

Prayers of Repentance and Confession

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 7:5–11

Background Scripture: Psalm 51; 2 Samuel 11

Psalm 51:1–4, 10–12, 15–17

1 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

11 Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

12 Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

15 O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

16 For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

Key Text

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.—Psalm 51:10

Worship in the Covenant Community

Unit 2: Songs of the Old Testament

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the circumstances that led King David to write Psalm 51.

2. Interpret Psalm 51 through the lens of King David's experience of repentance and forgiveness.
3. Confess and repent of personal and corporate sins.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Need for Confession
- B. Lesson Context

I. Confession (Psalm 51:1–4)

- A. Needing Mercy (vv. 1–2)
- B. Acknowledging Sin (vv. 3–4)
Stains Removed

II. Restoration (Psalm 51:10–12)

- A. Clean My Heart (v. 10)
- B. Grant Your Presence (vv. 11–12)
Sustained With Joy

III. Praise (Psalm 51:15–17)

- A. From My Lips (v. 15)
- B. From a Broken Heart (vv. 16–17)

Conclusion

- A. The Power of Confession
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Bathsheba Bath-*she*-buh.

Ecclesiastes *leez-ee-as-teez*.

Habakkuk Huh-*back*-kuk.

Hittite *Hit-ite* or *Hit-tite*.

Hosea Ho-*zay*-uh.

Lamentations Lam-en-*tay*-shunz.

Uriah Yu-*rye*-uh.

Introduction

A. The Need for Confession

In second grade, my class held an end-of-the-year pizza party. Our teachers told us that there was just enough pizza for every student to have one—and only one—slice. As the party ended, I snuck the last slice and ate it without telling anyone. What I didn't know was that another student hadn't yet eaten. So, when that boy came to get his slice of pizza, there was none left for him.

When our teacher asked who had taken an extra slice, I kept my mouth shut. As the silence grew, I saw the sadness on the other boy's face. Overcome with guilt, I raised my hand and confessed what I had done. I apologized to the other student, the teacher, and the whole class. I was worried that they all would be upset with me. Instead, the boy hugged me and told me that he forgave me. My teacher encouraged me by telling me she was proud of my honesty. My relationship with my teacher and classmates was restored when I confessed my wrongdoing.

Although that experience was trivial, it taught me an important lesson about the need for confession and repentance. Before we can have forgiveness and healing, we need an awareness of our sins and an admission of our wrongdoing. Today's psalm gives us an example of such.

B. Lesson Context

Today's lesson comes from Psalm 51, a lament psalm. This type of psalm focuses on the psalmist's remorse, confession of sin, and request for forgiveness (compare Psalms 6; 32; 38, etc.). The psalm's superscription attributes authorship to King David.

Psalm 51 was composed after a particularly heinous and tragic series of events in his life, as the superscription notes. The psalm endures as a model for confession, restoration, and praise.

These events are recounted in 2 Samuel 11–12 and occurred while David was king (1010–970 BC). While David stood on the roof of his palace, he saw a woman bathing (2 Samuel 11:2–3). This woman was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of David's fighting men. David sent for her, slept with her, and made her pregnant (11:4–5). To conceal his actions, David tried to convince Uriah to sleep with her so that Uriah would think he caused his wife's pregnancy (11:6–13). However, David's schemes failed, and Uriah refused to sleep with his wife. As a result, the king resorted to having Uriah killed in battle (11:7) and marrying the now-widowed woman (11:27a). David's sinful actions "displeased the Lord" (11:27b).

Therefore, the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to convict David of his sin. Rather than blatantly expose the king's sin, Nathan used a parable—a short story—to uncover it.

This parable presented two characters: a poor man who owned a beloved lamb and a rich man who owned many flocks of sheep. The parable described how the rich man took the poor man's precious lamb, killed it, and prepared it as a meal for the traveler (2 Samuel 12:1–4). The rich man's unjust treatment of the poor man infuriated David (12:5–6).

Nathan then revealed the parable's point: King David was like that rich man (2 Samuel 12:7). Although the king was exceedingly wealthy and powerful, he took that which was not his to take; he "killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife" (12:9). Upon hearing Nathan's words and being convicted of his sin, David confessed of his wrongdoing and proclaimed, "I have sinned against the Lord" (12:13).

I. Confession (Psalm 51:1–4)

A. Needing Mercy (vv. 1–2)

1. Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

The Hebrew word translated in this verse as *lovingkindness* occurs over 200 times in the Old Testament, with varying English translations. It is sometimes translated as "mercy" (examples: Psalm 33:18, 22), "merciful kindness" (examples: Psalms 117:2; 119:76), or "goodness" (examples: Exodus 34:6; Psalm 107:8). The word generally describes God's faithfulness to His people. An aspect of God's mercy is demonstrated in His response to sin (see Numbers 14:18–19; Daniel 9:9; Ephesians 2:4–5).

The word picture used by David is that of a ledger used by the Lord to record sins. To *blot out* something from that ledger would be to remove it entirely (compare Psalm 69:28). Centuries after David, God identified himself to the prophet Isaiah as the one who would blot out and no longer remember the sins of His people (Isaiah 43:25).

Transgressions are actions that willfully break God's law. The underlying Hebrew word translated *transgressions* is elsewhere translated as "sins" (examples: Proverbs 10:19; 28:13). David acknowledged that he had broken God's law by his actions with Bathsheba and against Uriah. David also knew that God is full of *mercy* (2 Samuel 24:14) and never-failing compassion (compare Lamentations 3:22). In his sorrow and remorse, David requested that God show mercy and demonstrate forgiveness by removing all records of his sins (compare Exodus 34:6; Micah 7:18–20).

What Do You Think?

How would you explain God's lovingkindness and tender mercies to someone who thinks God is harsh and unloving?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture texts come to mind to help your explanation (example: Psalm 103)?

2. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

This verse demonstrates *parallelism*, a rhetorical device frequently found in Hebrew poetry. It occurs when a line of poetry uses words or phrases that are different but synonymous. The repetition emphasizes the writer's point. In Psalm 51:1–2, parallelism is seen in the use of the words *blot out*, *wash*, and *cleanse*.

David's transgressions were like a stain on a garment that needed washing. His request, *wash me thoroughly*, reveals his knowledge of the depth of his sinfulness and understanding that only God could remove the stain of sin.

God promised to cleanse His people from their sins (Ezekiel 36:25). In response, God's people should confess their iniquities (Jeremiah 33:8) and commit to lives free from wrongdoing (Isaiah 1:16).

Of the dozens of uses of the underlying Hebrew word for *cleanse*, most refer to the ceremonial cleansing required by the Law of Moses (examples: Leviticus 14; Numbers 8:7). God requires that His people live pure and holy lives, free from *sin*. By asking to be cleansed from *sin*, David sought to be made clean before God (also Psalm 51:7, not in our printed text).

B. Acknowledging Sin (vv. 3–4)

3. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.

David could ask to be cleansed from sin because he knew the sins he had committed. For a person to *acknowledge* sin can be painful, but it must happen (compare Isaiah 59:12; Psalms 38:18; 40:12; contrast 1 Samuel 15:20–25). Awareness of sin must occur prior to personal conviction, which is required for true repentance and mercy (Proverbs 28:13; 1 John 1:9). David knew the extent of his *sin* (2 Samuel 12:13; compare Psalm 32:3–5). His admission of that fact to himself was his first step to confessing to God and receiving forgiveness.

More parallelism is displayed in this verse between the words *transgressions* and *sin*. We see this identical pair of terms stated in Psalm 32:5, another psalm by David.

What Do You Think?

What steps can a believer take to be attentive to the Spirit's conviction regarding his or her sin?

Digging Deeper

What things prevent us from hearing the Spirit's leading in this regard?

Stains Removed

The house we lived in when my children were little had white carpets. I did not prefer this flooring, especially in a home with young children and a dog. Replacing it would have cost too much for us, so it stayed. Almost daily, something spilled on that beautiful white carpet. Dirt, grass, and mulberry juice from the mulberry tree in our yard were

frequent culprits. Every day was a constant battle to keep the carpet clean—a struggle I repeatedly lost.

Eventually, I hired a carpet-cleaning service. After seeing the filthy carpet, the technician frowned with discouragement. “It’s okay if you can’t get the stains out,” I told him. “I know it’s bad. Just get it clean.” He agreed he would do his best. After some hours, he revealed the results of his labor: pristine, stainless carpets that looked new!

Sin has left its mark on us; our sins are like stains we can’t remove. Before God can cleanse us from our sins, we need to acknowledge the presence of sin and repent. David realized that he had sinned and came before God to request cleansing. God has promised to make us clean, but we must go before Him with a repentant heart. What prevents you from coming to God today with a heart of repentance?

—L. M. W

4a. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight.

Our sins can harm others. And yet, sin is ultimately a failure to follow the commands of a holy and righteous God. Therefore, sin is ultimately directed against God (see Genesis 39:9). This half-verse echoes David’s statement of confession after he had been convicted of his sin: “I have sinned *against* the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:13).

The phrase *done this evil in thy sight* reflects the statement made by Nathan to highlight David’s sin (2 Samuel 12:9). Because of God’s holiness, He cannot tolerate the sight of evil (Deuteronomy 4:25; Habakkuk 1:13). God sees the actions of all people (Psalm 11:4–5), even those done in private (Hebrews 4:13). David acknowledged the severity of his sin. Not only was he aware of his wrongdoing, but he was also aware of God’s knowledge of that sin.

4b. That thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Some psalms describe God as an all-powerful and all-knowing judge who, in His righteousness, will judge the behavior of His people (examples: Psalms 96:13; 98:9). Because all sin is ultimately directed against God, His judgment against it is *justified*. David knew this and was prepared to accept the consequences of his actions. The apostle Paul quoted this half-verse in Romans 3:4 to make the point that God is always righteous and correct in His judgment of sin.

II. Restoration (Psalm 51:10–12)

A. Clean My Heart (v. 10)

10. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

This verse continues a turn for David that began in Psalm 51:7 (not in today’s print passage). The turn is from his confession of sin to his request for a renewed relationship. David acknowledged that only *God* could clean his heart from sin. As such, David’s prayer suggests an important insight regarding the state of humanity: we are incapable

of having pure hearts and living completely righteous on our own (compare Proverbs 20:9; Romans 3:10–12 [quoting Psalms 14:1–3; 53:1–3 and Ecclesiastes 7:20]; 1 John 1:10). Only God, through His mercy, can give people a *clean heart* and a *right spirit* when they turn to Him (Ezekiel 18:31–32; 36:25–27; 1 Timothy 1:5; Titus 3:5). Only after God has provided this spiritual renewal can people then follow Him with obedience and love (Ephesians 4:20–23).

B. Grant Your Presence (vv. 11–12)

11. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

Under the covenant of Sinai, obedience to God's commands was a condition for Him to continue to dwell with the people (Exodus 29:42–46; contrast Ezekiel 10:18). Those who did not keep those commandments would be removed from the community and, thereby, the presence of God (examples: Genesis 17:14; Deuteronomy 17:1–5). David had previously admitted that he had disobeyed God. In this verse are his requests that result from that wrongdoing. He was fearful that he might suffer the loss of God's *presence* as a result (compare Isaiah 59:2).

This verse is only one of three verses in the Old Testament that use the title *holy spirit*, the others being Isaiah 63:10–11; compare "his [God's] spirit" in Psalm 106:33. During the Old Testament era, the presence of God's Spirit came upon certain people to empower them for a particular purpose (examples: Numbers 11:16–17; 1 Samuel 10:6; Micah 3:8). These rare instances prefigure the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that blesses all Christians today (Romans 8:9–11; 2 Timothy 1:14). However, through our sin, we risk deadening our attentiveness to the Spirit's influence. The apostle Paul warns strongly about the ways we might "grieve" (Ephesians 4:30) or "quench" (1 Thessalonians 5:19) the Spirit.

David had received "the Spirit of the Lord" after being anointed by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:13). The request that God *take not thy holy spirit from* David reflects that past experience. After David's predecessor, Saul, had sinned, "the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul" (16:14; compare 18:10; 19:9). It's not stretching our sanctified imaginations too much to think that David was fearful that he would suffer likewise.

David's fears in this regard are understandable. Since the introduction of sin into the world, humans have experienced guilt and shame when caught in sin. As a result, people often feel unworthy before the presence of God (examples: Judges 13:22; Isaiah 6:5). When we draw near to God with repentance, we can experience His presence and love (Psalm 23 [lesson 10]; James 4:8).

12. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

David's sin caused a sense of separation between him and God. At one time, God's *salvation* had led David to rejoice (Psalm 13:5). However, his feelings of *joy* had been replaced with grief because of the presence of David's sin.

David recognized that he could not experience transformation through his power; he needed God to provide support to *uphold* him. David had already acknowledged God's role in transforming David and strengthening the bond of their relationship.

What Do You Think?

How will you celebrate the joy of salvation in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

How will you go about such a celebration even if external circumstances seem less-than-ideal?

Sustained With Joy

A popular comedian once pointed out that joy and laughter should be communal experiences; humor is best when shared with others. To prove this point, the comedian described what he sees from the stage during a comedy set. The audience would typically respond to his routine by turning to one another, nudging each other, and laughing. These mutual experiences of joy and humor invite connections between people and build relationships among the audience members.

These experiences aren't limited to the audience of a comedy show. On several occasions, my coworkers and I have experienced the need for joy and humor. Once, during a difficult week at work, one coworker said something humorous. I then chimed in with a witty retort. We both laughed so hard that tears ran down our cheeks. Laughter, humor, and joy were the needed responses to relieve the stress of that challenging week.

David wanted to experience the joy that could come only from God's salvation. Such a joyous state came from David's right relationship with the God of salvation. What things have prevented you from experiencing the joy of God's salvation? What will you do to correct that?

—L. M. W

III. Praise (Psalm 51:15–17)

A. From My Lips (v. 15)

15. O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

With this verse, David's prayer of confession and repentance transitions to praise. He had confessed to God, requested forgiveness, and asked to experience a renewed relationship with God. As a result, David promised that he would use the experience of forgiveness as an opportunity to "teach transgressors [God's] ways" so that "sinners shall be converted unto [God]" (Psalm 51:13, not in our printed text). David's acknowledgment of his sin led him to seek repentance and use his life as an example to others for their correction.

This verse also demonstrates another use of poetic parallelism. *My mouth shall shew forth thy praise* parallels the statement “my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness” (Psalm 51:14, not in our printed text). Praise is the proper response to God’s love and mercy (63:3–5; Hebrews 13:11–15). David would respond to God’s mercy with public displays of praise and worship. His goal was not to manipulate God into granting forgiveness. Instead, he expressed his commitment to worship God in response to receiving God’s promised mercy.

B. From a Broken Heart (vv. 16–17)

16–17. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

David states the basis for his confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness. Through the Law of Moses, God established a system of sacrifices and offerings for the people of Israel (Leviticus 1–7). Therefore, at an initial glance, this verse appears to negate the role of this sacrificial system.

We can find an explanation by looking again at the context that prompted David to write this psalm (see Lesson Context). Under the Law of Moses, adultery and murder required capital punishment (Exodus 21:12; Leviticus 20:10). David knew that God desired a change of heart rather than sacrifices without any change (compare 1 Samuel 15:22).

Instead, God desires “internal” *sacrifices* from the contrite and repentant. These sacrifices include the attitude and stance of a person’s *spirit* and *heart*. When people become aware of their sin, they will experience grief for what they have done—a “godly sorrow” that leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10; compare Psalm 34:18). This sorrow results from having a *broken spirit* filled with sadness for not having loved and obeyed God as intended. However, experiencing sorrow for the sake of itself is not the intended goal. God desires that His people have a *contrite heart* that shows remorse for sinful behavior.

This verse also teaches us that religious observances and practices are ultimately meaningless if they are not followed by a change of heart that results in following and obeying God’s commands (compare Isaiah 1:11–15; 29:13). God will *despise* such behaviors (see Amos 5:21–23). Rather than sacrifices and offerings for their own sake, God desires a changed heart that results in worship and obedience (see 1 Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:6).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can a believer cultivate a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart?

Digging Deeper

How can a person overcome desensitization to sin so that he or she can cultivate these things?

Conclusion

A. The Power of Confession

Regardless of the sins we may commit, David's words in Psalm 51 provide us with a model of acknowledgment, confession, repentance, and praise. We first acknowledge our sins and take ownership of our actions. Second, we confess our wrongdoing and repent. Repentance is a crucial and necessary aspect of the Christian life (Luke 5:32), and it pleases God (see Ezekiel 18:23; Romans 2:4; etc.). Through our confession, we are "healed" from the power of sin (James 5:16) and receive forgiveness from God: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Finally, because of our confidence in God's promises, we praise Him for His mercy toward us, demonstrated through forgiveness. When wayward Christians follow this model, they can experience the joy of living in relationship with God—a joy to be shared with others.

What Do You Think?

How has Psalm 51 changed how you approach your acts of confession and repentance?

Digging Deeper

Who can be an accountability partner to encourage you in a life of confession and repentance?

B. Prayer

Merciful God, Your love and mercy are great. As Your people, we want to be in a right relationship with You. We confess that we have not loved You or others as we ought. We repent of our sinful actions and humbly ask for Your forgiveness. We praise You because You have promised to cleanse us from our sins and give us a life of joy in a right relationship with You. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Acknowledge. Confess. Repent. Praise.