

Hyssop

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 51, we read it, verse 7. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Now, obviously, inspired by the Lord, David is addressing this psalm as a prayer to the Lord himself. And it is to the Lord that he pleads, purge me with hyssop.

Why particularly hyssop? Well, as I'm sure some of you will know, there's application and use of this at the various stages, particularly in the purification process in the Old Testament.

If we were to think, for example, of the purification process for leprosy, which was considered all but a death sentence, a living death to the people in the days of ancient Israel.

Yet there was, within the law of God, within Leviticus, for example, in chapter 14, there was provision for the cure of leprosy, for the cleansing, the healing of leprosy.

[1 : 0 1] That which appeared to have no possible human cure whatsoever, the Lord provided for the steps to be followed and the procedures to be gone through, not merely if, but when, a leper was cleansed from his or her disease.

And of that seeming living death, we read in Leviticus 14, for example, from verse 4, then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two birds alive and clean.

And cedar root, cedar was, of course, the most majestic of the trees, certainly that populated the Holy Land, particularly in Lebanon, of course, famous for its cedar trees, but in many ways the king of trees to them, cedar wood and scarlet and hyssop.

Hyssop is part of the cleansing process for the cleansing of the lepers. And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water, of course, symbolizing life and cleansing.

As for the living bird, he shall take it and the cedar wood and the scarlet and the hyssop and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water.

[2 : 1 9] And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times and pronounce him clean and so on. So his hyssop, for whatever reason or purpose, the hyssop is included with the scarlet, which almost certainly is the scarlet thread.

And, of course, thread was used for binding or tying something on it. The fact that scarlet almost certainly symbolizes the blood, blood into which, of course, all these things are dipped along with the living bird, which is part of the cleansing process.

The cedar is at one spectrum, one end of the spectrum of the greatness of the trees and plants of nature. Hyssop is almost taken as being at the opposite end of the spectrum.

And I'm sure you've made reference to this in the past, but if we think of what is said about King Solomon in 1 Kings chapter 4, where we read, verse 30, we read, Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country and all the wisdom of Egypt.

For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezraite, and Heman, and Calcol, and Dada, and the sons of Mahal. And his fame was in all nations round about. And he spake 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.

[3 : 33] And he spake of trees from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon, even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall.

He spake also of beasts and of fowl, the creeping things and of fishes. So we have here in 1 Kings 4, there at verse 33, we have this contrast between the cedar at one end of the spectrum, a majestic soaring cedar tree with its spreading branches.

And we have the hyssop. It's almost described like a weed, you know, it springs out of the wall. Now, hyssop, although it's not a plant you may be all that familiar with, as far as can be ascertained, its appearance seems to be something not unlike kind of foxglove, with a tall cylindrical kind of flowering plant, purpley-blue sort of flowers.

But within, amongst the flowers, it seems to be this sort of almost conical shape, what one assumes is spongy material in the midst of it. Now, if the hyssop was taken as a sort of kind of sponge that you could dip into a liquid and then use it as an applicator, then that might account for some of the uses in which it was deployed in the Old Testament.

First of all, it is because it appears to be the least of the plants, certainly least of the plants of any particularly sacred use, the least of the plants, because Solomon speaks of, from the cedar that is in Lebanon all the way down to the hyssop that springeth out of the wall.

[5 : 03] This is the bottom end of the spectrum. And so the hyssop, nevertheless, is used in the cleansing process, particularly, as we mentioned, for the leprosy, which was the most severe of living ailments, as it were.

But, obviously, there's more to it than that. If you remember, of course, that in the time of the Passover, in the Exodus, we read in Exodus 12, verse 21, And Moses called for all the elders of Israel.

He said unto them, Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the Passover, and ye shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the basin, and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning.

For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians, and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you.

The use of the hyssop to smite the lintels, side and top posts of the door, this is commanded in Exodus at part of the Passover. By use of the hyssop, the blood is displayed.

[6 : 23] The blood is applied. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Is it the hyssop that cleanses of itself? Why with hyssop?

Not through hyssop, and not because of hyssop, and by means of hyssop, but with hyssop. Purge me with hyssop. Apply the hyssop to me. In other words.

Now, it is not unreasonable to take this as a sort of throwback reference to the fact that the hyssop does not cleanse, but the blood through which the hyssop applies protects.

It covers, as it is applied to the side posts, and the door lintel, and so on. As the Lord says, when I see the blood, I will pass over. But the way in which it is applied is particularly commanded.

Take the hyssop, dip it in the blood, apply it to the side posts, and the door lintel. If you don't do that, then the angel of death is not going to pass over the house.

[7 : 25] It will see no markings on the door. It will not pass over, and those will, or the firstborn of those within the house will die. Now, you might say, well, what about those Israelites that did as they were told, and they had the Passover, and they killed the lamb, and they ate the Passover, but they didn't take the hyssop, and they didn't put the markings on the door, and they didn't put the blood on the doorposts.

What would happen to them? They would die. They would die because they have not put up the visible marking as they are commanded. They would die because it's not just having the means, having the Passover at their disposal, but they have got to act on it and actually apply it.

So, likewise, the Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5. The Passover lamb, the lamb of God, has been slain from the foundation of the world.

That is not in doubt. Such a Hebrew family in Egypt might indeed have gone through the slaying of the Passover lamb. It might be there, the carcass on the table, the blood in the basin, but unless they take it and apply it to the doorposts of their house, their house is under threat.

Their house is vulnerable, exposed, and death will visit them, and there will be no mercy in that sense because the only protection, the only mercy is under cover of the blood, and the only means of applying the blood that is commanded is the hyssop.

[8 : 59] Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Therefore, we might say that the hyssop speaks to us of the application, the means by which the blood of Christ is to be taken and received and applied.

And remember that hyssop is involved right to the end of the life and ministry of our Lord. You read in John 19, remember, verse 28. After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished in the Scriptures, that it might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst.

Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar, and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon the hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus, therefore, had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished.

And he bowed his head and gave up the ghost. Now it's not entirely clear, of course, from that context, whether it's sort of a spongy material that is put on the stalk, as it were. You know, a sort of cane of the hyssop, as if all the leaves have been stripped away, and you've just got the long stalk, which would have the flower, a bud on top of it.

But it's just the stick, as it were, on which they stick the sponge and hold it up to Jesus. Now, more likely, perhaps, is that it would be the stalk of the hyssop, with its spongy, conical kind of cone bit at the top, on which the flowers would normally adhere.

[10 : 25] It's shaped not unlike, if you can think of a corn on a cob, once it's been stripped down of all its outer cob, where you've just got this sort of core that's left that you would normally throw. It's a bit like that on the end of the stalk, except it would be of this spongy material.

And so this is quite possible, might give the near stalk with the spongy end, and you dip that into the wine vinegar and hold it up. Now, remember that we tend to have an idea in our minds, perhaps from Christian art or, you know, stained glass windows or whatever, of sort of people gathered round the cross and sort of looking up, and Jesus sort of miles up there on the cross, and all the crucified and the two thieves and I know, so I just sort of way up there.

But bear in mind, it wouldn't be hugely, massively way up there. Jesus would have had to carry his cross, remember, which of course would be severely elongated on the length-wise of it, before you've got the cross being, but of that, quite a chunk of that would have to go into the ground.

So although, yes, he would be raised up on the cross, the fact of the matter is that it's far less likely to be a case of, say, a normal man is standing there, and there's the feet of Jesus there, and there he is, high up above that, so you need a long stop.

The likelihood is, if you're standing at ground level, then probably the feet of the crucifixion victim are just about there, just about maybe shoulder level, maybe slightly higher, if not high enough so that it can be a spectacle and a warning to anybody going past, because that is part of the purpose for the Romans of crucifixion.

[12 : 09] It is to terrorize, in order to literally strike terror into the population, say, this is what happens if you step out of line. But they want it to be visible.

Now, it's a way up there sort of thing, that the victim is in all likelihood, yes, raised up above the people, but not as high as perhaps traditional Christian art might have depicted.

So it wouldn't need to be all that long a stalk. It wouldn't need to be a huge, long spear sort of thing. But probably, you know, the stalk of the plant with its spongy material on the end, you dip that and bring it out, probably sufficient, just to reach up to where the victim's mouth would be.

I'm not saying definitely it was the hyssop spongy bit itself. It says a sponge put on the end and then raised up to him. John is the only one who specifies the hyssop.

Matthew and Mark, of course, they mention that after Jesus had called out for, as they thought, for Elijah, when he cried, Eli, Eli, Lamas, Harakani, my God, my God, last thou forsaken me.

[13 : 18] Some of them stood then when they heard, said, he's calling for the lights. And straightly one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink.

Now, the reed, the stick, whatever it was, obviously the stick itself was of the hyssop plant. The sponge itself may also have been the spongy end.

We don't know. Matthew and Mark, we say, mention this. They also mention, which John doesn't, that there was an initial attempt when Jesus was first being crucified to drug him, as it were, to give him wine mingled with gall, or as Mark puts it, with wine mingled with myrrh, he says.

But when he gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh, but he received it not. He doesn't want to be drugged. He doesn't want to be, you know, less than fully accomplished. That's when he is enduring this final test.

But at the time when he is about to expire, he receives that fulfilling of the scriptures, a little bit of, very, very thirst quenching, of course, but it might be just enough to wet his lips for the final cry.

[14 : 30] The final cry, it is finished, and then the final breathing, Father, into my hands, I commend my spirit. Just enough for that to be audible, just enough to fulfill it all.

And there is the hyssop plant, the humble hyssop plant, there right at the end. But as it is in use to apply the blood of the initial symbolic Passover, so it is there to apply, as it were, the last little dribble of mercy to the dying ultimate Lamb of God.

Purge me with the soot, and I shall be clean. Use, in other words, Lord, those means which you have set apart for applying, for receiving the precious blood by which I am redeemed.

The Israelites were physically redeemed at the time of the Passover itself. When I see the blood, I will pass over. It would not have been enough simply to have the Passover, to eat the Passover, but not to apply the blood to the doorpost, not to take the hyssop and make the use of it that is commanded.

The hyssop does not save. The hyssop does not redeem. But the hyssop is the means, the instrument specified to receive and to apply the blood to make that visible statement of that household being covered by the blood.

[16 : 06] And likewise, of course, for ourselves. Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us. But he has already been crucified. He's been crucified for 2,000 years.

The Passover Lamb has been slain. It is there for us. But unless we, taking and receiving of it, have the blood applied to us, and likewise, there is the call, there is the instruction to have the visible display of our being covered by the blood, a visible statement of faith.

that the Lord who has said, he and the pendant denieth me before men, I will deny him likewise before my Father. That he that confesseth me before men, I will confess before the Father.

There is that calling. There is that instruction that the blood being applied to us, the visible testimony of it, should be visible, just as likewise with the Passover.

There had to be the blood displayed, applied by the hyssop upon the doorposts of the men. Purge me with the hyssop. There is no salvific value in the hyssop.

[17 : 21] The hyssop is the means required by God to apply the blood. And likewise, there is no salvific, no salvation value in the bread and wine which we who sit around the Lord's table on the Lord's day will, we trust, receive.

There is no magic power in it. And although, you know, scholars might debate and without Christians may take different views on whether or not, for example, Judas Iscariot ever partook of the Last Supper.

Some say he did, some say he didn't. And people genuinely differ on it. Personally, I am inclined to think the evidence suggests that he did partake. But even if one were to say, no, no, definitely he did.

You know, you can't have Judas taking part in that, you know, which is the sacred Last Supper. Fair enough, I'm not going to discredit that view. But that is one thing, whether or not all the apostles partook of those symbols of Christ's body and blood.

But it would only be an insane madman who would say, therefore, for the last 2,000 years, every single person who has ever partaken of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper is definitely saved.

[18 : 34] No, of course they're not. There have been those who have eaten the bread, who have dropped the wine, and it has done them no use whatsoever because they've not partaken by faith.

They have not received what to them is by faith the body and blood of Christ. It's as though the doorposts of the Lincoln's are marked with disappearing ink rather than with the blood.

We cannot claim that there is anything in the hyssop, anything in the means by which we are called to have the blood applied.

But the hyssop is that, the instrument which God commands. Take it, receive it, apply that which I give. And by the same token, wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

And of course, this isn't just sort of, well, let me be washed. It's a request to God, wash me, the Lord wash me. Remember when Jesus, of course, is washing his disciples' feet.

[19 : 40] And Peter, of course, thinks, oh, this is beneath Jesus, he can't possibly do this. No, he says, you know, Lord, I shall never wash my feet. And Jesus said, Jesus answered, if I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.

Simon Peter, say, if I dare lower them, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. And Jesus said, he that is washed, he does not say to wash his feet, but is clean every foot, and ye are clean, but not all.

And Simon Peter says, if that's the symbol, that's the outward demonstration of devotion, Jesus said, I wash all of me. Jesus says, you don't need all of you to be washed. This is, I talk to you, a symbol of your ongoing cleansing by what I do, if you are clean, and me in the first place.

It is Christ who washes his disciples. This is why it is needful that in Psalm 51, David says, you know, wash thou me, and then I shall be whiter than the snow.

It says in the Metrical Version, wash me, I shall be whiter than snow. But it is the fact that it is the Lord who washes us. There's again, no magic power in the water.

[20 : 48] There was nothing special in the water Jesus used in the upper room in John 13. There's nothing magical in the symbols that God requires of us. But those symbols are the means by which he takes and applies that which is powerful.

And it is not the elements themselves. They are just the equivalent of the water. It is likewise that which takes and applies the power of Christ's blood applied to us by which we are covered, by which we are marked, by which when the angel of death comes when I see the blood, I will pass over.

And it is not for anything good or blessed or noble within the Hebrew household in Egypt. The angel of death doesn't come and say, well, there's nice people here, so I'll move on.

Oh, some people here are not very nice at all. They're quite badly behaved and they're not very devout either. And my goodness, some of those were ones that said to Moses, hey, why didn't you just go away and leave us in peace so that we can serve the Egyptians?

And that's not very good, either. So I think we'll just kill some of them. Doesn't say that at all. He's not interested in the internal nature or character of whoever happens to be within that house.

[22 : 08] But rather it is whether or not he sees the blood, whether or not they are covered. Purge me with a soap. Take the hyssop. Apply the blood to me and I shall be clean.

Wash me. Whether it's with the blood, whether it's with the water, if the Lord is the one who washes me, I shall be whetted in snow. There is nobody on earth can cleanse me.

There is only the Lord. And the humble hyssop is the means the Lord takes and uses, whether it is for the cleansing of the leper whose living death held out no hope and yet, way back in the law, there the Lord has allowed for and prepared for the conditions, the steps, the procedures to be followed when the leper is cleansed.

And when we come to Jesus in the New Testament cleansing lepers, not right, left and centre, but on several occasions, what does he always say to them? He always says, go show yourselves to the priests and offer the things that Moses commanded in the law.

So in other words, the doves are the pigeons and the running water and the scarlet and the hyssop. The hyssop to be taken, the hyssop to be applied, along with the scarlet thread, along with the blood, along with the running water, along with all that is needed.

[23 : 39] Go and fulfil these things, Jesus says. So far is he from saying, oh, that doesn't matter. You know, you're clean now, I've cleansed you, and I'm God the Son, so you don't have to worry about the law anymore.

You know, Jesus did not say, just dispense with it all. He said, rather, one jot and one tittle shall not pass from the law till all be fulfilled. When Christ comes, he does not come so that we can say, well, just dispense with that, just forget about that.

But rather, he requires of his followers more than a mere outward observance of the law. He requires rather a heart service, a whole soul and spirit being filled up with the law and the love of the Lord.

As Paul writes to Timothy, the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, the fulfillment of the law, in other words, the purpose of what the law is and the commandment is charity, love for the Lord out of a pure heart.

But these outward tokens, outward symbols, these are the means by which the reality is taken, received, applied. They are not the reality.

[24 : 52] The hyssop is not the blood. The water is not itself the cleansing, but it is the Lord who takes it, the Lord who applies it.

It is a plea to the Lord. You, Lord, purge me with the hyssop. If you take the hyssop and apply the blood to me, I will be clean. If you wash me, I will be whiter than stone.

That which is least, that which is humblest, amongst the plants or amongst the herbs or amongst the weeds of the world, the Lord can take, apply, and use, and give, even to the very end of his earthly life, a use that is noble, a use that is blessed, a use which brings to fulfillment and fruition all that the Lord came to do when he had received the wine vinegar, the sponge to his lips, whether it was part of the stalk of the hyssop or whether it was simply put on the end of the hyssop.

There is the humble hyssop with that vinegar trickling down onto it and the sacred lips touching the sponge at the top. And then he said, it is finished, and gave up the ghost.

You see, the Lord takes and uses and applies everything that his Father gives. And that means that if, as Jesus says, all that the Father giveth me shall come to me.

[26 : 28] Him that cometh to me I know no wise cast. Nobody is able to pluck out of the Father's hand those whom he has given to me. And he doesn't say, oh well, I'll take the cleverest and I'll take the richest and I'll take the best looking and I'll take the most accomplished.

He said, these will be mine and they'll be worthy. And when I make up my jewels I'll see what fantastic jewels these are. There's nothing in us to make the Lord want to take us, receive us, and use us.

We become precious not because we sparkle but because we are this. Don't you know these situations, you know, where something that is very, very ordinary in many ways becomes special or sacred because of who it belonged to or because of what they did with it.

You know, you can have an old beat up medieval Bible but if somebody say, this is the Bible from which Martin Luther preached, you know, in Wittenberg when the Reformation started or you see an old barren poop in an old jacket, this is the one John Knox preached from when the Reformation came to Scotland.

You know, this is the spot in which George Bushart was martyred or whatever. These ordinary, old, insignificant things, they take on a special meaning because of whose they were and likewise we are the mere hyssop, the mere weeds, not the sparkly jewels, not the great accomplishment, when we become this, we become the jewels in his hand and none shall pluck out of his hand.

[28 : 08] Purge me, you Lord, purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. You Lord, wash me and I shall be quite a bit of snow. Notice, this is not a plea, all of them a plea to be purged, to be washed.

There is the certainty that when that is done, David will be cleansed, when he is washed by God, he will be white of in snow, when he is purged by the Lord with a hyssop, he will be clean, when the Lord takes on his case, he will be saved.

That is the purpose of the original Passover. That is the purpose of all the regulations about cleansing a leper. That is the purpose of why all the detail that goes into all the laws and sacrifices of the Old Testament.

That I would suggest to you is even the purpose in the details that we have in the crucifixion of our Lord. Nothing is lost with God. Nothing is wasted. That means that in your life and mine, every tear is bottled, every sigh and sigh has been for a reason, has been for a purpose.

That God may gather it up and bring it to himself and make of it something, something worthwhile, something blessed, something which will last and which will glorify his name.

[29 : 37] Nothing is lost with the Lord and if we are his, we may rest assured we will not be lost either. Amen. Amen.

Amen.