

"Renew a Right Spirit Within Me"

Psalm 51

Psalm 51 is, perhaps second only to Psalm 23, one of the most well-known, most read, and most preached of all the psalms. Its depth and richness are such that no single message could ever exhaust its truths. In this particular study, we will consider it from the perspective of a sinner – not merely one who has never known God, but a child of God who has fallen into sin and broken fellowship with Him. This is a psalm of restoration; a prayer to be made right with God again.

The superscription (title) ties this psalm to a very specific and painful moment in David's life. Most theologians agree that this psalm was written after the prophet Nathan confronted David with the words, "Thou art the man" (2 Samuel 12:1-13). The weight of David's sorrow is unmistakable throughout the psalm. But equally unmistakable is the mercy and forgiveness of God.

Long before David ever held a crown, before he ever stepped onto a battlefield or sat on a throne, God said something remarkable about him: *"The Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart"* (1 Samuel 13:14). That statement, which is later repeated in Acts 13:22, has echoed through history as a description of what God desires most in a man or woman: a heart that desires to please Him and walk with Him.

Acts 13:22

²² And when he had removed him [King Saul], he raised up unto them David to be their king; to whom also he gave testimony, and said, I have found David the *son* of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will.

But then we come to Psalm 51, and it seems like everything has unraveled. David has fallen into catastrophic sin: adultery, deception, and murder. He's

crushed by the weight of his own sin, as we should be by ours, no matter how great or small that sin might be.

David was a man after God's own heart not because he never sinned, but because when he did, his heart could still be broken over it. He didn't excuse it or try to justify it, but instead He brought it to the Lord.

If you've ever wondered whether you can still be used by God after you've failed; if you've ever wrestled with guilt or cried out in the night for forgiveness; this psalm is for you. It's not just a confession – it's a pathway to cleansing, restoration, and renewed fellowship with God.

David's story didn't end with Bathsheba. After deep repentance, he was restored, but like all of us, he wasn't restored to perfection (that doesn't happen until we get to heaven). Years later, he sinned again by numbering the people, a decision rooted in pride and self-reliance. But what we see in that later failure is just as important: the same heart that once cried, *"Have mercy upon me, O God..."* (Psalm 51:1) now says again, *"I have sinned greatly in that I have done"* (2 Sam. 24:10). His heart was still tender, still reachable, still quick to repent. Restoration after Bathsheba didn't mean David would never fail again, but it meant he would never be content to live out of fellowship with God again. He had learned the beauty of forgiveness and he knew how to come back when he strayed.

In this psalm, we not only find heartfelt repentance but also a foreshadowing of the work of Christ. Through His shed blood, Jesus did not merely cover sin, He removed it. Psalm 51 reminds us that although sin still separates us from God in terms of fellowship, even for the believer, no sin is so great that God's grace cannot restore. That is the heart of this psalm: great sin met by greater mercy.

I. A PRAYER OF GREAT CONFESSION – vs. 1-3

I want to make a point here on the use of imperatives

in this psalm ("have mercy upon me," "wash me," "create in me," etc.). Psalm 51 contains one of the highest concentrations of imperatives in the entire book of Psalms (between 14 and 16, depending on how they're counted) especially remarkable given its relatively short length. But unlike other psalms where imperatives call the people to worship or praise, here David directs nearly every petition to God Himself. He pleads for mercy, cleansing, renewal, and restoration – not with a tone of command, but with the desperation of a man broken over his sin. In the Hebrew language, these imperatives express dependence rather than demand. They are bold appeals grounded in God's covenant mercy, not presumptuous orders. David knows he cannot fix himself and casts himself wholly on the mercy and action of God. This structure of urgent, faith-filled pleas sets Psalm 51 apart as a uniquely personal and intense prayer of repentance.

- It's like a drowning man crying out, 'Save me!' It's an imperative – but it's not a command; it's a plea for rescue. That's how David speaks here.

A. He pleads according to God's character – vs. 1a-b

David doesn't begin with his sin, as we most often do, but with God's mercy, the foundation of all true confession.

1. "Have mercy upon me" (חֲנּוּן) – this is grace for the guilty.
2. "According to thy lovingkindness" (חֶסֶד) – God's steadfast, covenant love; the loyal love He shows to His people.
3. "According to the multitude of thy tender mercies" (רַחֲמִים) – literally refers to the

compassion a mother feels for the child in her womb; that deep, instinctive, protective love.

B. He acknowledges the depth of his sin – vs. 1c-3

1. "Sin" (חַטָּאת) – to miss the mark (very similar to "sin" - ἁμαρτάνω - as found in Rom. 3:23). This is the most basic, most frequent of the Hebrew words for "sin." It covers both intentional and unintentional sin.
2. "Transgressions" (פְּשָׁע) – willful rebellion. This isn't just slipping up; it's deliberate defiant rebellion against God's authority.
 - a) David is said to "acknowledge" his sin. In verse 3, he says *"I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me."* The Hebrew word for "acknowledge" (יָדַע) means to know intimately or experientially. David isn't just intellectually aware of his sin; he's living with the constant, painful awareness of what he's done.
 - b) The phrase *"ever before me"* uses a Hebrew word (תָּמִיד) for "ever" which means continually or perpetually. David is saying that his sin isn't something he can forget or push to the back of his mind. It's a constant presence in his consciousness. This helps us understand that true conviction involves ongoing awareness of our moral failure, not just a momentary acknowledgment.
3. "Iniquity" (עֲוֹן) – as noted in a previous study on the psalms, this is often considered the most weighty and theologically severe of the three primary Hebrew words for sin (all three found in these three verses).
 - a) It carries the idea of moral distortion or twisting.

It's not just missing the mark (as in the word for "sin"), but corrupting what's right.

Isaiah 5:20

²⁰ Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!

b) It includes both the act and the consequence:

- (1) Unlike "sin" and "transgression," "iniquity" often includes the guilt, burden, and punishment that follow.
- (2) In Leviticus, guilt offerings are associated with "sin" (חַטָּאת) because of the ongoing liability before God.

Exodus 34:7 [the progression of severity seems to be important in this verse]

⁷ Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear *the guilty*; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth *generation*.

c) It's frequently associated with corporate/national judgment.

Daniel 9:13

¹³ As *it is* written in the law of Moses, all this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth.

- David doesn't minimize what he's done. He doesn't just say he missed the mark (*sin*), or that he rebelled (*transgression*). He says he has committed iniquity, the

kind of moral perversion that leaves lasting consequences. He uses the strongest word available to describe the full weight of his guilt.

C. He expresses his need for cleansing

Each plea for cleansing corresponds to a facet of sin. David seeks total cleansing, both spiritually, morally, and judicially.

1. "Blot out" (מָחָה) – vs. 1c-3

This word is used for erasing writing from a scroll or removing a stain. It's the idea of complete removal, as if the record of transgression never existed.

2. "Wash me thoroughly" (הָרַב כְּבִסְנִי) – vs. 2a

a) "Wash me" – this is intensive. It's a picture of beating clothes against rocks to remove deep, ingrained stains. This is not a ceremonial sprinkle. It's a vivid, physical image of labor-intensive scrubbing to remove deep defilement.

This is frequently used in Levitical contexts as part of cleansing from defilement.

Leviticus 11:25

²⁵ And whosoever beareth *ought* of the carcase of them shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the even.

Leviticus 13:6

⁶ And the priest shall look on him again the seventh day: and, behold, *if* the plague *be* somewhat dark, *and* the plague spread not in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean: it *is* *but* a scab: and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean.

Leviticus 14:8

⁸ And he that is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and wash himself in water, that he may be clean: and after that he shall come into the camp, and shall tarry abroad out of his tent seven days.

b) "Thoroughly" – "keep scrubbing until the stain is gone."

(1) This is connected to "iniquity," a word that implies lasting defilement. Because of that, his cleansing must be intense and thorough.

(2) He's not asking for a single act of mercy, but a complete spiritual purging, however long it takes and however hard it is.

➤ When David says, "wash me thoroughly," he's admitting that his sin runs deep. He's not asking God for a quick spiritual rinse; he's pleading to be scrubbed, laundered, and scoured until every stain is gone. Real repentance wants not just to be forgiven, but to be changed.

3. "Cleanse me" (טָהַר) – vs. 2b

This is a word used for ceremonial purification, often in the context of making something ritually clean. It's the most comprehensive of the three words, suggesting complete purification.

Conclusion to this point: David's confession is given the way it is specifically and intentionally. He appeals to three aspects of God's mercy, acknowledges three distinct dimensions of sin, and pleads for three corresponding acts of cleansing. His prayer shows not

only deep sorrow, but theological clarity: he knows who God is, what sin is, and what grace he needs. True confession doesn't minimize sin; it magnifies God's mercy and seeks full restoration.

II. A PRAYER OF GREAT CONVICTION – vs. 4-6

A.

III. A PRAYER OF GREAT CLEANSING – vs. 7

IV. A PRAYER OF GREAT CONTRITION (BROKENNESS) – vs. 8-11

V. A PRAYER OF GREAT CONSECRATION – vs. 12-19