

Psalms 51:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

Analysis

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. This verse concludes the penitential section before David's intercessory prayer for Jerusalem (vv.18-19). It reveals what God truly desires: not external ritual but internal reality—genuine brokenness over sin and humble contrition before His holiness.

"The sacrifices of God" (זִבְחֵי אֱלֹהִים/zivche Elohim) uses plural 'sacrifices'—but then defines them as singular spiritual realities rather than multiple animal offerings. David has already acknowledged (v.16) that God doesn't desire animal sacrifices for his sin—adultery and murder had no prescribed ceremonial atonement. He must appeal beyond the ritual system to God's heart, offering what God truly values.

"Are a broken spirit" (רוּחַ נִשְׁבָּר/ruach nishbarah) identifies the true sacrifice God accepts. Shabar (broken, shattered, crushed) describes something violently broken into pieces—shattered pottery, crushed bones, demolished walls. A broken spirit is thoroughly humbled, crushed under the weight of sin's guilt, shattered by recognition of offending infinite holiness. This isn't mere regret over consequences but deep sorrow for rebellion against God.

"A broken and a contrite heart" (לֵב־נִשְׁבָּר וְנִדְכָּה/lev-nishbar venidkeh) parallels and intensifies the first phrase. Lev (heart) is the personality's center; nishbar (broken) repeats from the previous phrase; nidkeh (contrite, crushed, humbled) adds the

sense of being ground to powder, thoroughly humbled. Together these words picture complete brokenness—no pride, no self-justification, no excuse-making, only humble acknowledgment of guilt and desperate plea for mercy.

"O God, thou wilt not despise" (אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִבְזֶה/Elohim lo tivzeh) declares God's gracious response. Bazah (despise, reject, treat with contempt) is negated: God will NOT reject the broken and contrite heart. Though He resists the proud and rejects mere external religiosity, He responds graciously to genuine humility and contrition. This echoes Isaiah 57:15: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit.'

This transforms understanding of sacrifice. True sacrifice isn't giving God something we value (animals, grain, money) but offering ourselves—specifically, offering broken, humble hearts acknowledging our unworthiness and dependence on His grace. God desires truth in the inward parts (v.6), not external conformity. He accepts those who come broken, rejecting those who come proud.

Historical Context

David's theology anticipated prophetic critiques of empty ritualism. Samuel told Saul, 'to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams' (1 Samuel 15:22). Isaiah condemned Israel's multiplied sacrifices when accompanied by injustice and unrepentant sin (Isaiah 1:10-17). Hosea declared God's preference: 'I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6:6). Jesus quoted this verse twice (Matthew 9:13, 12:7), emphasizing mercy over ritual.

The prophets weren't rejecting the sacrificial system per se but condemning its abuse—treating ritual as mechanical means to manipulate God while ignoring moral requirements and heart attitude. Sacrifices were meant to express repentance, faith, and devotion; when they became substitutes for these realities, God rejected them. David grasped this truth: God wants hearts, not merely ceremonies.

Jesus's parable of the Pharisee and publican illustrates this principle (Luke

18:9-14). The Pharisee trusted his religious performance, boasting before God. The publican, aware of his unworthiness, beat his breast crying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' Jesus declared the publican went home justified, not the Pharisee. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5).

The New Testament develops this theology. Romans 12:1 calls believers to 'present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.' True worship isn't animal sacrifices but self-offering—lives wholly devoted to God. Hebrews 13:15-16 describes sacrifices pleasing to God: praise, confession of His name, doing good, and sharing. These spiritual sacrifices replace Old Covenant animal offerings.

Throughout church history, this verse has shaped Protestant theology particularly. The Reformers emphasized salvation by grace through faith, not works or ritual. External religiosity—pilgrimages, indulgences, penance—can't earn salvation. God desires broken, contrite hearts trusting Christ alone. This verse justified rejecting merit theology and embracing sola gratia (grace alone). True religion is heart religion; genuine faith produces humble, broken spirits acknowledging complete dependence on divine mercy.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How does this verse critique empty ritualism and external religiosity that lacks genuine heart repentance?
2. What does it mean to have a 'broken and contrite heart,' and why does God value this above all external offerings?

3. How does Jesus's parable of the Pharisee and publican (Luke 18:9-14) illustrate the truth that God accepts humble, broken hearts while rejecting proud, self-righteous ones?
4. In what ways might contemporary Christianity emphasize external performance or ritual while neglecting the broken, contrite heart God desires?

Interlinear Text

זָבַח י	אֵלֹהִים	רוּחַ	לֵב	רוּחַ	וְרוּחַ	וְרוּחַ
The sacrifices	O God	spirit	a broken	heart	a broken	and a contrite
H2077	H430	H7307	H7665	H3820	H7665	H1794
אֵלֹהִים	לֹא	תִבְזֶה:				
O God		thou wilt not despise				
H430	H3808	H959				

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 34:18 (Spirit): The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.

Isaiah 66:2 (Spirit): For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.

Luke 15:10 (References God): Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

Psalms 147:3 (Parallel theme): He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.

Mark 12:33 (Sacrifice): And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Matthew 5:3 (Spirit): Blessed are the poor in spirit: for their's is the kingdom of heaven.

Psalms 102:17 (Parallel theme): He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer.

Hebrews 13:16 (Sacrifice): But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Psalms 107:22 (Sacrifice): And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing.

1 Peter 2:5 (Spirit): Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

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