom we are familiar and those who are yet unknown to us.

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Cleanse me... prays David. David was a man. A man who had sexual desires. This is a common, yes, a created thing to have. But, as you know, David found satisfaction for his sexual desires in a sinful way. First, he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Second, he orchestrated the murder of Uriah, her husband, to cover things up.

Utterly shameful! Yes. Although if we're honest, we will admit that we can at least understand how this shameful act happened. Sexual desires are powerful, and many have stumbled into sexual sins of one kind or the other. Didn't our Saviour say to the scribes and Pharisees—all of them men—"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her?" John 8:7. In the context, Jesus was clearly referring to sexual sin. Certainly, David is not the only guilty person when it comes to sin against the 7th commandment... is he?

Yet, David was not just a man. He was a king. He held public office in God's own holy nation. And it's not only David *the man* who's praying here, but it's also David *the king*, the shepherd of God's own flock. As king, his sin not only affects him, and his wife Michal, and others close to them... no, the sin of this king has widespread, yet national, consequence.

Cleanse me... *the king*. Cleanse me... *the office-bearer*. David prays. And he uses a most surprising word. The root of this word *cleanse* or *purge* is actually the common word for committing a sin. It seems almost contradictory. But it's *hatah*: to sin, or to miss the mark. Only it's a certain form of that verb. (It's in the Piel stem, for all the Hebrew scholars in our midst). And if you dig around in your grammars (such as Waltke O'Connor *Hebrew Syntax*), you'll find a nice explanation of this so-called particular form (i.e., the privative Piel), but it's comes down to this. If *hatah* normally means: to sin; this form means: to de-sin, or to un-sin.

Have mercy on me, O Lord and *de-sin* me. Yes, that's exactly what we need. That's what we long for. A complete eradication. Take all my actual sins—all the evil things that I have done in your sight, O Lord (see the verses 1,2,3, and 4)—take all those actual sins and un-sin me. Just get rid of them, completely and totally. And take my original sin—the sin in which my mother conceived me (see verse 5)—and O

Lord, get rid of that, too. Un-sin me from all my sins, in whichever way, shape or form they might appear.

That's King David's prayer. But, brothers, that's also what you need to preach. Oh, it's not original. And based on solid exegesis, you might have to find a fresh way to bring across an old truth. But this is what people need to hear. The gospel of *comprehensive de-sinification* **never** goes obsolete... at least not in this life. And blessed is the pulpit that still proclaims it today!

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De-sin me... **with hyssop**. Rather a peculiar choice, wouldn't you say? Now, I'm not a botanist. I don't even think I qualify as a green thumb. But I have a book by a professor of botany at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem... and it's all about biblical plants.

(And as an aside, you should really have a book like that in your library, too, which describes biblical plants and animals. Because if you can describe plants and animals from the pulpit in a clear and detailed way, you will instantly have the under-10 crowd in the congregation listening with big, elephant ears.)

But getting back to hyssop... Professor Zohary write that this hyssop is a "stout, many-stemmed, hairy gray shrub about 70cm tall" with "small flowers [which] are grouped in dense spikes on the upper part of the branches" and there also seems to be some chemical in the hairs on the stem which slows down the coagulation of blood (97).

In other words, hyssop itself does not have any real, cleansing power. It's not some kind of natural anti-bacterial herb or something like that. But with its many, dense, hairy spikes, and with its anti-coagulation chemical, it is a plant well-suited for smearing and sprinkling blood.

And if you survey the OT, you'll find that that is exactly how God's people used it. It's how God the Redeemer *told* his people to use. On Passover, they used hyssop plants to smear the lamb's blood on the doorposts (Exod 12:22). When a leper was cleansed of his horrible disease, then he could not go back into the temple until he had been sprinkled with blood and water, using hyssop stalks (Lev 14:4,6). And the hyssop stalks were even used to sprinkle a mixture of blood and water all over a house, when it had been contaminated by some kind of uncleanness (Lev 14:49-53).

Why hyssop? Well, it's not the hyssop itself. It's really what goes on the hyssop, and then what is shaken off the hyssop that counts. And that is: *blood*. Sacrificial blood. Atoning, de-sinification blood.

In fact, as the Holy Spirit reminds us in Heb 9:19, hyssop was even used to sprinkle the blood of the covenant on God's people at the foot of Mt. Sinai. And as the Spirit teaches us in the same book, all those litres upon litres of animal blood sprinkled with all those meters upon meters of hyssop stalks ultimately did not atone for even one, single sin. But they did certainly teach everyone – including us – where such atonement could be found. Not from blood of lambs sprinkled from a stalk of hyssop. But from the blood of the Lamb shed on the cross of Golgotha!

Christ's blood, and Christ's blood alone, had true and lasting de-sinification power. In fact, through the working of the Holy Spirit, a few drops of blood shed from the Messiah's side is more than enough to atone for all the sins of the entire world!

Now that's supernatural, spiritual cleansing power! That's the kind of cleansing that will take even the dirtiest... the filthiest soul and make it clean... yes, make it even whiter than snow!

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Is that even possible? Isn't a freshly-fallen layer of snow simply the whitest thing on earth? What could possibly be **whiter than snow**?

Well, two things. First, just like it is virtually impossible to imagine something whiter than snow... so it is also virtually impossible to imagine just how clean you are in God's sight when you are cleansed with the atoning blood of Christ. The atoning of sacrifice of Christ doesn't only cover over the dirt of sin so that it's effectively masked or camouflaged. No, we confess more. What about these words? "God grants [the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ] to me [so that it is] *as if I never had... nor committed any sin... and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me... if only I accept this gift with a believing heart*" (LD 23). Yes, it is hard to imagine something that is whiter than snow, but, to be sure, if anything is that white, then certainly the perfect holiness of Christ shines with a snow-superseding whiteness! O Lord, cleanse me with the blood of Christ, and yes, I will be whiter than snow!

And second, blindingly brilliant white snow never stays that way forever. Here in Hamilton the white snow quickly turns greyish or brownish. Dirty boots and paws, salt spray, other dust or pollution. Pristine white doesn't last long. But forgiveness through the blood of Christ lasts, and lasts, and lasts some more. It's *ever-lasting*. Both in the present age and the age to come. So, yes, in Christ we are whiter than snow because in him we're white forevermore.

This is the good news that people, near and far, need to hear, need to embrace in faith, need to live in accordance with. And it's this good news that is at the heart of everything we do here at CRTS.