
A Broken Heart and a Contrite Spirit

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Those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit are willing to do anything and everything that God asks of them.



How I love Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin! The poet Rudyard Kipling wrote the following words in 1897, an admonition to the British Empire against pride:

*The tumult and the shouting dies;
The captains and the kings depart.
Still stands thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.*
(“God of Our Fathers, Known of Old,” *Hymns*, no. 80)

When Kipling spoke of a contrite heart as an “*ancient sacrifice*,” perhaps he had in mind the words of King David in the 51st Psalm: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:

a broken and a contrite heart” (v. 17). David’s words show that even in Old Testament times, the Lord’s people understood that their hearts must be given to God, that burnt offerings alone were not enough.

The sacrifices mandated during the Mosaic dispensation pointed symbolically to the atoning sacrifice of the Messiah, who alone could reconcile sinful man with God. As Amulek taught, “Behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; . . . the Son of God” (Alma 34:14).

After His Resurrection, Jesus Christ declared to the people in the New World:

“Your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away, for I will accept none of [them]. . . .

“And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart . . . , him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 9:19–20).

What are a broken heart and a contrite spirit? And why are they considered a sacrifice?

As in all things, the Savior’s life offers us the perfect example: though Jesus of Nazareth was utterly without sin, He walked through life with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, as



manifested by His submission to the will of the Father. “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38). To His disciples He said, “Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29). And when the time came to pay the ultimate sacrifice entailed in the Atonement, Christ shrank not to partake of the bitter cup but submitted completely to His Father’s will.

The Savior’s perfect submission to the Eternal Father is the very essence of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Christ’s example teaches us that a broken heart is an eternal attribute of godliness. When our hearts are broken, we are completely open to the Spirit of God and recognize our dependence on Him for all that we have and all that we are. The sacrifice so entailed is a sacrifice of pride in all its forms. Like malleable clay in the hands of a skilled potter, the brokenhearted can be molded and

shaped in the hands of the Master.

A broken heart and a contrite spirit are also preconditions to repentance. Lehi taught:

“Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah. . . .

“Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered” (2 Nephi 2:6–7).

When we sin and desire forgiveness, a broken heart and a contrite spirit mean to experience “godly sorrow [that] worketh repentance” (2 Corinthians 7:10). This comes when our desire to be cleansed from sin is so consuming that our hearts ache with sorrow and we yearn to feel at peace with our Father in Heaven. Those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit are willing to do anything and everything that God asks of them, without resistance or resentment. We cease doing things our way

and learn to do them God’s way instead. In such a condition of submissiveness, the Atonement can take effect and true repentance can occur. The penitent will then experience the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost, which will fill them with peace of conscience and the joy of reconciliation with God. In a wondrous union of divine attributes, the same God who teaches us to walk with a broken heart invites us to rejoice and to be of good cheer.

When we have received a forgiveness of sins, a broken heart serves as a divine shield against temptation. Nephi prayed, “May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite!” (2 Nephi 4:32). King Benjamin taught his people that if they would walk in the depths of humility, they might ever rejoice, “be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of . . . sins” (Mosiah 4:12). When we yield our hearts to the Lord, the attractions of the world simply lose their luster.

There is yet another dimension of a broken heart—namely, our deep gratitude for Christ’s suffering on our behalf. In Gethsemane, the Savior “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6) as He bore the burden of sin for every human being. At Golgotha, He “poured out his soul unto death” (Isaiah 53:12), and His great heart literally broke with an all-encompassing love for the children of God. When we remember the Savior and His suffering, our hearts too will break in gratitude for the Anointed One.

As we make the sacrifice to Him of all that we have and all that we are, the Lord will fill our hearts with peace. He will “bind up the broken-hearted” (Isaiah 61:1) and grace our lives with the love of God, “sweet above all that is sweet, . . . and pure above all that is pure” (Alma 32:42). Of this I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■