

WHITER THAN SNOW

Psalm 51:1-12

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January 19, 2025

When you hear the word “snow,” what thoughts come to mind? How about childhood memories? Were you excited when you saw those first snowflakes falling? Did you ask yourself, “I hope they cancel school?” Did you look for a hill to go sliding down, build a snowman or perhaps throw a few snowballs? I remember a particular snowstorm when I was in the seventh grade. It started early in the morning as I was walking to the school bus stop. It had been warm, and I said to myself, “It won’t stick,” secretly hoping that it would. All that morning it kept snowing. It began to cover the ground. The school buses were summoned and soon we were on our way home. The snow kept falling and the temperature kept dropping. The next morning there was a foot of that white fluffy stuff in the front yard of our home and the road in front of our house was coated in ice. We didn’t have school for almost a week.

Snow is one of those delightful meteorological events that bring delight to the hearts of children, and if we’re honest with ourselves it brings at least a smidgin of delight to folks of all ages, even if it is nothing more than looking out a window and watching it drift down from the sky. I suspect the same was true for those who lived in Bible times. Although we tend to think of the Holy Land as a place that is for the most part arid and hot, at least in the summertime, the fact of the matter is snow is not completely foreign to that part of the world. In the wintertime, snow occasionally covers the ground even in places like Jerusalem. For that reason there are numerous references to snow in the Bible. Let’s take a look at a few of them this morning, especially the one that is found in the book of Psalms.

To begin, snow was seen as the handiwork of God. Since He controlled the forces of nature, God could direct where and when it fell. For example, in the book of Job, one of those who came to meet with Job in his distress speaks about God’s authority over these forces of nature. He says, “God’s voice thunders in marvelous ways; He does great things beyond our understanding. He says to the snow, ‘Fall to the earth,’ and to the rain shower, ‘Be a mighty downpour’” (Job 37:5-6). Then in the next chapter God actually addresses Job personally. In response to Job’s desire to know why he has had to endure so much suffering, the Lord tells Job that there

are a lot of things which are simply beyond his understanding. Then to prove His point, He asks Job, "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail" (Job 38:22)? Like all of these natural wonders that take place, snow is under God's control and used to fulfill His desires and purposes. Even today, when the forces of nature go on a rampage, we refer to them as "acts of God." So snow in the Bible is a beautiful and lovely expression of God's handiwork.

It can also be used as an illustration of God's judgement for our sinful behavior. In the book of Numbers there is an account about a dispute regarding Moses' leadership. Even though God had appointed Moses to lead the children of Israel to the Holy Land, over and over again there were those who disputed his authority. On this occasion the dispute involved those of his own family, Aaron his brother and Miriam his sister. They sought to discredit him for choosing a wife with a complexion much darker than their own. They accused him of marrying a Cushite wife, a woman possibly from sub-Saharan Africa. This angered the Lord who is no respecter of persons. He honors and treats everyone the same way. Calling the three of them to the Tent of Meeting, the place where God personally met with His people, the Lord expressed His displeasure in an unmistakable way. Not only did the God reaffirm His support of Moses, but after His departure this is what happened, "When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam, leprous like snow" (Numbers 12:10). Trying to discredit Moses by criticizing his wife was a big mistake, one which was fortunately resolved after some much needed repentance. To sum things up, a snow-white complexion may be sought after by some, but not if it reflects the acquisition of leprosy.

There's a third way in which the word "snow" is used in the Bible. It refers to the Word of God. Speaking on behalf of the Lord, the prophet Isaiah said, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for sower and bread for the eater, so is My Word that goes out of My mouth: It will not return to Me empty; but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11). My son, who used to live in California, related to me the importance of snow falling on the higher elevations of the High Sierra mountains of that state. As the days grow warmer in the spring and summer time, the snow gradually melts and runs down the slopes to water the fields and fill the aqueducts of the large cities along the coast. Without that moisture, disaster awaits both farmers and the urban populations as evidenced in the raging fires that have ravaged California. God has given His Word to us with an express purpose in mind, to refresh our lives with life giving sustenance. When that is not provided, like California, disaster awaits us.

Finally, let's turn our attention to the book of Psalms and the passage of Scripture, which was read this morning, chapter 51, verses one through twelve. This psalm is attributed to David and is autobiographical in nature. It refers to that time in his life when he violated two of God's Ten Commandments. First, he entered into an adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and then he had her husband killed to cover up his crime. Confronted by Nathan the prophet, David came to three undeniable conclusions in Psalm 51, conclusions which we would do well to remember. First, when we sin, those sins attach themselves to us, occupying our thoughts and feelings. No matter how hard we try, we cannot get rid of them. David was forced to admit, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (verse 3). Remember Marley's ghost in Dicken's Christmas classic? He appears before Scrooge wrapped in chains. Those chains are the constant, clanging reminders of his disregard for the poor and needy. The same is true with regards to you and me, especially if we consider ourselves to be children of God. When we sin, do something that we know is wrong, a sense of guilt and regret clings to us like a chain of unending remorse. Try as we might, we cannot escape it.

Second, when we sin, especially when we do something that is a clear and unambiguous violation of God's laws and precepts, we are not just sinning against the person or persons we have harmed, we are sinning against God. In verse five David cries out, "Against You," referring to God, "You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight." It's bad enough when human relationships are disrupted, but getting on the wrong side of God, is a much more serious offense. It can drive us to the edge of insanity. A prime example is the sad account of the demise of Judas, one of Jesus's disciples. Having sold his master for 30 pieces of silver, he realized the seriousness of what he had done when Jesus was condemned to death. He returned the 30 pieces of silver that he had been given by the chief priests in payment for his betrayal and cried out, "I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood" (Matthew 27:4). Shortly thereafter he committed suicide. I sometimes wonder how many suicides have their origin in a similar set of circumstances. The person has done something or said something or acted in such a way that finding forgiveness no longer seems to be an option. The only way to end the internal anguish is to rush into oblivion to escape the pain.

Fortunately, David's psalm does not end on this sad note. He realizes that even the most heinous sin can be forgiven by God. In fact, he begins this psalm by beseeching God, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions" (Psalm 51:1). He is asking God to blot out, to erase the horrible stain of his sin so that it is no longer visible. Later in verse seven,

David repeats this heartfelt desire, but in a different way. Once again speaking to God, he says, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean. Wash me and I will be whiter than snow." Being cleansed with hyssop, a Middle Eastern shrub, and being washed with water is reminiscent of Jewish sacrificial practices found in the Old Testament. In this psalm David is, therefore, asking God to do the same thing for him. He's asking God to wash away his sins and the guilt which accompanies them. He is asking God to cover them up just like the snow that covers all of the blemishes and ugliness of this world when it falls upon the earth. Stop for just a moment and visualize this scene, a garbage dump full of decaying and foul smelling refuse that has accumulated in that location. Then the snow begins to fall and after a while all of that trash is covered over by a blanket of whiteness which hides what was once so visually disgusting. David is asking God to cover his sins with a blanket of snow so that they are no longer visible to him or anyone else, including the Almighty. Likewise, what David asked God to do for him is something that we can ask God to do for us, something that was accomplished when Christ died on the cross so that our sins might be covered over like snow falling from heaven, making us clean and white and once again beautiful to behold. Moreover, not only covering our sins but washing them away all together is something that God and God alone can do, when we entrust our lives into the care of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Years ago, a dear friend who along with her husband were the caretakers of a little Christian camp near our church wrote this poem. Let me share it with you.

Snow

Mamie King

February 2, 1972

The snow that fell during the night
Made the earth appear clean and white
Dirt and debris could no longer be seen
Under the blanket of snow so white and clean

But the dirt is still there, it's not washed away
And will show up again when the snow melts away.

The sins in my life, though many or few,
Are not washed away by the good that I do.

David prayed in the long ago, (Psalm 51:7)
"Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."

Like David, my sins must be forgiven
Before I can enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus shed His blood on Calvary that day
That my sins, by His blood, could be washed away.
By faith, now forgiven, I know I am. (Revelation 7:14)
My garments washed white in the blood of the lamb.