

## A Brief Reflection on Psalm 51

This Psalm of David is one of the most read and most preached in the Psalter. Yet, I suspect that for all its familiarity, and for all the exposition of it over the centuries, there's more here than meets the eye. Most commentators say the Psalm has to do with confession of sin. Sure. That's there. But certain phrases here and there suggest to me that what David has done is pen a brief, albeit poetic, treatise on sin. I'll try here to develop this theme.

The context of course is David's sins with Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. And after being confronted by the prophet Nathan, David immediately acknowledged the wrong he'd committed. But David has more than that in mind.

**Verse 1.** David understood that God had entered into a covenant relationship with Israel, referring to Israel as His son, and that necessarily had to involve mercy. At the Golden Calf episode, God revealed Himself to Moses (and to Israel) as a God of compassion and mercy, forgiving wickedness and sin. Notice that David refers to "transgressions" in the plural. He was responsible for coveting, adultery, rape, and murder. Yet, he must have more sin in mind than just that Bathsheba episode.

**Verses 2,3.** David's plea is not merely for forgiveness, but for deliverance from all sin. He abhors not just what he did but the enormity of all sin, that enslaving force that compels us to violate God's holiness. Sin affects the mind, so our thinking is distorted. It affects the will too; indeed, it corrupts our very being.

**Verse 4a.** Huh? Why is David saying this? He unlawfully took Bathsheba and forced himself sexually on her and then murdered her husband, whom she may have loved dearly. Yet he says, "against You only have I sinned." Most commentators pass over this strange statement saying blandly that sin ultimately is against God. OK. Sure. David certainly is aware that sin is an offense against God that transcends whatever wrongs people commit against each other, as grievous as those wicked acts may be. But David, writing under the supervision of the Holy Spirit, must mean more than that. Sin creates enmity with God; it sunders any relationship that might have existed or would be possible. Sin isn't just doing something bad. Sin is a ghastly cosmic evil in God's creation. Where it came from is not revealed in Scripture, although reading between the lines it appears that God Himself introduced it in the Garden as a judgment for prior rebellion, to drive humanity to Himself for mercy. See Romans 11:32. David had rebelled in his heart against God, and he now realized it. The evils he committed were a consequence of that rebellion, and that rebellion expressed hard-heartedness toward God. But there's another far more important dimension to this: David was given a unique privilege, that of being king over all Israel. He was God's vice-regent ruling over God's elect people on God's behalf. That carried with it unique and demanding responsibilities. As God's immediate representative on earth, he personally had to faithfully and carefully obey God's laws and will as well as enforce them . . . or else. In this role, he failed God. Worse, David and his subjects were a corporate unity, so David's failure anticipated all Israel's failure. And that nation's sin against God, their failure to fulfill His great purposes for them, is too massive to contemplate. This text certainly warns us, let's be sure we know *why* we're here, why God has called us, and be faithful in fulfilling that purpose.

**Verse 4b.** God is just in judging human sin. He had clearly stated in Scripture (Deuteronomy, for example) that we're to love Him with all our being, we're to fear Him, and we're to serve Him. Failure to do that will, in perfect justice, necessarily result in punishment. God was in unique relationship with His beloved people, Israel, and personal relationships involve both privileges and responsibilities. Perhaps David is being prophetic here, anticipating the severe discipline God will impose on him (2 Samuel 13-20; notice that David's punishment was in the domain of monarchy). And not only on him but on all Israel (think Exile). Let's beware: Although David was forgiven, nevertheless, in God's justice, he was subjected to suffering because of it.

**Verse 5.** David here acknowledges the dreadful extent and scope of sin. Do we get it? I suspect most of us never really do. Sin isn't just what wrongs we do (or the rights that we fail to do, something we easily forget about). Sin is an inescapable state of being, a force that envelops and controls each of us and all humanity. It's built into the human race (probably by God's doing).

**Verse 6.** This is strange. All of a sudden David brings truth and wisdom into his text. Why? Truth has to do with how God has ordered His creation, and truth is conformity with reality. So truth is a holy and righteous God's own personal characteristic impressed on the physical world He made, *including humans*. The image of God necessarily includes a penchant for moral truth. Our conscience is tightly related to and expresses, or gives witness to, God's moral truths. So David understands that sin violates truth. Paul understood and argued this in Romans 2 and 3. Notice that Paul quotes

Psalm 51 in 3:4, so he must be drawing on David's understanding of sin as a betrayal of truth (see especially 2:1-11). The Law sets in writing those norms, but those moral norms really exist even without the Law. So sin makes us all liars! Living in sin, we necessarily live out a falsehood. Jesus, had no sin, thus could say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). He alone, of all humans, lived truth. He lived in perfect conformity with the absolute moral realities that characterize a holy God and that are embedded in His creation. And wisdom? Sure! Wisdom is knowing God's will and doing it. God's will is to live righteously, to express His holiness. Sin repudiates wisdom. Sin is folly. We live out wisdom when we live according to God's revealed righteousness in the power of the Spirit. David's plea for truth and wisdom in our inner being is fulfilled by being in Christ.

**Verses 7-12.** The plea here is for deliverance from sin. This appeal is central to what all Scripture is all about. God is on mission to defeat sin and evil. Jesus will do that; He alone *can* do that. David here is being prophetic. He's voicing what all humanity needs and cries out for, relief from the terrible fact of sin. I suspect we today don't really get it. We suppose that having the forgiveness of sins because of the cross is all that's necessary. No. What's necessary is holiness. What's necessary is to express God's holy character in this life here-and-now. We must, empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit, practice mortification. In Christ, the power of sin has been broken, so we don't have to express sin if we understand all that it is from the Word and commit to eschewing it. "Grant me a willing spirit," David pleads. He knows perfectly well that our indwelling sinfulness opposes God's revealed will for us, and that only God is able to influence our will. Jesus', "Not my will but Thine," should be our constant prayer and the principle that controls our life.

**Verses 13-15.** David wants to pass on to others his understanding of sin. He also will praise God. So should we. It's the logical response to what God does for us. Faith isn't private! Knowing God and His great work of deliverance demands that we share it with others. Experiencing Jesus' rescue from sin, if genuine, should radically transform us.

**Verses 16-17.** Now David has come to the core problem, hard-heartedness. He places it in the context of worship ("sacrifices") but it's deeper and more pervasive. Sin expresses pride, autonomy, selfishness. Only an attitude of humility before our Creator can we experience salvation and a personal relationship with God. That's an absolute prerequisite. Humility involves repentance, repentance acknowledges our sinfulness and rebellion, and without repentance there can be no relationship. If we suppose our (passive) attendance at Sunday morning church "worship" services is sufficient for salvation, we are in very serious error. Yet David does recognize something that Paul will make explicit later (Romans 12, for example): salvation does involve personal sacrifice, the sacrifice of ourselves. We deliberately obey God's Word, express His will, live according to His righteous standards and values, not our own. That's how verse 17 is fulfilled.

**Verses 18-19.** What are these verses doing here? Some commentators suggest that someone added them later in time. Nonsense. David realizes here something that most of us today don't, which is that in the future God is going to do something wonderful for His people. We know it as the Millennial Kingdom, and it's yet future even for us. In that coming era God will do something necessary, miraculous and magnificent: He will bring an end to sin and restore His creation and His people. That will be a glorious time when sin is finally dealt with and people will be able to worship God in truth. David is looking forward to that. So should we.

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Let's conclude by thinking about how David, or anyone for that matter, could have forgiveness of sin. Can we first understand that "forgiveness of sin" isn't merely absolution for having done wrong? It's a relational term. It makes it possible to form and maintain a relationship with the Holy God of Israel. Faith in Jesus is, for us today, the necessary human response to what God has done in Jesus. But because of faith in God, that is, faith in His Scriptural promises, David as well as all the other Old Testament faithful saints had the benefits of the atoning work of Jesus applied retroactively to them. They too had forgiveness of sin and a personal relationship with God. It was—and *could only have been*—by grace thru faith on the basis of the infinitely efficacious, sacrificial, vicarious, atoning death of Christ.

I argue here that David is not merely confessing his sins with Bathsheba and Uriah. He's not merely expressing contrition. He's aghast at what he did and horrified at what sin means to God, with whom He was in a mutual love relationship. Do we grasp how extensive, pernicious and hideous sin is? Let's not *ever* presume that "forgiveness of sin" means our spiritual state is now secure and we're freed from concern over sin. Jesus is at the Father's right hand *continually* interceding with His blood and His perfect obedience on our behalf. We must have Jesus to live, and let's be ever thankful to Him, for Him. And this: Let's be absolutely sure that we're faithful in fulfilling God's purposes for us.