

# How to Pray about your Sin

Psalm 51 - Part One

Sermon for May 21, 2023

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We have been going through a sermon series called: "How the Psalms Teach us to Pray."

Today we are looking at the first half of Psalm 51.

The original Hebrew manuscript includes these words of introduction:

"For the director of music.

A psalm of David.

When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba."

This introduction refers to a story from David's life, recorded in 2 Samuel chapter 11.

I want to read this for context, before we look at Psalm 51.

2 Samuel 11:2-4 says:

2 "It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful.

3 And David sent and inquired about the woman.

And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?"

4 So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her.

(Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.)

Then she returned to her house."

As you just heard, King David saw a beautiful married woman.

He wanted her, and he took her.

He used his power and position to commit adultery with Bathsheba.

Soon she became pregnant, and David knew his sin would be exposed.

He tried to conceal his sin by bringing Uriah back from war, to sleep with his wife.

But David's plan didn't work, so he had Uriah killed in battle.

David hoped that killing Uriah would conceal his sin.

But God knows everything, and all sin is an offense against him.

God sent the prophet Nathan to David, to confront David and invite him to repentance.

All sin damages our relationships vertically with God, internally with our soul, and horizontally with other people.

That's why God invited David to repent, so he could restore all those relationships.

David wrote Psalm 51 as a prayer of repentance after Nathan confronted him.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, from Psalm 51:1-9.

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out 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.
- 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 blot out all my iniquity.

*Together we read Isaiah 40:8:*

*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.*

## **Please pray with me.**

Father in heaven, our sin breaks fellowship with you, and hurts the people around us.

Thank you for showing us our moral failures, so we can come to you for healing.

Help us understand how to pray when we have failed, so we can be forgiven and healed.

We pray in the name of Jesus our Savior, amen.

Let's look through these verses together in order.

In verses 1 and 2, David begins his prayer by asking for forgiveness:

- 1 "Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin."

David does not appeal to his good deeds as the reason God should forgive him.

David believes that God will forgive him only because God is full of mercy.

David's incredible honesty in this psalm is motivated by God's "unfailing love" and "great compassion."

Let me tell you about Al Capone, one of the worst criminals in American history.

In my hometown of Chicago, Capone made millions of dollars from prostitution, drugs, and gambling.

He was responsible for about 200 murders.

But Capone only served 11 years in prison.

Do you think that was enough time to pay for all his sins?

I don't think so.

This is what Al Capone asked to be written on his tombstone when he was buried at age 48:

"My Jesus, Mercy."

I have no idea if Al Capone actually trusted in Jesus for salvation before he died.

There is no written evidence that Capone humbly repented of his sins like King David did.

But I think Capone's tombstone tells us one thing:

He understood how serious his sins were.

Capone knew that nothing on earth could wash away all his iniquity.

He could spend 11 years in prison, or 22 years, or 99 years, and it would not cleanse him of sin.

Why?

Because sin is more than breaking the laws of our government.

Sin is rebellion against our holy God, the Creator and King of the Universe.

Forgiveness is not possible until we are honest about that.

Listen to verse 3 again:

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

David does not attempt to deceive himself or conceal his wicked behavior.

True repentance names specific sins specifically.

What is the benefit of being completely honest about your sin?

When you confess more, you receive more grace.

If you want to know the full height and extent of God's love, you have to be honest about the full depth and extent of your sin.

However, human beings are very good at self-deception.

We rarely do something that we admit is evil.

Instead, we convince ourselves we are doing something good.

For example, imagine you work in a restaurant for low pay.

Three times you asked your boss for a pay raise, and he always said no.

You are having trouble paying your rent, and your boss lives in a nice big house.

One day you take \$100 from the cash register.

You rationalize your theft, saying to yourself:

"My boss makes a lot of money, and he is selfish.

The extra \$100 won't hurt him, but it will help me a lot.

I work very hard, and I deserve the extra money this month."

You take the \$100 because you convince yourself it is fair and good.

Maybe David did something like that with Bathsheba.

Maybe he thought to himself:

"She is alone, because her husband is always gone with the army.

She is lonely, and I am lonely.

It is a good thing to help each other cure our loneliness."

When you rationalize your sin you insult God, because you're acting as if your opinions or feelings can overrule God's law.

That's one reason David says in verse 4:

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."

Who did David sin against?

He sinned against Bathsheba when he sent servants to take her and bring her to David's bed.

David sinned against Uriah when he committed adultery with his wife, and had him killed.

However, all sin is an offense against God our creator.

When David broke his marriage vows, he also broke God's covenant of marriage.

When David murdered Uriah, he killed a man made in God's image.

When David lied to himself and others, he became an ally of Satan the prince of lies and enemy of God.

People in the modern world are uncomfortable with the idea of sin.

They prefer to believe that bad behavior is a result of ignorance or sickness.

But why did apartheid exist for so long in South Africa?

Why did the minority white population oppress and subjugate the black native population?

Was it because those white men lacked education to see the humanity of their black neighbors?

No.

The root causes of apartheid were the greed and pride in sinful human hearts.

Pastor Eugene Peterson says:

*"there is apparently something wrong with us, that the professors and physicians are helpless to do anything about.*

That something is sin."

We attempt to erase sin with education, medicine, or legislation.

But the world is still plagued by greed, sexual sin, and oppression.

We want to solve spiritual problems without the Holy Spirit.

We want to cure the sickness of our soul without help from heaven.

To solve our deep-rooted sin problem, we need is to be fully honest with ourselves, each other, and God.

That is what David models for us in Psalm 51.

Now let's look at verses 5 and 6:

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."

I know that babies are adorable and precious.

They are also born with self-centered hearts that resent authority.

Theologians call this "original sin."

If you disagree that children are born with sinful hearts, you should spend time with 2- and 4-year-old children.

Please explain to me how they became so self-centered!

Did someone sit down with the 2-year-old children, and teach them to say "no!" to their parents?

Where did that defiance come from?

Their own hearts.

Did someone teach the 4-year-old children to scream "mine!" when other children touch their toys?

Where did that selfishness come from?

Their own hearts.

The doctrine of original sin doesn't excuse our guilt.

The point is that our problem is planted deeply inside of us.

There is no quick or easy fix for a heart that has been self-absorbed since birth.

Now let's look at the most-important line in Psalm 51, in verse 7:

7 "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;

wash me, and I will be whiter than snow."

David does not say: "I will repay my debts to you God, then you can forgive me."

Instead, David asks God to do what God alone can do.

David asks God to cleanse him--"cleanse" means to wash deeply and thoroughly.

This is a picture of a hyssop branch.

Long ago, this plant was sometimes used as a broom or paintbrush.

David is remembering what God did in Egypt when he saved his people from slavery.

Pharaoh would not release his Hebrew slave laborers, so God sent the angel of death to kill the first-born of every household.

But the angel was told to look for a sign on the homes of God's people.

Listen to Exodus 12:21-23.

21 "Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them:

"Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb.

22 Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe.

None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning.

23 When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians,

he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway;

and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down."

Why did God choose blood as the sign?

Blood represented the life of the animal.

When the throat of the lamb was cut, blood poured out, and it died.

God accepted the life of a sinless animal as a substitute for the life of sinful people.

The sacrifice of blood was an act of atonement, to wash away guilt.

Leviticus 17:11 says it this way:

11 "for the life of the body is in its blood.

I have given you the blood on the altar to purify you, making you right with the Lord.

It is the blood, given in exchange for a life, that makes purification possible."

On that deadly night in Egypt, the blood of lambs was given in exchange for Hebrew lives.

For hundreds of years after this, God's people sacrificed animals for the forgiveness of their sins.

When David asked God to cleanse him with hyssop, he asked for a substitute victim.

David asked God to forgive his terrible sins through the blood of another.

We face the same situation today, my friends.

God's judgment will fall on you or on Jesus.

You need to decide if you want to stand in front of God's judgment throne alone.

What will you say to God, to explain or excuse your many sins?

There's nothing you can say.

If you want to be forgiven, there is only one thing to do.

You must pray verse 7, and pray it to Jesus:

7 "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;

wash me, and I will be whiter than snow."

God knew that the blood of animal sacrifices could never completely or permanently remove the stain of sin.

Our human souls are polluted by sin, therefore human blood is required to remove the stain.

That's why God himself came to earth, to live a sinless life and die a sacrificial death.

In a few minutes we will come to this table, to eat the bread of life and drink the cup of forgiveness.

This sacrament of communion reminds us that Jesus is our Passover Lamb.

Jesus laid down his life willingly.

He died as our substitute, offering his blood in our place.

Jesus explained this when he initiated the sacrament of communion in Matthew 26:26-28.

26 "While they were eating, Jesus took bread,

and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying:

"Take and eat; this is my body."

27 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying:

"Drink from it, all of you.

28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

The Lord's Table is God's answer to David's prayer of confession in Psalm 51.

Jesus lived 33 years on this earth, and never committed a single sin.

Only the uncontaminated blood of the one sinless man could permanently remove the sins of millions.

In Tibet, nomadic people lose many sheep to wolves.

The wolves can kill dozens of sheep in one night.

The clever Tibetan shepherds dig pits to catch the wolves.  
Into the pit the shepherds put one young sheep as a sacrifice, to attract a wolf.  
The wolf kills the lamb, and then the shepherds kill the wolf.  
The blood of one lamb is offered as a substitute and sacrifice to save the rest of the sheep.

Jesus the Lamb of God was willing to climb down into the pit of darkness and death.

**He offered his life as your substitute, because he loves you.**

Do you believe that?

If you can be honest with yourself and with God about your sinful heart, then joy and eternal life can be yours.

Peace and healing are possible, when you seek mercy from the God of unfailing love.

That is why he deserves our worship, our obedience, and our devotion.

I think the most-appropriate thing we can do now is stand and confess our sins together.

Then after we sing the Doxology we will come to the Lord's Table, to celebrate the forgiveness we have received.

Most holy and merciful Father, we confess our sin to you and to one another.

We have sinned with our thoughts, words, and deeds.

*ALL: Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We have not loved you with our whole heart, mind, and strength.

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

*ALL: Have mercy on us, O Lord.*

We have not forgiven others, as we have been forgiven.

*ALL: We confess to you, O Lord.*

We confess to you our anger, pride, envy, and hypocrisy.

We have done wrong, and failed to do right.

*ALL: Please forgive us, dear Lord.*

We cannot pay the penalty for our sin.

We need a substitute sacrifice.

*ALL: Thank you Jesus, Lamb of God, for dying in our place.*

Restore to us the joy of our salvation, and a desire to obey you in all things.

*ALL: Send us to tell all the world about your great mercy and compassion.*

In the name of Jesus our Savior, Amen.