

HYSSOP CLEANSING – Psalm 51

In verse 7 of Psalm 51 we read, 'Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean...' What is this hyssop cleansing?

Hyssop is a name of Greek origin and was a holy herb used for cleaning sacred places. It is cultivated for its flower tops that are steeped in water to make an infusion to clear the nose and throat, and for indigestion. Hyssop was used for religious purification in Egypt and was found in the Sinai desert. It was used as a cleaning agent in the homes of lepers before they were forced to live outside city walls. Hyssop was used to focus the mind in meditation, manage addictions and repel evil spirits. The plant is also valued by Middle Eastern bee-keepers to produce a rich and aromatic honey. It has an intense minty aroma.

In Exodus the enslaved Children of Israel were told by Moses to take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood of a lamb and use it as a paint brush to mark the lintel and side posts of their front entrances so that when the death angel came and saw the blood, no member of the family would die. Hyssop was within reach of all - a lowly shrub, a bitter growing herb with purplish fragrant flowers. It was to feature prominently in the Passover. In the travelling tabernacle everything used in its ceremonies were cleansed with hyssop.

Centuries later when Messiah Jesus was dying on a cross he said, 'I'm thirsty.' So a Roman soldier reached for a seaside sponge, filled it with wine vinegar mixed with water, impaled it on a hyssop stem and raised it to our Lord's mouth. The hyssop absorbed liquids well and Jesus accepted this drink. Our Lenten Reflections this year point us towards quenching our thirst in God's love. Thirst is deadlier than hunger and we need God more than ever as we struggle with our 21st century living. The one who said, 'I am the water of life.' was literally dying of thirst. And Christ still thirsts for us to keep on coming to him.

This profound Psalm is about deep repentance. Lent is a time when we can engage our minds and hearts to do more than say sorry and live intentionally in the mercy and grace of God for his glory and the well-being of everyone who crosses our paths.

In this psalm David was in the depths of despair when he contemplated his illicit affair with Bathsheba, his body guard Uriah's wife, as well as his attempts to cover it all up for over a year. He was 'between the proverbial rock and a hard place'. He had committed two sins that were not forgivable by Jewish law. Adultery and murder! There was no provision for atoning for those sins through their sacrificial system. These sins were punishable by death and he was the king.

David had no place to go but to throw himself on the mercy of God. He prayed to be cleansed with hyssop. David needed his sins to be passed over. He sought joy and gladness again so as not to feel the despair of a broken and crushed spirit.

Hyssop points us to the concept of salvation during the Passover, in the tabernacle and temple during sacrifices and in David's prayer of repentance. But hyssop only cleans externally. We require constant inner cleansing. A Puritan prayer says, 'I need to repent of my repentance; I need my tears to be washed.' That is deep cleansing for those who seek full restoration.

Let us all pray deep within our beings, 'Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me.' (silence)

David took for himself what wasn't his at great cost to others.
Jesus gave to others what wasn't theirs at great cost to himself.

Today I wish I had some hyssop seeds to give you to grow in a container at home and watch it germinate in under 3 weeks. When planted outside they'll prove irresistible to butterflies.

So - 'purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean...'

AMEN



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