

To the Chief Musician.

A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

¹ Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin *is* always before me. ⁴ Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done *this* evil in Your sight -- That You may be found just when You speak, *And* blameless when You judge. ⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. ⁶ Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden *part* You will make me to know wisdom.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Make me hear joy and gladness, *That* the bones You have broken may rejoice. ⁹ Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me *by Your* generous Spirit.

¹³ *Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You. ¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, The God of my salvation, *And* my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. ¹⁶ For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give *it*; You do not delight in burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart -- These, O God, You will not despise. ¹⁸ Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem. ¹⁹ Then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, With burnt offering and whole burnt offering; Then they shall offer bulls on Your altar. ^[NKJ]

Introduction: Psalm 51 begs: “God, be merciful to me.” Is that your prayer?

In Psalm 51, David became aware of the greatness of the weight of his sin. Do you realize the great weight of your sin? Sinclair Ferguson points out: No one seeks God’s grace who does not feel the weight of his sin. The importance is not the amount of your sin compared to other people, but the character, and greatness of your sin before the holy God.¹

David confesses his sin as a personal offense against God and His law. Contrast David’s confession to the way our society talks about sin. It is claimed that as long as people are consenting and nobody is hurt there is nothing wrong with what people do. This assertion forgets the holy God who is offended by sin whether or not it is agreeable to people.²

1. The Context -- Historically, the church has identified seven psalms that have this very personal sense of grief for sin and called them “the penitential psalms.” They are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.³ The gravity of Psalm 51 is disclosed by the relationships of Uriah and Bathsheba with David.

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *Peccavi*, 01/22/2012, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC, www.sermonaudio.com

² Richard D. Phillips, *The Psalm of Repentance*, 01/16/2011, Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, www.sermonaudio.com

³ W. Robert Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms* (Reformation Trust, 2017), p. 103

Uriah was an officer in David's army, who was one of the elite corps called "the Thirty," most of whom seem to have been of foreign origin, and were probably mercenaries (2 Sam. 23:23-39). It seems likely that he accepted Hebrew citizenship, and that he accordingly adopted a Hebrew name [*Jahweh is light*] to indicate that he was a worshiper of Jehovah.

One spring (2 Sam. 11), when David should have been in battle against Ammon, he sent Joab and remained at home. While Joab had Rabbah of Ammon under siege, David lusted after and seduced Bathsheba, the wife of a Uriah. She became pregnant. In order to cover his fornication with Bathsheba, David recalled Uriah so that he might visit his wife. He refused to visit her, even though David tried to make him drunk. When David failed to make this device effective, he gave Uriah a sealed dispatch to Joab, the commander of the army, requesting that Uriah be placed in a dangerous position and that support be withdrawn. Joab complied, and Uriah was killed in battle. Upon his death, David married Bathsheba. The child conceived in adultery was born.

Bathsheba was the daughter of Eliam (2 Sam. 11:3), also a member of "the Thirty" (2 Sam. 23:34). She became David's eighth wife.⁴ After Bathsheba lost her first child she bore four more sons. The last was Solomon (1 Chr. 3:5).

2. The Consequences -- According to its title, David wrote Psalm 51 in response to his sin with Bathsheba and the word of judgment that God sent to him through Nathan the prophet. David had indeed sinned grievously, not only by committing adultery with Bathsheba, but also by arranging the murder of her husband, Uriah, to cover up his sin. For these sins, Nathan had pronounced the Lord's judgment: because David had Uriah killed with the sword, the sword would ever depart from the house of David; because he had taken the wife of Uriah from him, someone from David's own household would take his wives from him; because David deserved to die for his sin, the Lord would take away his sin, but still the son conceived of the adulterous relationship with Bathsheba would die (2 Sam. 12:7-14). David was personally forgiven, but the consequences for his life and dynasty were very grave. Psalm 51 does not, however, explore the various results of David's actions for the kingdom. The focus of the psalm is on David's immediate relationship with God.⁵

Man generally does not pay attention to the divine law of sin and retribution. One reason for this is that the full brunt of God's anger is withheld and unknown to man. The frustrations in life are explained away or accepted as long as there are not too many problems. The greatness of God's wrath should evoke fear, and that fear should be commensurate with God's wrath. Scripture, when it depicts God's wrath against sin, never uses an hyperbole: it would be impossible to exaggerate God's wrath.⁶

3. The Content -- Psalm 51 illustrates what *Heidelberg Catechism 2* identifies as the three things you need to know that you may live and die happily. They are: how great my sin and misery is; how I am redeemed from all my sin and misery; how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption. We need to know guilt, grace, and gratitude, or sin, salvation, and service. The outline of Psalm 51 is: The Guilt of Sin (vs. 1-6); The Grace of Salvation (vs. 7-12); The Gratitude of Service (vs. 13-19).

⁴ The preceding wives were Michal (1 Sam. 18:27), Abigail (1 Sam. 25:42), Ahinoam (1 Sam. 25:43), Maacah (1 Chr. 3:2), Haggith (1 Chr. 3:2), Abital (1 Chr. 3:3), and Eglah (1 Chr. 3:3).

⁵ Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 102

⁶ Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5 (Zondervan, 1991), p. 596

A. THE GUILT OF SIN (vs. 1-6)

1. Prayer for Restoration (vs. 1-2) -- David knows he has no claim on God's kindness: he has sinned far too much. So he appeals simply to God's "mercy, "steadfast love" and "abundant mercy." These three terms are borrowed from the golden calf story, when all Israel sinned (Exo. 34:6). Yet God, in response to Moses's prayer, forgave his wayward people. Here David asks God to show the same mercy to him as he showed to Israel in Moses's day.⁷

The three terms of God's unmerited favor (mercy, lovingkindness, multitude of tender mercies) are followed by three terms for God's forgiveness (blot out, wash, cleanse) and three terms for David's sins (transgressions, iniquity, sin).

By "blot out," David is asking that the tablet that records his sin would be smashed, or the parchment that lists his sin would be erased, that it would be removed from God's remembrance. One of the metaphors about God's forgiveness is that God forgets our sin or remembers it no more. The LORD says in Isaiah 43:25, "I, *even I, am* He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins." It is not as if God suddenly has amnesia where He can no longer remember what actually happened. When God no longer remembers our sins, it is not that He is forgetful. Rather, it is that He no longer remembers the sin against us. He does not bring it up against us. Once He forgives a sin He treats it as if it had never happened. He removes it from the record. He blots out the transgression. This is the act of God's free grace in justification. As the answer of *Heidelberg Catechism 56* states, "That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, neither the sinful nature with which I have to struggle all my life long; but graciously imputes to me the righteousness of Christ, that I may nevermore come into condemnation."

"Wash me thoroughly ... cleanse me from my sin" is a poetic expression that is synonymous. Both lines are saying basically the same thing. God's Spirit comes to His marred and stained people as a cleansing agent that removes the stain. The stain is totally removed. There is not the slightest trace. We are made as white as snow. The LORD says in Isaiah 1:18. "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool." When there is real repentance, there is a desire not only to receive the mercy of God but there is a desire for forgiveness. God cleanses our soul from the blemish of sin. This is the work of God's free grace in sanctification, as *Westminster Shorter Catechism 35* says, "whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness."

David calls his sins *transgressions*. To transgress is to step over the boundaries of God. He has certain laws. To disobey any is to deserve the consequences. David calls his sin *iniquity*. Iniquity means that which is altogether wrong. You can't excuse it. You can't offer some sort of an apology for it. You can't in any way condone it. Then there is *sin* which means to miss the mark. We don't come up to God's standard. David also uses the word *evil* meaning that which is actually wrong. David uses this word to speak of the fact that he was wrong. He admits it. David uses three words to describe sin: transgressions (to rebel against authority); iniquity (inward disposition that is diseased, corrupt, perverted); sin (to shoot an

⁷ Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed* (Crossway, 2013), p. 50-51

arrow that misses a target). He prays for mercy that God would forgive his sins.

2. Confession of Conviction (vs. 3-6) -- David confesses his actual sins (vs. 3-4) and his inborn sin (vs. 5-6).

David is not here denying that he had sinned against others, but he recognizes that in comparison with his offense against God, these other sins do not matter at this point. He must first express his remorse and repentance to God.⁸

In one sense, David is using hyperbole here. He has sinned horribly against Uriah, Uriah's family and friends, Bathsheba, and the whole nation of God's people. But David understands that sin ultimately is an offense against God, because God is the only perfect being in the universe. As God is the judge of heaven and earth, all sin is defined in terms of the transgression of God's law and is an offense against His holiness. David knows this and acknowledges it. He's not minimizing the reality of his sin against human beings, but he recognizes the ultimacy of his sin against God.⁹

He then makes a statement in the second part of verse 4 that is one of the most powerful expressions of true repentance in the Scriptures: "That You may be found just when You speak, *and* blameless when You judge." David is essentially saying, "O God, You have every right to judge me, and it is clear that I deserve nothing more than Your judgment and Your wrath." David acknowledges that God is blameless and has every right to judge him. There is no bargaining or negotiating with God.

When David says, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me," he is not speaking against his mother, nor against the process of conception. Neither is he excusing himself. This is the climax of the facts that he is facing: that his sins are his own and inexcusable; worst of all, they are the very element he lives in. Not only has he sinned this once, but he is in his very nature a sinner. Every sin should convince us of the general truth of the corruption of our nature.

We are sinners because we have a sin nature. God has imputed to us the guilt of Adam. David is not appealing to original sin to minimize his guilt. David is confessing his accountability not only for the actual sin, but also for his original sin, or his fallen condition, out of which the actual sin emerged. We need to confess our guilt not only for our actions but for that sin nature that we all have out of which our sins flow.¹⁰ The Guilt of Sin.

B. THE GRACE OF SALVATION (VS. 7-12) -- The grace of salvation is expressed as the guilt that is removed, the grace that is given, and the repair that is complete.

1. The guilt that is removed (vs. 7, 9) -- David alludes to the cleansing of a leper when he pleads "purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean." David Dickson, a Church of Scotland minister and theologian in the 1600s comments, "No less loathsome than leprosy is the sight of sin, when it is looked upon as unpardoned; and nothing less than the blood of Christ signified by the blood of the clean bird slain to cleanse the leper, can purge a man of it. For David looketh unto the manner of cleansing the leper, as it is set down, Leviticus 14. Where two birds were taken and one of them slain, the living bird being dipped with hyssop in the

⁸ Godfrey, *op. cit.*, p. 102

⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Psalm 51*, 4. God's Just Judgment, www.ligonier.org

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

blood of the slain bird, was let fly away, to signify the leprous sinner's deliverance from perdition by the blood of the pure sacrifice of Jesus Christ."¹¹

When God is said, in the 9th verse, to *hide his face* from our sins, this signifies his pardoning them, as is explained in the clause immediately annexed – *Blot out all my sins*. This represents our justification as consisting in a voluntary act of God, by which he condescends to forget all our iniquities; and it represents our cleansing to consist in the reception of a gratuitous pardon.¹²

2. The grace that is given (vs. 8) -- The result of guilt that is removed is the grace that is given. The bones that God broke by convictions and threatening may rejoice, may not only be set again, and eased from the pain, but may be sensibly comforted. The pain of a heart truly broken for sin may well be compared to that of a broken bone; and it is the same Spirit who as the Spirit of bondage smites and wounds and as a Spirit of adoption heals and binds up.¹³

3. The repair that is complete (vs. 10-12) -- David is not asking God to regenerate him. Regeneration is a necessary prerequisite for repentance. Yet those born anew by the power of the Holy Spirit still sin. We plead to God to renew that spirit that He gave us in our rebirth. David pleads for a spirit that is steadfast so that he can be consistently walking as a godly person.¹⁴

Repentance is not something we do only to become Christians. Repentance is not only for those who have sinned grossly. Repentance is for the entire life of believers. The truth about repentance is what Martin Luther proclaimed as the very first of his famous Ninety-Five Theses: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent', he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance."¹⁵ The Grace of Salvation.

C. THE GRATITUDE OF SERVICE (VS. 13-19)

1. Thankful for the expulsion of wickedness (vs. 13-15) -- The Lord has opened David's eyes to see the inward reality of corruption. He has moved David's heart to confess original and actual sin, to admit his specific sins. He has redirected David's feet to forsake sin and to make things right. Now God loosens David tongue to sing of God's righteousness.¹⁶

Nowhere in this psalm is he concerned to escape the material consequences of his sins: it is the guilt of them that burdens him. Even *deliverance* is too narrow a word: in reality he wants to praise God's righteousness, whose crowning work is to make the sinner himself righteous.¹⁷

David is repenting not only for his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, but also for the contrived conspiracy he entered into with his general Joab to place Bathsheba's husband Uriah at the front line of battle to ensure Uriah's death that David may possess Bathsheba for

¹¹ David Dickson, *A Commentary of the Psalms*, Vol. 1 (Klock & Klock, Minneapolis, MN, 1980 reprint), p. 306-7

¹² John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. 5 (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI), p. 296

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 3 (Fleming Revell Company), p. 432-3

¹⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Psalm 51*, 6. Coram Deo: A Fearful and Joyful Experience, www.ligonier.org

¹⁵ Phillips, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Joel Beeke, *How the Spirit Works True Repentance*, 10/26/2014, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, MI, www.sermonaudio.com

¹⁷ Derek Kidner, *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, Psalms 1-72 (Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 193

himself. He is expressing his guilt of bloodshed.¹⁸ Two other magnificent leaders of God's people caused the murder of another person: Moses (Exo. 2:12) and Paul (Act. 22:4).

"Open thou my lips" is no mere formula but the cry of one whose conscience has shamed him into silence. He longs to worship freely, gratefully again; and he believes that by the grace of God he will.¹⁹

2. Thankful for the substitution of righteousness (vs. 16-17) -- The Old Testament has a way of saying "not that, but this," or "not that without this." God is not rejecting His own appointed offerings, still less saying that we can be self-atonement. What He is emphasizing is that the best of gifts is hateful to Him without a contrite heart. The reference is not simply to atonement (for which only the blood of another can suffice, Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22) but to the whole range of worship, not in token but in personal reality, since the peace offering ("sacrifice" vs. 16) expresses communion, and the burnt offering expresses dedication. In all this, God is looking for the heart that knows how little it deserves, and how much it owes.

There may be another reason why David here affirms that God would not accept of a sacrifice, nor be pleased with a burnt-offering. No particular sacrifices were appointed by the Law of Moses to expiate the guilt of murder and adultery. The person who had perpetrated these crimes was, according to the divine law, to be punished with death. David therefore may be understood as declaring, that it was utterly vain for him to think of resorting to sacrifices and burnt-offerings with a view to the expiation of his guilt; that his criminality was of such a character, that the ceremonial law made no provision for his deliverance from the doom which his deeds of horror deserved; and that the only sacrifices which would avail were those mentioned in the succeeding verse, "The sacrifices of a broken heart."²⁰

The only sacrifice that is worthy of God's attention, and the only sacrifice that is a prerequisite for the others to be effectual is a sacrifice of a broken heart. Can you thank God for breaking your heart? The tears from a broken heart are precious to the heavenly Father. There is in the ear of God more music in the sobs of His people than the songs of His angels. The day is coming when our heavenly Father will wipe every tear from our eyes and our sacrifices will turn to be praise for the Lamb of God.²¹

3. Thankful for the restoration of fellowship (vs. 18-19) -- Jerusalem was already built, but David prays that God would build it still farther, for he knew that it fell far short of being complete, so long as it wanted the temple, where he had promised to establish the Ark of his Covenant, and also the royal palace. We learn from the passage, that it is God's own work to build the Church.²² The Gratitude of Service.

Applications: You have not yet considered the greatness of the weight of your sin. This was David's situation and problem. David discovered the greatness of grace, pardon, and forgiveness. No one seeks grace who doesn't feel the weight of sin. The importance is not the amount of your sin, but that you have felt the weight of your sin. Your discovery of the weight of God's grace in your life is directly related to the greatness of the weight of sin that

¹⁸ R.C. Sproul, *Psalm 51*, 7. A Contrite Repentance, www.ligonier.org

¹⁹ Kidner, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Calvin, *op. cit.*, footnote, p. 304

²¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *A Broken Heart*, 01/07/2021, The Bahnsen Institute, www.sermonaudio.com

²² Calvin, *op. cit.* p. 307

you have confessed.²³

We will never seriously apply to God for pardon, until we have obtained such a view of our sins as inspires us with fear. The more easily satisfied we are under our sins, the more do we provoke God to punish them with severity, and if we really desire absolution from his hand, we must do more than confess our guilt in words; we must institute a rigid and formidable scrutiny into the character of our transgression.²⁴

Sometimes we hear the invitation, "Give God your heart." Does God want your dirty, hard heart of stone? God is not asking anybody to give Him your heart. He offers to give you a new heart of flesh.

However great the consequences of our sin, we are able to come to the God against whom we have sinned and beg for His mercy according to His loving-kindness.²⁵

Untold billions of people have never experienced the joy of salvation. If you are one of them, I say to you that there is nothing like it in the world. Just imagine having every sin that you have ever committed erased by God, having all of the guilt you have accumulated and the attendant feelings of guilt removed. That's what Christ came to do. He wants to give us joy, not power or success. His gift is the joy that comes from knowing that our names are written in heaven.²⁶

From Psalm 51 we should learn that whoever stands can fall, but also whoever falls can by the mercy of God be raised up again, even be re-created.

Conclusion: How are you righteous before God? Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. That is: although my conscience accuse me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and that I am still prone always to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sin, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me, if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.²⁷

Prayed the petition, "God, be merciful to me"!

Prayer: Father of all mercies, who delightest not in the death of a sinner, have compassion upon us, and wash us from all our sins that we have committed against thy holy Majesty since the time we first came into this world. Create in us a clean heart, and strengthen us continually with the power of thy Holy Spirit, that we, being truly consecrated to thy service, may set forth thy praises, through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.²⁸

Psalter Selections: 32C, 51D, 51E, 51F [Book of Psalms for Singing]

²³ Ferguson, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Calvin, *op. cit.*, p. 284-285

²⁵ Ferguson, *op. cit.*

²⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Can I Have Joy in My Life?* [<https://store.ligonier.org>]

²⁷ *Heidelberg Catechism* 60

²⁸ *Prayers on the Psalms*, From the Scottish Psalter, 1595 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), p. 75