

PSALM 51

DAVID'S PRAYER OF REPENTANCE

After the prophet Nathan had convicted David of his great sin in the matter of Uriah and Bathsheba, the repentant king poured out his soul to the Lord in prayer for mercy and grace; and this Psalm contains the words that he used in this prayer. Indeed, David could not have done anything better than lifting up this humble prayer to his God; for where else should backsliding children return, except to their heavenly Father, Who is the only One that can heal them?

By Divine teaching and inspiration, David drew up a record of the workings of his repentant heart toward God. Those who are truly sorrowful and repentant of their sins will not be ashamed to confess that sorrow and repentance before the Lord and any other person that they have sinned against. Here the Psalmist has also left an example that instructs others what to do, and what to say, under similar circumstances.

We ought to observe that even though David had done much and suffered much in the cause of God during his lifetime, yet he does not mention any of that as a reason or merit for why the Lord should accept his repentance. Rather, he flees to God's infinite mercy, and depends upon that alone for pardon and peace. He begs for the pardon of his sin. The blood of Christ, sprinkled upon the conscience, blots out our transgressions; and then, having reconciled us to God, it reconciles us to ourselves as well. The believer longs to have the whole debt of his sins blotted out, and every stain cleansed; he wants to be thoroughly washed from all his sins. But the hypocrite, on the other hand, always has some secret reserve; he always desires to have some favorite lust spared.

David had such a deep sense of his sin that he was continually thinking of it with sorrow and shame. His sin was committed against God, Whose truth we also deny by our willful transgressions; we deal deceitfully with Him when we fail to obey His Word. A person who is truly repentant, however, will always trace the streams of his actual sin back to the fountain of original depravity.

Overview of the Psalm, adapted from Charles Spurgeon:

This is "a Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." After the Divine message had aroused David's dormant conscience and made him see the greatness of his guilt, he wrote this song of repentance. He had forgotten his Psalmody while he was indulging his flesh; but he returned to his harp when his spiritual nature was awakened, and he poured out his song to the accompaniment of sighs and tears. The great sin of David is not to be excused; but when we remember his sin, let us dwell most upon his repentance, and upon the long series of chastisements which rendered the later part of his life such a mournful history.

It will be simplest to note, in the first twelve verses, the penitent's confessions and plea for pardon; and then, in the last seven, his anticipated gratitude and the way in which he resolves to display it.

In verse 7, David exclaims, “Purge me with hyssop!” – that is, with the blood of Christ applied to his soul by living faith; just as the water of purification, under the Levitical law, was sprinkled with a bunch of hyssop. The blood of Christ is called the blood of sprinkling (Heb. 12:24). If this blood of Jesus – which cleanses from all sin – cleanses us from *our* sins in particular, then we shall be clean indeed! (Heb. 10:2) Notice, too, how the Psalmist does not ask to be comforted until he is first cleansed (verse 8). However, when sin – the bitter root of sorrow – is taken away; then he can pray in faith, “O Lord! Let me have a well-grounded peace, so that the bones which have been broken by conviction of sin may rejoice and be comforted. Hide Your face from my sins; blot all mine iniquities out of Your record-book; blot them out, as a cloud is blotted out and dispelled by the beams of the sun!” But the believer also desires renewal to holiness, just as much as the joy of salvation (verse 10). David now saw, more than ever, what an unclean heart he had; and he sadly laments it. But he sees that it is not in his own power to amend it, and so he begs God to create in him a clean heart. When the sinner feels that this change is necessary and reads God’s promise that He will work such a change, then he begins to ask for it. The Psalmist knew that he, by his sin, had grieved the Holy Spirit and provoked Him to withdraw from him; and he dreads this more than anything else. He also prays (verse 12) that Divine comforts may be restored to him. When we enjoy the sweet liberty wherewith Christ makes His people free, we are no longer under that burdensome yoke of bondage to sin (Gal. 5:1). And in light of this, when we open our lips, what should they speak except the praises of the Lord for His forgiving and cleansing mercy?



Those who are thoroughly convinced of their misery and danger by sin are willing to spare no cost to obtain the remission of it. But since they cannot make satisfaction for their own sin, God cannot take any satisfaction in their sacrifices and offerings that they present to Him – except as expressions of their love and duty to Him (verses 16-19). The good work that is done in every truly repentant person is a broken spirit, a contrite heart, and sorrow for sin. It is the creation of a new heart that is tender and pliable to God’s Word. O that there were such a heart in every one of us! The Lord is graciously pleased to accept this instead of all burnt offerings and sacrifices that could ever be presented to Him. The broken heart is acceptable to God only through Jesus Christ, for there is no true repentance without faith in Him. How precious it is to know that although humans may despise that which is broken, our God will not! Let this be the continued joy of all His children: they have redemption through the blood of Jesus, and the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace!

Lord Jesus, we beseech You to create in us a clean heart, and to renew a right spirit within us. We give thanks to You that the efficacy of Your perfect obedience and sacrificial death is the everlasting cause and security of all our mercies! Amen.