



## Psalm 51 - Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon

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

### Introduction

This is probably the best known of the 'Penitential Psalms', i.e. Psalms 6, 25, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143. According to the title, David composed this psalm as a result of Nathan the prophet convicting him of his sins, both for his adultery with Bathsheba and for his arranging of the murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 12:1-14).

At the same time, this is more than David's personal prayer: its instructional elements show that, although the situation that led to the psalm was intensely personal, the psalm in its current form is well-suited to be a hymn by which the members of the worshipping congregation confess their own sins.

As is the case with Psalms 25 and 32, the psalm enables its singers to appeal to God's own gracious character as the grounds for their cry for forgiveness, echoing Exodus 34:6-7. The psalm also reinforces the view, found in the Levitical system itself, that the sacrifices bestow their benefits only on those who use them in humble and penitent faith.

### Psalm 51:1-2 - Have Mercy on Me

The psalm opens with an appeal to God for forgiveness. The terms mercy and steadfast love, as well as transgressions, iniquity, and sin, all evoke God's proclamation of his own name, with its focus on his grace and kindness. The plea for mercy here is a humble one, based entirely on God's mercy, frankly recognising that the worshipper does not deserve it.

The terms wash and cleanse come from the ceremonial system, where they refer to rites that allow a person to come safely into God's presence. Here the psalm focuses on the inner condition that the ceremony points to.

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

### Psalm 51:1-2

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. The title of this psalm gives the tragic context for David's plea. He had sinned in murder, adultery, the covering of his sin, and in hardness against repentance. It took the bold confrontation of Nathan the prophet to shake him from this (2 Samuel Chapter 12); yet once shaken, David came in great honesty and brokenness before God.

Have mercy on me, O God is the prayer of a man who knows he has sinned and stopped from all self-justification: <<**David said to Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord**>> (2 Samuel 12:13a), a good and direct confession, without excuse and with clarity. David asked for mercy, and that according to the measure of God's steadfast love. This is God's *hesed*, his loyal love, his covenant mercy. It was a well-phrased request with the eloquence of true brokenness.

According to your abundant mercy. In slightly different words, David repeated the thought of the previous appeal. He had before experienced the multitude of God's tender mercies; he asks for this outpouring once again.

Blot out my transgressions. David felt a register of his many sins condemned him and he wanted the account of them to be erased. The blotting out may refer to David's own conscience, or to God's accounting of sin, or perhaps to both. It is like erasing a written record: <<**But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written**>> (Exodus 32:32), <<**Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness**>> (Numbers 5:23), <<**I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins**>> (Isaiah 43:25), and: <<**If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels**>> (Revelation 3:5).

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. The Word of God through Nathan the prophet worked like a mirror to show David how dirty and stained he was. He had lived in that condition for some time, perhaps a whole year, without an acute knowledge of his iniquity and sin. Now the sense of the stain drove him to beg to be cleansed of his guilt and shame.

David used several words to speak of his offense against God:

- Transgressions has the idea of crossing a boundary.
- Iniquity has the idea of being twisted or perverted.
- Sin has the idea of falling short or missing the mark: <<*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*>> (Romans 3:23).

### Psalm 51:3-5 - I Own Up to My Sin

The next section builds on the humility expressed in the opening section, freely acknowledging that the sin is the worshipper's own and that God is free from all blame. Indeed, God would be fully justified in refusing the request for mercy and bringing judgement instead.

<sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.

<sup>4</sup> Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.

### Psalm 51:3-4

For I know my transgressions. David realised it was not only one, but multiple transgressions. He did this without excuse, blame-shifting, or rationalisation. There is not attempt to justify his actions.

My sin is ever before me. In the many months between the time David committed these sins and this confession, he had not escaped the sense of sin; it was always before him: <<*For our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities*>> (Isaiah 59:12). He did his best to ignore it and deny it, but as a genuine child of God he could not escape it. He was in unconfessed sin, but miserable in it, as a child of God should be. David did not say, "My punishment is ever before me" or "My consequences are ever before me." What bothered him was his sin. Many grieve over the consequences of sin, few over sin itself.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned. Of course, in doing wrong he had hurt others; the point here is that God is the ultimate judge for all sin, thus harming others is given not less weight but more. The Prodigal Son also recognised that his sin was both against God and against his father: <<*Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son"*>> (Luke 15:21).

And done what is evil in your sight. David realised that God was there and God was looking when he did his evil. He was not absent from the bedroom of adultery or the place where the command to kill Uriah was given.

So that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement. The psalmist acknowledges his guilt before God so that God's justice in all he does will be clear. In Romans 3:4 Paul cites this part of the verse from the Septuagint in support of his argument that God is just and is entitled to judge: <<*By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, 'So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging'*>>.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

#### Psalm 51:5

I was born guilty. David thinks of himself as a sinful person from the time of his birth: <<*but human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward*>> (Job 5:7). The Pharisees accused the man who had been born blind and whose sight Jesus had restored of being such a person: <<*They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out*>> (John 9:34).

A sinner when my mother conceived me. The idea is not that the act of conception was itself sinful but, as the parallel first line indicates, each worshipper learns to trace his sinful tendencies to the very beginning of his existence – not only from birth but even from before that, to conception. This certainly attributes moral accountability, the most important aspect of personal identity or individuality to the developing baby in the womb. This is why many see this passage as implying that an unborn child should be thought of as a human person from the point of conception in his mother's womb.

#### Psalm 51:6-13 - I Seek Restoration and Renewal

The proper posture of the penitent is to crave a fresh sense of God's presence (vv.8-9 and v.11), a deeper purification of the moral life (v.6, v.10 and v.12), and a credible witness to the unfaithful (v.13). The focus is on the innermost self, from

which obedient actions flow: inward being, secret heart (v.6); and clean heart, right spirit (v.10). The goal of this confession is not self-abasement but a renewal of the joy and gladness (v.8) that the faithful have in God's presence.

- 6 You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

#### Psalm 51:6

You desire truth in the inward being. Although the sinful nature was deep within David, God wanted to work deeply in him. God wanted a transformation in David all the way to the inward being, to the secret heart that would know wisdom: *<<Teach me good judgement and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments>>* (Psalm 119:66). David did not cry out for a superficial reform, but something much deeper.

- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.

#### Psalm 51:7-9

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. David looked for God to do a work of spiritual and moral cleansing, and to do it in connection with the atoning sacrifice of a substitute. David did not think for a moment that he could cleanse himself. He needed God to cleanse him, and to do it through the blood of the perfect sacrifice anticipated by animal sacrifices.

Hyssop is a plant with hairy leaves and branches; bunches of the branches are good for sprinkling. For its use in a cleansing ceremony, as seen in: *<<He shall take the living bird with the cedar wood and the crimson yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water>>* (Leviticus 14:6), and: *<<The priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson material, and throw them into the fire in which the heifer is burning>>* (Numbers 19:6). As with v.2, the psalm highlights the inner condition to which the ceremonies point.

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. David knew that God's cleansing was effective. His sin was a deep stain but purity could be restored. It can be sensed that David spoke with the voice of faith; it can be difficult for the convicted sinner

to believe in such complete cleansing. It takes faith to believe God despite the doubt and difficulty.

It is a terrible thing to be so directly confronted with the blackness of sin, yet God means even this to be a prelude to joy and gladness. The restoration of joy is his goal.

Let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. The feeling of God's displeasure, and of his favour, penetrates into the whole person: <<*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long*>> (Psalm 32:3).

Usually when God is said to hide his face from someone, it means that he will no longer look upon that person with favour: <<*My anger will be kindled against them on that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. On that day they will say, "Have not these troubles come upon us because our God is not in our midst?"*>> (Deuteronomy 31:17), <<*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?*>> (Psalm 13:1), and: <<*In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer*>> (Isaiah 54:8). Here the singer asks God no longer to look upon his sins.

To blot out is to remove completely from the record book; refer to the comments made on vv.1-2.

- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

### Psalm 51:10-11

Create in me a clean heart, O God. David felt that it was not enough if God simply cleaned up the heart he had. The plea 'create' indicated he needed a new heart from God, a clean heart, one not stained by sin. In this David anticipated one of the great promises to all who believe under the New Covenant: <<*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh*>> (Ezekiel 36:26).

And put a new and right spirit within me. Along with a new and clean heart, David needed a steadfast spirit to continue in the way of godliness. This expressed a humble reliance upon the Lord.

Do not take your holy spirit from me. Some have taken this to imply that the Holy Spirit can be taken from someone, at least in the OT; others have suggested that the Holy Spirit is viewed here in his role of empowering David for his kingly duties, and that this is a prayer that God not take the kingship and the divine anointing for kingship from David as he did from Saul: <<*Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah. Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him*>> (1 Samuel 16:13-14).

To evaluate these views, one should observe that the OT rarely discusses the Holy Spirit's role in cleansing the inner life. Besides here, Ezekiel 36:27 is the main OT text on the subject, and certainly does not enter into technical questions of the Spirit's permanent indwelling. Further, the fact that this is a psalm for the whole congregation, argues against the idea that this is David's personal prayer about his kingship. The whole tenor of this psalm is that, if strict justice were God's only consideration, he would have the right to bring dire judgement on those who sin, which includes all of his own people, and that the only possible appeal is to his mercy. The function of the psalm, as a song sung by the entire congregation, is to shape their hearts so that they feel this at the deepest level, lest they ever presume upon God's grace.

- 12     Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
          and sustain in me a willing spirit.
- 13     Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
          and sinners will return to you.

### Psalm 51:12-13

Restore to me the joy of your salvation. In his many months of unconfessed sin, David felt the misery of spiritual defeat. He wanted once again the joy appropriate to salvation, to those whom the Lord rescues.

Sustain in me a willing spirit. This expresses again David's confidence in God for his future. He did not dream of upholding himself. Such self confidence is what typically leads even good men into sin: <<*Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*>> (Mark 14:38).

As usual in the Psalms, the transgressors and sinners are members of the covenant people who do not faithfully embrace the provisions of God's covenant; the faithful call them to embrace God's grace, from the perspective of those who themselves deserve to be cast out.

### Psalm 51:14-17 - Then I Will Worship Truly

The terms in this section, such as sing aloud (v.14), declare (v.15), and sacrifice (vv.16-17), all point to activities of public worship. The person who has used this psalm to confess his sins and to receive God's assurance of pardon is the one who can genuinely worship the gracious God of the covenant.

- 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.
- 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

### Psalm 51:14-17

Bloodshed is probably a reference to the slaying of Uriah (2 Samuel 12:9). The faithful may not have committed this particular sin, but should instead take heart: if God can forgive David this evil act, he can certainly forgive all else!

And my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. David knew that with his guilt dealt with before God, he would again be able to sing aloud; that my mouth will declare your praise. The months of unconfessed sin were silent from a spirit of true praise.

These verses seem to make sacrifice and burnt-offering relatively unimportant for the faithful, even replacing them with the inner disposition of a broken and contrite heart. However, since v.19 goes on to speak of offering physical sacrifices, it is better to take these verses as implying that the animal sacrifices look to the worshipper offering himself to God as <<*a living sacrifice*>> (Romans 12:1), and without this they forfeit significance.

O God, you will not despise. It is easy to imagine that many in David's day would despise his broken and contrite heart. What he did, taking whatever woman he wanted and killing anyone who got in his way, this was expected conduct for the kings of the world. Perhaps his neighbouring kings were mystified as to why any of this bothered David. To him, it did not matter what others thought; God did not despise David's broken and contrite heart, and that was enough.

### Psalm 51:18-19 - Do Good to Zion

The psalm closes by enabling worshippers to see the relationship between their own spiritual health and the well-being of the whole body of God's people i.e. Zion. Each member is linked to all the others in a web of relationships, and together they share in the life of God as it pulses through the whole body. Thus each member contributes to, or else detracts from, the health of the whole. The ideal Israel is a community of forgiven penitents, faithfully embracing God's covenant and worshipping him according to the rites he appointed; this is the community that can bring light to the whole world.

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

### Psalm 51:18-19

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. David realised that in his sin he did not only fail as a man, a husband, and a father. He also failed as a king over God's people. He humbly asked God to restore his favour to the kingdom. It is not known if there was an obvious demonstration of God's displeasure against the kingdom of Israel in the period of David's unconfessed sin. Whether there was or was not, David understood that there was an aspect of restoration in terms of the kingdom that needed to be addressed. The prophets indicated that God would do so: <<*For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song*>> (Isaiah 51:3), and: <<*Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion; my house shall be built in it, says the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Proclaim further: Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity; the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem*>> (Zechariah 1:16-17).

Then you will delight in right sacrifices. Under the Old Covenant, David knew that God was not yet done with animal sacrifices. They would still offer bulls on the altar. With the heart issues addressed, those sacrifices could be full of meaning and benefit. It is also possible that David had in mind the sacrifices that were regularly offered on behalf of Israel, and that they could be restored to meaning and benefit on behalf of the nation.