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DO YOU HAVE A BROKEN SPIRIT?

The Bible speaks about "a broken spirit". So do you personally have a broken spirit or not? And is a broken spirit a good thing, or is it a bad thing?

The answer to this last question depends on what we are talking about. It depends on what we mean. In the Bible this expression "a broken spirit" actually refers to two completely different things, one of which is a good thing, while the other is a bad thing. And there are biblical references for both types of broken spirit.

However, while in our English translations the word "broken" is used for both types of spirit, in the Hebrew text they are clearly differentiated. In Hebrew there are in fact two different words, which have both been translated as "broken" into English. And those two different Hebrew words do have different meanings. So where in English you might reply "what type of broken spirit are you talking about?", in Hebrew there is no ambiguity because of the different Hebrew words that are used. And in Hebrew you would know immediately what the question "do you have a broken spirit?" is referring to.

Let's now consider both types. We'll start with the one that is bad.

THE BROKEN SPIRIT THAT IS A BAD THING

This type of spirit is referred to by Solomon in the Book of Proverbs.

A merry heart does good *like* a medicine: but **a broken spirit dries the bones**. (Proverbs 17:22)

The Hebrew word here translated as "broken" is the adjective "nake", which is derived from the Hebrew verb "naka". "Naka" means: to strike, scourge, smite. The focus of this word is on **being in some way injured**.

This is illustrated in the next chapter, where Solomon wrote:

The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but **a wounded** (Hebrew "nake") **spirit** who can bear? (Proverbs 18:14)

Here the Hebrew word for "broken" is translated as "wounded". The word refers to being injured.

In chapter 15 Solomon then wrote:

A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance: but by **sorrow** (Hebrew "atstsebeth") of the heart **the spirit is broken** (Hebrew "nake"). (Proverbs 15:13)

Of note in this verse is the Hebrew word translated as "sorrow". This Hebrew word is formed from the root verb "atsab" (or "asab"). This root verb relates to both **physical and emotional pain**, or to physical and mental discomfort. The point is that the kind of sorrow involved here is not the type of sorrow that is an expression of remorse over past conduct. That type of sorrow is by Paul called "godly sorrow" (see 2

Corinthians 7:10).

But the sorrow addressed in Proverbs 15:13 is only the type of sorrow that is **a response to pain** and to suffering.

So to get back to Proverbs 17:22, in modern English we might render this expression as: **a discouraged spirit** dries the bones, i.e. this spirit has an adverse effect on a person's health. This refers to a discouraged, negative, critical, downcast and gloomy attitude. It is the opposite of a happy, cheerful disposition (i.e. the opposite of "a merry heart").

But note!

This Hebrew word "nake" does **not** refer to "a **sorrowful** spirit" (e.g. the 1899 Catholic Douay Rheims American Edition) which is an expression of regret for past conduct, i.e. the godly sorrow. And it also does **not** refer to "a **crushed** spirit" (e.g. the NIV and the 2016 English Standard Version, etc.). That is a rather unsuitable translation of the Hebrew word "nake".

To be scourged or smitten is not the same as being crushed! And neither does being scourged or smitten have anything to do with being sorrowful for past wrong conduct. There is a different Hebrew word for being crushed, which word we will look at shortly.

Being scourged or smitten is in the Bible always the expression of **a penalty** that has been imposed **for transgressions**. It is a consequence for wrong conduct or wrong behavior. Being scourged is a form of punishment. Scourging is never something that we would intentionally impose on ourselves.

This is **a bad form of broken spirit** because it results in unintended self-inflicted health problems. When we engage in this negative way of assessing our own personal circumstances, then our bodies respond by producing conditions that may cause us to be more vulnerable to becoming sick or susceptible to other adverse health issues. In other words: when we engage in this wrong type of thinking, then our bodies "smite us" as a penalty for being discouraged and negative. This type of spirit is one particular manifestation of a spirit of fear (see 2 Timothy 1:7).

So with this meaning in mind, I hope that you do not have a broken spirit.

Right, now let's look at the other type of broken spirit, the one that is a good thing.

THE BROKEN SPIRIT THAT IS A GOOD THING

This type of broken spirit is referred to by Solomon's father David in the Book of Psalms.

The sacrifices of God **are a broken** (Hebrew "shabar") **spirit: a broken** (Hebrew "shabar") and a contrite **heart**, O God, You will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

Here we have a completely different Hebrew word.

The Hebrew verb "shabar" means: **to break, to destroy, to break in pieces, to crush**. This Hebrew word is focused on destroying something by crushing it and breaking it in pieces. It is not focused on inflicting some kind of injury.

And so "shabar" does not refer to scourging or to smiting, meaning that it isn't focused on punishing

some transgressions, as is the case with our other Hebrew word. It is focused on blotting out of existence something that should not exist ... that is what crushing and breaking into pieces is supposed to achieve. That is far stronger than inflicting some pain as punishment.

So here in Psalm 51:17 David tells us that God desires to see our spirits and our hearts crushed and broken into pieces, with the intention of blotting them out of existence. So let's ask:

Why does God want to see our spirits crushed and broken into little pieces?

The simplest answer to this question is: because **God's spirit cannot really co-exist with our spirit** in any meaningful way. As long as our own spirit has not been crushed, our own spirit will always exert the greater influence in our lives. It is our own spirit that is "enmity against God". It is our own spirit that is not prepared to be "subject to the law of God" (see Romans 8:7).

But **God's spirit is not prepared to take a backseat** in any person's life. God's spirit is not prepared to co-exist with enmity against God. And so either God's spirit is in the driver's seat, or it is going to leave. In biblical terms that type of situation, where God's spirit leaves because it is unable to exert any meaningful influence, would be called "neglecting so great salvation" (see Hebrews 2:3).

"Crushed" would probably be a more suitable translation for "shabar", rather than "broken". And "crushed" creates a very vivid picture of what is required of us when we repent before God.

For many years I have been explaining that repentance refers to changing the way we use our minds. It refers to installing into our minds a totally different way of thinking. Psalm 51:17 shows us that our natural spirit needs to be crushed (or "broken" if you prefer), to make room for God's spirit to be the guide regarding how we will live our lives from now on.

"Crushing" also makes clear that we have to bring our minds into total subjection to God's spirit. As Paul put it:

But **I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection**: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

And even more than our bodies, it is our minds that need to be brought into subjection.

This is the good form of "broken spirit". It is the form without which no human being will be granted salvation by God. And if you are a truly repentant person, then you also have this good form of broken spirit (really "crushed spirit").

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