

# Psalm 51 • The Biblical Definition of Repentance

## Introduction

“Oops I sinned, so I need to ask for forgiveness.” Is this the way it works for you? It’s really not what the Bible teaches. This Psalm of David reveals his thoughts and emotions about seeking to repent of his sin, which were actually capital crimes involving lying, adultery, murder, and enlisting the aid of others in the execution of same. It’s easy to rush through this Psalm and over-focus on some of the most quoted Scripture in the Bible. Don’t. As we examine each of David’s thoughts and actions, ask yourself, “Is this how I go about it?” You may find the answer to why some issues keep recurring in your life in spite of having brought them to the Lord many times before. You may simply be “venting” instead of “repenting”.

<sup>1</sup>Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;

According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.

<sup>2</sup>Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin.

<sup>3</sup>For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me.

<sup>4</sup>Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge.

<sup>5</sup>Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.

<sup>6</sup>Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.

<sup>7</sup>Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

<sup>8</sup>Make me to hear joy and gladness, Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.

<sup>9</sup>Hide Your face from my sins

## [Read v.1-4]

**Q: To what does David make his appeal? What attributes of God does he seek?**

A: “...according to Your lovingkindness; according to... Your compassion...” David is seeking grace and mercy.

**Q: What specifically does David want God to do?**

A: “...blot out my transgressions.” It’s the language associated with something that’s been written down in a book. Using only ink in those days, to “blot” something is the method of erasing or removing an entry. David is keenly aware that sin is recorded by God for future judgment but that it’s also within God’s power as King to expunge the record and grant a pardon.

**Q: David’s sins included adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband murdered to cover up his indiscretions so he could take her as his own wife. Yet to whom does David designate as the sole object of his actions?**

A: “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight.” The very definition of sin is failing to follow God’s commandments and Law. We may hurt or even involve others in our sin, but it can only be committed against God. David’s not just honest in his appeal to God but acknowledging from the outset that there is only one Source of mercy, the same Source that is directly offended by David’s actions. David therefore knows that God is “justified” and “blameless” in however He sees David as the result of his sins.

**Application:** Do you see sin as something that actually offends God and God alone? Do you see it as a personal break in your relationship with God? How do you attempt to repair the breach?

## [Read v.5-9]

**Q: Is David trying to pass on the blame in v.5, that because of man’s sinful nature he just couldn’t help himself?**

A: No, it’s more along the lines that David is confessing that his nature is even still now ready to commit sin, that the problem with sin is a continuing struggle and not actually limited to these specific sins in question, and all of this has revealed to him personally his true nature. The issue for David is compounded by v.6 in that David knows God requires the struggle with sin to be resolved by embracing His truth and wisdom from the very inner self in which sin originates. So David is really saying that he knows he is without excuse, that man knows from birth that he has trouble with sin and that God requires man to deal with it.

And blot out all my iniquities.

**Q: What was the very first recorded biblical use of hyssop?**

A: It was used according to God's instructions to apply the blood of the Passover lamb around the doors of the houses of those that wanted the angel of death to pass by their household just before Israel was released by Egypt. (Exodus 12:21-22) This allowed judgment to pass them by.

**Q: How is hyssop used in Old Testament Law?**

1. To signify that a leper has been cleansed of his disease. (Leviticus 14:1-9)
2. To signify that a dwelling has been cleansed of disease. (Leviticus 14:48-57)
3. As part of the ritual sacrifice of the red heifer that is used to produce a special water used to remove impurity and to purify things from sin or consecrate them for the Lord's service. (Numbers 19:1-10)

David is admitting that sin has made him both impure and filthy, conditions unsuitable for the presence of God; he needs to be cleansed according to **GOD'S** ways—not man's—in order to be allowed back in His presence.

**Q: What is the result of purification at the hand of God?**

A: "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." David is not merely apologizing, but acknowledging that only God can restore him to God's presence, to a right relationship with Him. He is asking God to do in reality what the rituals only symbolize.

**Q: How does David describe the effect of God's having brought to David's attention the nature of his sins?**

A: "...bones which You have broken..." For David, the pain of sin—of failing God—is as real and devastating as any personal injury, and he knows that the only healing possible is from God, a pardon that would not simply ease the pain but would, like a prisoner in an electric chair that gets the last minute telephone call commuting his sentence, cause him to "hear joy and gladness".

**Q: What is different about David's second request for God to blot out his sin in v.9 from the first request in v.1?**

A: Whereas the first request is for "my transgression"—addressing the specific issues of sin at hand—the second request is for "all my iniquities", David having now brought his entire life before God acknowledging the need for total cleansing of all sin.

**Application:** *Is it possible to fixate on a single sin without bringing before God the problem of our entire sin nature? Do we realize that the occasion to bring specific sin before God is really the occasion to address **ALL** our sin and tendencies?*

## Application

1. David appeals to God's grace and mercy.
2. David acknowledges that sin is a personal issue with God alone.
3. David knows he needs to be cleansed—purified—from sin as it prevents his access to God.
4. David acknowledges the general nature of his predisposition to sin and recognizes that God has called him to overcome it.

Do you see that the biblical process of repentance involves more than just saying, "I'm sorry"? Do you approach repentance as one who is seeking never to duplicate the issue, or one just seeking a temporary pass until the next time? What is the right attitude and process that we should undertake?

## Observation

Whereas the first half of this Psalm seeks forgiveness and purification of sin, the second half seeks spiritual renewal.

### [Read v.10-13]

<sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.

<sup>11</sup>Do not cast me away from Your  
presence  
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from  
me.

<sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of Your salvation  
And sustain me with a willing spirit.

<sup>13</sup>Then I will teach transgressors Your  
ways,  
And sinners will be converted to You.

#### **Q: Why does David want "a clean heart" and "a steadfast spirit"?**

A: The biblical definition of a "clean" heart is a "pure" heart, completely rid of sin. Such a condition allows one to reside in God's presence. Steadfastness is sought so as to make these changes to his behavior permanent, to not repeat them, to always live according to God's ways.

#### **Q: Why is it that David wants "the joy of Your salvation" to be restored and not just to made to generally feel good or happy with life?**

A: Joy for the things of this life is fleeting and only temporary during the course of this life; salvation is the work of eternity that brings joy both in the assurance of the course of this life and the one to come.

#### **Q: Why does David ask for "a willing spirit"? Shouldn't he ask for wisdom or love?**

A: One cannot maintain purity from sin or steadfastness to His ways without being sustained by obedience that comes from a willing heart, soul, and mind. Love and wisdom are never suitable substitutes for obedience.

#### **Q: What can we conclude from v.13 as the biblical qualifications for a teacher or evangelist or even as a witness to others?**

A: They must first be living in a right, committed relationship with God themselves.

**Application:** Do we extend our request for forgiveness to include a request for renewal, even for the necessary changes to live differently going forward? Do we realize that the quality of our witness and service to others is affected by the consistency—or lack therein—of our walk, that we're "steadfast" for others as well as ourselves?

<sup>14</sup>Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.

<sup>15</sup>O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise.

<sup>16</sup>For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering.

<sup>17</sup>The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

<sup>18</sup>By Your favor do good to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem.

<sup>19</sup>Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices,

In burnt offering and whole burnt offering;

Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.

### **[Read v.14-17]**

#### **Q: What is the nature of David's crimes?**

A: First adultery, then murder, a capital crime demanding the death penalty referred to by David as "bloodguiltiness". Only a king can pardon a capital crime.

#### **Q: If forgiven by God the King of Creation, why would David promise to "sing of Your righteousness"? Shouldn't he promise to sing about God's mercy?**

A: God's desire is to impart righteousness to the ungodly, to do for those seeking forgiveness and mercy what they could never achieve through their own merit or work. David is speaking to an even higher character trait than mercy: God's entire work of salvation to reconcile the whole man and make him fit for God's presence and service.

#### **Q: There seems to be a lot of God's Law—particularly in the first five books of the Bible—devoted to rules, regulations, and practices regarding sacrifices? Why would David say "You do not delight in sacrifice" and "You are not pleased with burnt offering"?**

A: The most common misapplication of the sacrifices is the belief that the sacrifices themselves atone for or remove sin. They don't. They are intended to be the **END** of the process that first begins with "a broken and a contrite heart". Such a person recognizes not just sin within them but has the burning desire to be rid of sin permanently. The sacrifices were supposed to be a kind of public declaration that one is not just seeking to remove sin but to never engage in it again. If it doesn't begin with a change heart, it's just an empty ritual with no real meaning to God.

**Application:** *What is the degree of our sincerity in the course of asking God's forgiveness? Does it start with a changed heart and continue with seeking to sustain the changes going forward?*

### **[Read v.18-19]**

#### **Q: Given the context to this point, how does this closing fit in with David's prayer for repentance and renewal?**

A: This is an illustration of sanctification, the work of separating us exclusively to God, wholly devoted to Him, and living **IN** the world but not **OF** the world. Zion symbolizes all true followers gathered to serve in His city and temple, and the walls of Jerusalem represent His protection. Only if those that seek to live exclusively according to His ways are gathered together with the right heart will the offerings be presented as God really wants them—from a people wholly devoted to Him and to no other. The city then serves as an example to the rest of the world but while it's still in the world.

**Application:** *As we go through this process of repentance and renewal, are we seeking to be wholly and devoted to Him or merely seeking temporary protection from our bad feelings and emotions? Do we see the need to continue with the process of sanctification as the completing act of God's forgiveness? Are we truly repenting or just "venting"?*