

ECF 2nd December 2018 Psalm 51 A Prayer For Mercy

Each year, about this time, thousands of kids write letters to Santa, asking for what they would like for Christmas. Many will ask for all the usual kinds of presents, but some will ask for really big things, no matter how unlikely they seem. Like

- Samantha who wanted a little sister, but not right now, but in 2 years' time.
- Or another girl who wanted 5 feet long hair, as well as a DSi and an elf.
- Or the kid who in addition to a remote control truck wanted Santa to make his brother nicer.
- Or even more impossible, Hunter who wanted a rainbow unicorn that poops ice cream.
- And last of all the kid who wanted to be turned into a dragon!

It is crazy what kids ask for Christmas. But it isn't just kids who can ask for outrageous gifts. In Psalm 51, David prayed for something outrageous. He prayed for mercy, when he deserved only condemnation. Psalm 51:

"Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

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

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

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

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

⁶Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

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

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

⁹Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

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

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

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

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.

¹⁴Save me from bloodguilt, O God,
the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

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

¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸In your good pleasure make Zion prosper;
build up the walls of Jerusalem.

¹⁹Then there will be righteous sacrifices,
whole burnt offerings to delight you;
then bulls will be offered on your altar."

1. A Terrible Sin

David used here the same three words to describe his wrongdoing, as we saw last week in Psalm 32. He talked about:

- “My transgressions,” Psalm 51:1, his rebelling against God’s authority.
- “My iniquity.” Psalm 51:2, his straying from God’s path,
- “My sin,” Psalm 51:2, his falling short of God’s standard.

But unlike with Psalm 32, this time we know what David had done wrong. The introduction to this psalm says that it was written: “When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”

This is one of the darkest episodes of David’s life. David should have been leading his people out to battle, but instead he stayed home and sent his army to fight. Then he saw Bathsheba bathing, and instead of turning away from this married woman, he sent for her and committed adultery with her. He was able to do this because Uriah, her husband was a soldier on the front line in David’s army. David slept with Uriah’s wife when Uriah was risking his life to fight for David!

David thought that was the end of it. But then he heard that Bathsheba was pregnant. As Uriah was away from home, it was obviously not his. So what would David do?

Well, to try and cover-up his sin, he brought Uriah back from the front line. But because of his strong sense of honour, Uriah refused to go home to his wife while his brothers-in-arms were out in the fields.

Finally, David sent Uriah back to the battle, with a sealed letter instructing his commander to arrange for him to be killed in action.

Then David quickly married Bathsheba and claimed her son as his own. David had committed adultery and murder and for a whole year, it looked like he’d got away with it.

But then God sent his prophet Nathan to David with a powerful message: “Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own.” 2 Samuel 12:9 The game was up. David had covered his sin from others, but God had seen it all.

2. An Honest Confession

So how would David respond now? Would he continue to try to cover up his guilt and hide from God? Well, no. Instead he responded with this honest confession: “I have sinned against the Lord.” 2 Samuel 12:13

And in this psalm, David expanded on this confession in 5 ways that help us to understand the true depth of his sinfulness.

a) Sin is Distressing

Firstly, he said, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.” Psalm 51:3

David had tried to forget his sin and move on. But he wasn’t able. It stuck in his mind and he suffered for it. Perhaps, this is what we saw in Psalm 32:3 when he wrote: “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” Sin is distressing.

b) Sin is Against God

Secondly, David said, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” Psalm 51:4

Some people object to this because they think that David was trying to dodge his responsibility of sinning against Uriah, Bathsheba, her child and against the nation as a whole. But that’s not what is going on here. Instead David was facing up to the ultimate reason why his sin was so serious. That is, because it was against God.

Hurting other people is awful, it is terrible. But that is not the full horror of sin. Instead, because of the supreme value of God, the worst aspect of sin is that its an attack on him. It is an offence against the one who is worthy of all the glory and all the honour in this world.

It was understanding this that stopped Joseph from sinning when seduced by Potiphar’s wife. He responded, “How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” Genesis 39:9 The true seriousness of sin is that it is against God!

c) Sin is Wrong

And so thirdly, David here didn’t try and excuse his actions. He didn’t say anything about his overwhelming desires or the pressures of his position. He simply said, “You are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.” Psalm 51:4

David admitted his actions were wrong, and that God was just when he condemned them. Before a holy God, we have no excuse, no mitigating factors, nobody else to blame. We can only say that we are wrong.

d) Sin is Lifelong

Fourthly, David said that he had always been like this. **“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”** Psalm 51:5 These actions might have been particularly horrific, but David recognized that they were not really out of character for him. Instead right from the start, he’d a sinful nature that rebelled against God and his standard.

That’s why we don’t have the right to condemn others in their sin. The shocking reality is that the same root of sin, the same sinful nature is in all of us. And so, **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** Romans 3:23

e) Sin is Disobedience

And that’s the case, despite the fact that God has been speaking his truth into this world. Lastly, David said, **“Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.”** Psalm 51:6

David knew that God was looking for integrity and purity of heart. He’d read in God’s Word that he was to serve God with all his heart, mind and strength. And yet, still he’d disobeyed. He had refused to obey, and instead followed his sinful desires.

So this is the depth of David’s sinfulness. This is the horror of his wickedness. He was distressed, because he had sinned against God and done what was wrong, and he realised that this was just the latest in a life of disobedience before God. And in of ourselves, we are exactly the same. We too stand guilty before God.

3. An Incredible Request

And yet despite this, David began this psalm with the most remarkable request: **“Have mercy on me, O God.”** Psalm 51:1

David stood guilty and deserving of judgement, and yet, he asked for mercy. And not even just a little bit. David asked for an incredible gift.

a) Forgiveness

First of all, he pleaded for forgiveness. He used three pictures of this to emphasise his desperate longing to be right with God again.

“Blot out my transgressions.” Psalm 51:1 Like deleting the record of a crime, or wiping out a debt from a ledger, David longed for his rebellion against God’s authority to be erased.

“Wash away all my iniquity.” Psalm 51:2 Like washing dirt out of our clothes, David wanted his straying from God’s path to be washed away.

“Cleanse me from my sin.” Psalm 51:2 Like the priests who would perform a purification ritual, David wanted to be cleansed from his falling short of God’s standard.

And to emphasis his longing for this, David repeated these requests in v7 and 9. But this time he developed the full impact of what he was asking for:

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

**Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.”** Psalm 51:7, 9

David was asking for nothing less than complete, full and total forgiveness. He wanted to be righteous in the sight of God.

b) Transformation

But that is not all. David was also asking for a complete transformation.

**“Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”** Psalm 51:10

David longed for a completely new beginning – with a new heart and a new spirit, one that would be committed to God and his will, one that would keep on going in the right direction and not fall back into the snare of sin.

c) Acceptance

And with this, he wanted to know that he would always be accepted into God's presence: "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." Psalm 51:11

Maybe this was such a real fear for David because he had seen King Saul lose the presence of God. Because of his disobedience, "The Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul." 1 Samuel 16:14 So David pleaded with God that this wouldn't happen to him.

d) Joy

And finally, David asked for renewed joy.

"Let me hear joy and gladness;

let the bones you have crushed rejoice...

Restore to me the joy of your salvation." Psalm 51:8, 12

David had been burdened with his guilt and weighed down by his sin. But now David asked to be filled with the joy of knowing that he was right with God, in communion with him. And David knew that there was no greater joy in life.

So this was David's request:

- Forgiveness of all of his sins
- Transformation of his heart and spirit
- Acceptance into God's presence
- Joy to fill his heart.

It was an incredible request from a man who was guilty of such a terrible sin. But even more incredibly, this is what David received. Yes, there were serious consequences to David's actions that stayed with his family for years - but his sin was forgiven. He was restored into his relationship with the Lord. Nathan told him, "The Lord has taken away your sin." 2 Samuel 12:13

And amazingly, this is what God wants us to enjoy today. We who like David stand guilty before a Holy God, who have sinned against him all our lives, rebelling against his authority, straying from his will, falling short of his standard – we can be completely forgiven.

- The promise of the New Covenant through Jesus is that "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Hebrews 8:12
- We can also experience a radical transformation: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" 2 Corinthians 5:17
- We can also know that we'll always be accepted into God's presence. God's promise to us is: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Hebrews 13:5
- And we can experience the filling of his joy as, "Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." 1 Peter 1:8–9

As incredible as it sounds, this is what God wants us to experience in our lives!

4. A Wonderful Foundation

But what right did David have to ask and receive this wonderful gift? Well, it was not based on his past achievements or successes. David did not bargain with God for this. He didn't try to earn this through works or sacrifice. In fact he said:

"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;

you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;

a broken and contrite heart,

O God, you will not despise." Psalm 51:16-17

And so that is how David came to God in this psalm. He came in brokenness, bringing nothing but his repentance and shame.

a) God's Love

And he simply asked for mercy on the basis of God's love: "According to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion." Psalm 51:1

This is the only basis that David had. This was the only ground that he could stand on. It was God's unfailing love and his great compassion to his people.

And it's the same for us. We've no right to demand God's mercy. We don't deserve it. We haven't earned it. We can only accept it as a loving gift of God's grace through Christ: ["Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions."](#) Ephesians 2:4-5

b) God's Provision

David didn't fully understand how God would provide this forgiveness through Christ. But there's a clue here that points to it, when David asked God to ["Cleanse me with hyssop."](#) Psalm 51:7

Hyssop is first mentioned in the Bible as the shrub used to apply the blood of the Passover Lamb to the top and sides of the door-frame of the Israelites' houses to save them from the final plague on the Egyptians. God's promise was, ["When I see the blood, I will pass over you."](#) Exodus 12:13

And this points forward to the ultimate Passover lamb who would lay down his life for sinners on the cross. Jesus is ["The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"](#) John 1:29

5. A Wholehearted Response

So David experienced God's amazing forgiveness that would be paid for through the blood of Jesus. But forgiveness was not the end of the process for David. This psalm ends with David's wholehearted response to it.

a) Evangelism

It included evangelism, as he promised: ["Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you."](#) Psalm 51:13

b) Praise

It also included praise as David promised to glorify God for his mercy: ["My tongue will sing of your righteousness... my mouth will declare your praise."](#) Psalm 51:14, 16

c) Fellowship

And it included fellowship, as David looked beyond his own needs and prayed for the community of God's people: ["In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem."](#) Psalm 51:18

And similarly for us, the experience of God's forgiveness in our lives should motivate us to:

- Tell others of God's grace in evangelism
- Celebrate God's glory in praise
- Build up God's people in fellowship.

Conclusion

This is the amazing news that we can celebrate with David today. Despite the awfulness of our sin, if we confess it before God and put our faith in Christ alone, then we can be fully forgiven, transformed, accepted and filled with the joy of God's salvation so that we be involved in building God's kingdom and glorifying his name.

Because of Christ, sinners like us can be completely clean! [Video: Clean by Natalie Grant](#)

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