

“The Cry of a Contrite Heart”  
Psalm 51 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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

- Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.
- <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!
- <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.
- <sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words  
and blameless in your judgment.
- <sup>5</sup> Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- <sup>6</sup> Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,  
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- <sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
- <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.
- <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.
- <sup>11</sup> Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
- <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.
- <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
- <sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- <sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
- <sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
- <sup>18</sup> Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
build up the walls of Jerusalem;
- <sup>19</sup> then will you delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

## Would You Want the World to Know Your Greatest Sin?

What would you do if the darkest and most disturbing episode in your life was about to be broadcast on the evening news? How would you feel if a best-selling author was about to release a tell-all book exposing the greatest sins in your life – including your inmost thoughts?

Most of us cringe at the thought of such exposure. Sure, we may live outwardly respectable lives, but still we know there are words we have said in anger, things we have done in the passion of our youth or in the heat of the moment, thoughts we have dwelt on and even secretly cherished in our hearts that we would not want the world to know.

Now consider King David: He was guilty of a more shocking and scandalous sin than any of us (as far as I know), and his sin has been publicly recorded in the best-selling book of all time, read and discussed by millions and millions of people for thousands of years. What's more, during his lifetime he wrote this psalm "For the Choirmaster" and he wrote Psalm 32, giving his people insight into his heart during this darkest episode of his life and helping them learn the value of repenting, the way to repent and the great benefits of repenting and being forgiven by God.

Psalm 51 has been one of the most treasured psalms for worship and prayer in the church and in the private lives of believers for thousands of years. 500 years ago, Martin Luther said of Psalm 51, "There is no other Psalm which is more often sung or prayed in the church." This psalm gives us a model for how we should pray when we fall into sin, including what it means to confess our sin openly and honestly, what basis we can find for appeal to God, what we need from God, what we should do when we are forgiven and how God's mercy in our lives bears lasting fruit for the benefit of all of God's people.

With so much vital ground to cover in this wonderful psalm, let's begin . . .

### A. A Cry for Compassion and Cleansing, vv. 1-2

*Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.*

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!*

David opens with two urgent requests: Have mercy and Wash me.

"Have mercy on me, O God" could also be translated "Be gracious to me, O God," This is the same opening request as Psalm 56, written when David was seized by the Philistines in Gath: "Be gracious to me, O God," We noted then that this prayer is for God to stoop down, to bend low, to condescend to show favor to someone who is inferior.

David appeals to God's character for the ground of this plea. He doesn't say, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to the great deeds I have done in Your name." Nor does he say, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to the wonderful psalms I have written and sung to your glory." David does not appeal to his past good deeds or his past religious devotion. He doesn't even say, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to the wonderful sincerity of my repentance." David cannot and will not appeal to God for condescending favor and kindness on the basis of anything in David, but he grounds his request in the character of God.

"According to your steadfast love" – This is God's faithful kindness to His own people. David had broken his covenant vows of faithful love in marriage and he had led Bathsheba to break her covenant vows to Uriah, but David knew that God would never break His vow to be faithful and compassionate, to be gracious and loving toward His own people.

“According to your abundant mercy” – This is a more emotional expression, referring to God’s tender compassion and pity. God is abundant, rich in mercy, He has much tender compassion and pity for His own, overflowing.

So, David’s opening appeal is grounded in who God is, in God’s condescension, His covenant faithfulness and His abundant pity and tender compassion. We need God’s mercy more than we know. In his commentary on Psalm 51, Williams S. Plumer wrote, “Without mercy in God, we should all be undone. His power would destroy us, His wisdom confound us, His justice condemn us, His majesty affright us. But by His mercy, all these turn to our good.”

David then turns to the reality of his own character, and when he does, he finds much that he needs God to cleanse and to remove:

“*Blot out my transgressions*” – Here David is thinking of the numerous ways in which he has violated God’s law. A transgression is a clear violation of God’s law by doing something God has forbidden. David lusted after Bathsheba, he intentionally planned and committed adultery with her, he then deceived people by trying to plot a cover-up of his sin. When his deceit did not work, he plotted Uriah’s death, using battle tactics to commit murder. He then lied in covering up his murder, and he kept his deed secret for about a year, maybe more.

Each of these transgressions of God’s Law was a mark against David in God’s book. Rather than argue that the good marks in David’s favor should somehow outweigh the bad marks against him, David pleads with God to blot out these marks, to take the back of His stylus and rub out the marks entirely.

“*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity*” – Iniquity is a word which does not describe individual deeds, like transgressions does, but it points to a deeper underlying wickedness. Iniquity speaks of moral perverseness and evil in the heart. David knows that his transgressions of God’s law arose from an iniquitous heart, a morally corrupt and evil heart, and he knows he needs to be thoroughly washed from this evil within.

“*Cleanse me from my sin*” – This is very similar and speaks of David’s need for inner cleansing, but this points more at David’s need for a sin offering to cleanse him of his guilt before God that keeps him from being able to approach God in worship. In other words, if iniquity speaks of the moral nature of our corruption, sin speaks to the spiritual corruption, the alienation from God that requires a sacrifice of atonement.

David’s opening petitions show that he knows God’s character, he knows his own sinful condition and he knows his need as a sinner before a Holy God. David needs compassion and cleansing, and having asked for these things, he now makes his clear, personal, open and full confession.

## **B. A Clear and Full Confession, vv. 3-4**

*For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words  
and blameless in your judgment.*

David says, “I know my transgressions.” He is not pleading ignorance, and even more, he means that he is calling to mind and remembering his transgressions. He is not going to minimize or suppress the wrong that he has done.

David’s awareness of his own sin is so deep and profound that he says, “My sin is ever before me.” In other words, I cannot ever ignore or forget the evil that I have done and the offense that this evil is against a holy God.

Some people have been confused by the next lines in David's prayer. In fact, some people have been so confused that they have said David could not have written these lines, since he obviously sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

David is not minimizing the fact that his sin cost Uriah his life and that he recruited Joab, the commander of his army, to cover up this sin with another crime. But all sin, no matter its form, is first and foremost sin against God. This is how Jesus could forgive people of all of their sins, even when it didn't seem like their sins were against Him. He could look at them and say, "Your sins are forgiven," because their sins were in fact against Him, as all sin is primarily sin against God. God has made us and has given us life and health and our minds and bodies, as well as our time and resources. When we sin, we take the things God has graciously given us and we use them to attack God and assault His holy character, His image in us and His law given to us.

David also knew that, as king, no one in Israel could judge him or hold him accountable for his actions. Yet he was not above the law. God alone was his judge, which is why the prophet Nathan, though he was of lower rank and lesser power than King David, could come and confront David in his sin, because Nathan represented God.

David knew he had no case to plea before the bar of God's justice. He made his appeal for mercy because he knew how utterly guilty he was according to God's just standard. He knew God had every right to judge and condemn him. God could take away David's life and condemn him to hell forever, and David would have no basis for objection, no way to argue back against God. David's hope was only in God's mercy.

Do we cry out and confess in this way? Do we seek the mercy on God on the basis of God's compassionate and loving character? Do we own our sin and confess it openly and fully? I think these two things are tied together: Often we are seeking to justify ourselves in our own minds and before God, to find some basis on which we can justify our actions or minimize the depth of their iniquity. We say we messed up, made a mistake, slipped up, etc. We blame our parents or our culture or the system.

Why do we do this? Perhaps it is because we think if we must openly confess how guilty we are, God might not forgive us. If we're really as bad as we secretly suspect we might be, maybe God will run out of pity, will run out of compassion. Maybe He won't be willing to stoop that low. But here is David, holding nothing back, making no excuses, throwing himself on the mercy of God. If there's to be any hope for us, it must be in the mercy of God.

### **C. A Confession of Sinful Condition, vv. 5-6**

But David knows that his deep sin is nothing new. It doesn't surprise God. His sinful heart may have manifested itself in a particularly heinous way in this case, but it's been inside him from the very beginning. So he confesses . . .

*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.  
<sup>6</sup> Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,  
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.*

David says three key things here:

1. He confesses that he has always been a sinner. David's great sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah did not make him a great sinner. He was born a great sinner because he was a sinner when he was conceived. His great sinfulness manifested itself in this great sin, but it came from himself.
2. He knows that God doesn't delight in sin, but that God delights to see truth in David's inmost being.
3. David knows that God must be the one to teach him wisdom in the secret heart.

If our hearts are dark and broken from birth by our sinful nature, then the only hope of wisdom, truth, love and righteousness being found in us will be if God teaches us and puts them there, Notice also the way the Scripture unites

truth, wisdom and righteousness. David's problem is iniquity and sin, a lack of righteousness. Yet he needs truth and wisdom, for these things are not separate in God's mind. God is Light, and the Biblical image of light includes both truth and righteousness. God is the source of everything good.

#### **D. A Cry for Restoration, vv. 7-12**

David now returns to his plea for cleansing, but this time he's focused on how he can be cleansed and what would be the effect of his being cleansed. The emphasis throughout this part of David's prayer is on restoration:

*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*  
<sup>8</sup> *Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.*  
<sup>9</sup> *Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.*  
<sup>10</sup> *Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.*  
<sup>11</sup> *Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.*  
<sup>12</sup> *Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

How can David be clean? Only if God purges him with hyssop. What is hyssop? It's a small shrub, and in Old Testament worship it was dipped in water and in blood and sprinkled on the people as they worshiped God. It was also the shrub the Israelites used to paint the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and the lintel of their house during Passover. So, hyssop is a symbol for cleansing by a sacrifice.

But David knows there is no sacrifice he can offer for his cleansing. He will go on to say: "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering." David knows that nothing he offers to God can cleanse him, but he still knows he needs to be cleansed by blood, to remove his guilt, and by water, to make him clean. This is a cry of faith for a sacrifice that God would make 1,000 years later on a cross, where Jesus died. His side was pierced and blood and water flowed, answering David's plea and the plea of every child of God throughout the ages.

And what will be the result of this cleansing with hyssop?

"Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." Though David's heart was black with iniquity, and though his hands were red with the blood of Uriah, he can be whiter than snow. This reminds me of God's invitation to His people in Isaiah 1:18:

*"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool."*

Will you come and reason with God this morning? Will you stop seeking ground for justification in your own actions or intentions? Will you ask Him to cleanse you with hyssop, that you may be whiter than snow?

But David doesn't just want his sins removed. He also wants God to create in Him a clean heart. He wants a heart that loves what God loves, that is concerned with the things that concern the heart of God, that pursues what God pursues. He wants a right spirit, not a twisted, selfish, iniquitous one. This is a clear part of repentance, and it is something too

many of us miss. Sometimes we act like we just want God to get us off the hook. We just want our “Get out of jail free” card. But that’s not what God does in the hearts of His children. When He cleanses, He also renews. When He wipes clean, He also makes right. This must be the cry of our heart.

As David continues his cry for restoration, he prays:

*Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.  
<sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

David remembered well what happened to Israel’s last king, King Saul. Saul had sinned against the Lord, and the Lord then rejected Saul from being king over His people and the Holy Spirit left Saul, replaced by an evil spirit. This had to be sobering and frightening to David.

Note first that we’re not talking about losing your salvation here. Saul evidently was never really saved. He was chosen by God to be king over God’s people, but he showed no evidence of true and saving faith.

The Holy Spirit was given to Saul as his anointing for his office, not as the indwelling presence of God in the life of believers. This is also the same sense David has in mind: Take not your Holy Spirit from me means that David knew he couldn’t rule God’s people well without the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

David wanted not just to be forgiven but to also know the joy of God’s salvation in his life, to walk in that joy as God upheld him by the Holy Spirit (which is how I think we should understand “a willing spirit,” as a reference to the Holy Spirit.)

### **E. A Cry of Commitment, vv. 13-17**

And what will be the fruit of this restoration in David’s life. It will be seen primarily in two ways: In more eager outreach to people and in more sincere worship of God –

*<sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.  
<sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.  
<sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
<sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
<sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

David knows God can use his willing testimony to teach other transgressors about His grace and turn their hearts back to God. Thus, David is eager not just to be forgiven and restored, but also to be used by God to reach and teach others.

Martin Luther said, “If we have, through faith in Christ, received the righteousness and grace of God, we can do no greater work than speak and declare the truth of Christ.”

But not only will David’s outreach be strengthened, so will his worship. David says his voice will sing aloud of God’s righteousness and will declare His praise. As William S. Plumer said in his commentary, “A soul released from guilt and wrath and shame cannot but publish in some fit way the goodness of God displayed towards it.”

One pastor noted that he could always tell when God had finally truly gotten ahold of the hearts of the men in his congregation because they started to truly sing.

What God wants from us in worship is not an external conformity to a set of prescribed expectations, but an inner brokenness. David knows that nothing he can offer God can satisfy divine justice and free him from the penalty of his sin. But as he receives the grace of God, as he is showered in the abundant goodness and tender compassion of God, he can offer something more pleasing to God: a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart.

A contrite heart is one that is remorseful, but the Hebrew word used here literally means shattered. Our hearts are hardened by our sin, broken by God's mercy and shattered by His grace. We offer God the broken pieces of the heart He has undone, and with this sacrifice He is pleased.

## **F. Contentment and Thanksgiving, vv. 18-19**

The final result of David's repentance and forgiveness is a heart full of contentment and gratitude that looks beyond himself to the people of God as a whole:

*Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
build up the walls of Jerusalem;  
19 then will you delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

David sees God doing good to Zion and building up the walls of Jerusalem. Even as he is praying this, he sees by eyes of faith God doing this. God will be good to His people and He will strengthen us against the enemy's vicious attacks.

In the light of God's goodness and protection is the right place to then offer right sacrifices, burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings. If we make offerings to God in an attempt to secure His favor and earn His mercy, we have missed the point and God will not be pleased. Only in view of His mercy, only in response to His goodness, can we offer rightly. Paul says the same thing in Romans 12:1:

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. – Romans 12:1*

## **What Does It Look Like to Repent?**

### **How is it Possible?**

This psalm is a beautiful and powerful picture of true repentance – no excuse-making, no minimizing, no justifying, no bargaining. Sin is not minimized, personal responsibility is not evaded, but neither is any attempt made to earn, merit or deserve God's forgiveness. Everything is laid at the feet of God and all pleas are rooted in His character – His mercy and His steadfast love, His tender compassion and His covenant faithfulness.

Can we repent like this? Not on our own. In our own flesh, we will always seek various forms of minimizing, evading or bargaining. Why? Because we are desperate to hold onto some shred of self-righteousness. But the Holy Spirit can change our hearts, and He and He alone can and will grant us the saving grace of true repentance.

There's a common and wrong way to respond to David's sin with Bathsheba, and that is to think or say, "Well, at least I've never sinned that badly!" That's the cry of self-justification. A much, much better response would be, "If God was pleased to grant repentance and forgiveness to David, then perhaps He would be willing to do the same for me, for I, too, have sinned grievously, and I need the Lord's cleansing mercy and restoring grace."