

The Sinner's Prayer
Psalm 51

Turn to Psalm 51. We are nearly done our series on Psalms. At this point I'm thinking two more psalms after this one today. A comment on Psalms as a whole: The book of Psalms works like this: the different experiences of God's people are different places on a map.

There's a place on the map of confidence in God, a place of disappointment with God, a place of thankfulness to God, a place of anger at other people, a place of sadness, a place of hunger for God, a place of worship to God and praise to God.

All of these are different places on a map; the different parts of the map are different life situations in which we find ourselves. God is at the center of the map, but in these different places we don't know the way to God. How do we go to God from that experience?

Each psalm is a *pathway* to God. Each different part of the map has a *pathway* to God. Whatever our life situation, our experience, there is a *road* from that part of the map. The psalms, each one, is its own *road* to God, or perhaps a *guide*. But the psalms do not just take us to God.

These roads, these guides, teach us. As we use that road, that is, as we pray that psalm, we find ourselves saying things to God about him and about ourselves that we didn't know. So we don't just find God, we also understand God better, and ourselves, and what it means to be his people.

Psalm 51 is a prayer of confession. As we pray it, we don't just confess our sin, we learn about God, we learn how to talk to God about our sin, we learn about sin and about ourselves, and how relationship with God works when we sin. And saying those things to God changes us, saying those things to God strengthens and deepens our relationship to God.

We can get to God without the map, without the Psalms, just charging through the bush. We'll find him and He'll be there and meet us, for sure. But there are things you can learn from a good map, from a good guide, that just we won't get otherwise. God gave us these guides.

God wants a relationship with people on every part of the map, every part of human experience. So there are psalms for all the major situations of life. God wants relationship. He wants to be our God, and us to be his people. One of the ways he brings us to him is through Psalms.

Now to Psalm 51. It is a prayer of confession. The heading mentions David's sin with Bathsheba. These headings are early tradition, I honestly don't know how reliable they are. For the most part I take the psalm on its own, without that, and will approach this psalm like that too.

This psalm is a prayer of someone who knows they have sinned against God. It is not clear to me from the psalm if the person is confessing one serious sin, or if the person has been a sinner all along and is confessing a lifetime of sins. This psalm works either way, it seems to me.

We'll go over verses 1-4 with particular care, because the main ideas are clear in verses 1-4. Then we'll move a little faster through the rest.

¹*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion wipe away my transgressions.*

²*Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

This prayer asks four things of God, more or less the same thing said four ways: 1, have mercy on me; 2, wipe away (the stain of) my transgressions; 3, wash away all iniquity (all of it!); 4, cleanse me from my sin. Have mercy, God - wipe away - wash away - cleanse me.

Why will God do this? *According to your unfailing love, your hesed, your covenant love, your loyal family love.* The person praying this is already a part of God's covenant people, as we are. One of the faithful is confessing like this.

This is important – why will God do clean us? To what does the sinner appeal? *Your unfailing love, O God, your great compassion.* Because of your unfailing love, O God, and your great compassion, have mercy on me, wipe away my sins, wash it all away, cleanse me.

We appeal to God's love for his people, and his compassion. I thought to myself, "wow, can God just do that? Have mercy and wipe away sins, because of his great compassion?" And in this psalm, the answer is "yes, certainly yes."

I do not tell God of my obedience in the past, or how much I love God. The composer of this prayer had obeyed God in the past, and shown devotion to God, but that does not belong in this conversation. The only reason here for God to act is his unfailing love, his great compassion.

³*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.*

I know what I have done, I have done wrong, God, there is no doubt about what I did, and I cannot think about anything else. All I can see is my sin, it is there all the time.

We don't say to God, "maybe what I did wasn't really that bad, God. I can hardly remember it, God." No, don't come to God like that. *I know my transgression, and my sin is always before me.*

We don't say, "Here is how it happened, God, here is why I sinned." No, in this prayer it does not matter why. We say this: "I know what I did, I cannot forget it, I sinned against you."

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict, and justified when you judge.

Strictly speaking this is never the case. When we sin we damage ourselves, and we damage others. It might take time to affect others, but we injure ourselves immediately, and it time it will always touch others. But at the center it is not about ourselves or others.

At the center it is about us and God. He created us, he made us in his image to worship him and enjoy him and honour him with our lives. And by sinning we defy our Maker and our God. *Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.*

David had certainly sinned massively against Bathsheba and Uriah both. But when Nathan the prophet confronted David, he replied, *I have sinned against the LORD.* 2 Samuel 12.

A common morality these days says that if no one is hurt, it is okay, no harm done so no sin. That is the morality of atheists, do not connect that to the God of the Bible. Hurting people offends God, make no mistake. But it is not the definition of sin in the Scripture. Sin is going against how God called us to live.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict, and justified when you judge.

“When you say I’ve done evil, O God, you are right. When you sentence me to judgement, O God, you are just and fair.” I’m not sure I’ve ever said that to God in a confession, and I don’t want to say it. But it is part of this prayer.

By the way, there are six or seven main kinds of psalms, according to the experts. Psalm 51 does not fit into any of those. By the normal categories, it “defies classification.” It is one of a kind.

First four verses again:

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, wipe away my transgressions.

² Wash away all my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict, and justified when you judge.

This psalm is honest and humble. The prayer does not grovel, though. “O God, I am the worst person ever, I’m so disgusting, I am just scum and filthy trash, how can you even look at me.” There is nothing like that in this psalm. Don’t talk like that to yourself, don’t talk like that to God. He’s not interested, that is not the way to confess sin.

Our enemy the accuser takes our healthy distress about our sin, and he adds a self-disgust that God never intended, and that does not come from God. We've heard his lie so often we can no longer tell the difference between healthy sorrow about our sin, and the lie that we should despise ourselves and that we are putrid to God, completely unattractive to him.

You and I are not worse sinners than the composer of Psalm 51, and the people who have used this guide to God for 3,000 years. Therefore, do not believe anything worse about yourself than what is actually stated in this psalm. Don't say it to yourself, and don't say it to God. It's a lie.

Truth: We've sinned, we done evil, we've offended God, we are distressed and discouraged, we need his love and compassion to clean us. "Have mercy O God, and wash away all my iniquity."

Vv16-17 – I want now to go to the near the end of the psalm.

¹⁶ *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*

¹⁷ *My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*

Hebrews 10:4 says that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. But our psalm hints at that also, and some other places in the OT. When there was serious sin in the OT, they did not offer a sacrifice. They did just as this psalm, they asked God for mercy.

When Solomon built the temple, he offered many sacrifices to dedicate it. But back in the wilderness, when Israel worshipped the golden calf, and God was ready to destroy Israel, there were no sacrifices to take away Israel's sin. Moses just begged God to be merciful and compassionate. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for Uriah to be killed, he did not offer any sacrifice to get forgiveness. He just confessed his sin, like this psalm.

Easter Sunday was one week ago. *Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures*, it says in 1 Corinthians 15. There is one sacrifice for sins, and it was our Lord Jesus himself, now with scars in his hands and his feet.

Father and Son arranged that between them: the Son would die for our sins, so that God could have mercy on us according to his unfailing love; so that according to his great compassion, he could wipe away the stain of our transgressions." God did that so he could forgive.

What is our part? What did God ask from an OT believer, and it will still be true.

¹⁶ *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*

¹⁷ *My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*

My sacrifice, O God, is a heart that's troubled about my sin. I am sad and discouraged about my sin. My sacrifices, O God, are a heart that's troubled, and a spirit that's sad and discouraged about my sin. I bring these offerings to you, O God, and you will not despise them." There is a quiet solid confidence at the end of v17. "O God, you will not turn away from these offerings."

We will go through the rest of the psalm more quickly. Verses 5-9:

⁵ *Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*

⁶ *Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place.*

⁷ *Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*

⁸ *Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.*

⁹ *Hide your face from my sins and wipe away all my iniquity.*

“God, I have been sinful a long time, I have been sinful as long as I can remember.” And then the prayer asks for four kinds of mercy again, much like the first four: V7: 1, cleanse me; 2, wash me; v9: 3, hide your face from my sins; 4, wipe away all my iniquity.

Verses 10-12 ask God for healing of our hearts and spirits. When we sin we damage ourselves, we twist and cripple our souls and hearts. We need more than just forgiveness, more than guilt removed. We need to be healed. Our minds – souls – hearts – spirits need help from God.

¹⁰ *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

¹¹ *Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me.*

¹² *Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

“Create in me a pure heart.” That’s what these lines are about. “My heart is not pure, O God, and I cannot make it pure. If it will be pure at all, it will be your work as a Creator. Create in me a pure heart. My spirit is not right, it is not faithful to you, and I cannot make it right. Renew a right spirit within me.”

“Don’t throw me out, O God. I need your Holy Spirit to give me a holy spirit. I need your Holy Spirit to make my spirit holy. Renew me, restore me O God, create in me a pure heart.” Sinners need more than forgiveness. We need healing, and confessing sin includes asking for that.

And now near the end, we have the common vow of the psalms. What will we do when God answers our prayer and has mercy on his, and restores to us the joy of our salvation? We will speak to his praise!

¹³ *Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.*

¹⁴ *Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.*

¹⁵ *Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.*

“I will teach transgressors your ways,” which here means “I will urge sinners to ask for mercy and healing as I have just done.” “My tongue will sing of your righteousness; my mouth will declare your praise.”

¹⁸ *May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem.*

¹⁹ *Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Commentators all think someone added verses 18-19 later, the years after the Babylonians but before the temple was rebuilt under Ezra. For another example of this, the last verse of Psalm 72 says *This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse*. That was almost certainly not a part of the original psalm, but it is now. (And the heading of Psalm 72 says “Of Solomon,” so we’re not sure what to make of that either.)

So we will take it that the original prayer ended at verse 17. ¹⁶ *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.* ¹⁷ *My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*

Prayer:

Have mercy on us, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, wipe out our transgressions. Wash away all our iniquity, and cleanse us from our sin. For we know our transgressions, and our sin is always before us.

Against you, you only, have we sinned, and done what is evil in your sight. When you say we've done evil, O God, you are right. When you sentence us to judgement, you are just and fair. We have been sinful as long as we can remember.

Our sacrifices, O God, are hearts that are troubled, and spirits that are sad and discouraged about our sins. We bring these offerings to you, O God, and we know you will not despise them. We know you will not turn away.

We give you thanks for your Son Jesus, who died for our sins, so you could have compassion on us and answer prayers like this.

*Our hearts are not pure, O God. Create in us pure hearts. Our spirits are not faithful to you; renew our spirits. May **your** Holy Spirit give **us** a holy spirit. Make our spirits holy.*

Then we will tell others to turn back to you. Restore to us the joy of your salvation, and our tongues will sing of your righteousness. Open our lips, Lord, and our mouths will declare your praise. Amen.