

A Theological Reading of Psalm 51

Most of us are familiar with this Psalm of David. We've probably read it again and again, and we've undoubtedly heard it preached expositionally. But let's look at it once more, this time with a view toward understanding it theologically.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loyal love!

Paul insightfully states God's great purpose in His redemptive dealings with humanity: He **"bound all men over to sin so that He may have mercy on them all"** (Romans 11:32). Sin is God's mysterious work. We think of sin as necessitating judgment. But Paul got it right: Sin is, itself, a judgment upon humanity for rebellion; but it's also a testing of God Himself to deal with it. Mercy is the expression of God's goodness and transcendent love for His human creatures. But God's kind of love involves self-sacrifice to meet a need. For God to have mercy, He must sacrifice of Himself. Thus, mercy compromises His infinitely perfect justice, for example. So Paul explains in Romans how God's justice is maintained even while God shows mercy. The explanation: It's why the Son was sent. It's why the cross. Do we understand how costly God's mercy is? I suspect not.

God's purpose in the redemption of sinful humanity is to defeat evil and that the glory of His Person may be displayed in His human creatures. The word translated "loyal love" here is *chesed*, which means more than all the English words used by translators combined. It functions as the Hebrew counterpart to the New Testament word, "grace." We do NOT glorify God by being trophies of His grace, but by responding to the grace He has shown us by willfully and deliberately transforming our lives to become godly (thus Romans 12:1-2).

According to your great compassion, blot out my rebellious acts! Wash away my iniquity! Cleanse me of my sin!

God had revealed to Moses that His name, that is, His Person, includes compassion (Exodus 34). So David appeals to God's character, His very Person. David understood that sin isn't merely doing wrong, it's rebellion against God. His plea is that God will totally remove the guilt of sin from David so that it's as if the sin hadn't occurred. But David probably has in mind more than just what he did to Bathsheba and Uriah, he's thinking of *all* sin that contaminated or polluted his life and offended God.

Do we really grasp what Jesus accomplished for us? He removed from humanity the penalty that sin deserves! It's gone! The guilt is gone. The power of sin is broken. Reconciliation accomplished! But more: The old, corrupted humanity is gone, and a totally, radically new humanity in the Son is available. God's loving relationship with His beloved human creatures is restored, a humanity that can glorify God.

For I am aware of my rebelliousness; I am forever conscious of my sin.

David confesses how broken he is, not merely over what he did in that episode, but by the fact of *sin*. David understands, as we should as well, that sin is not merely doing wrong acts; it's far deeper and more powerful, controlling us and influencing us to do wrong. David here expresses repentance. We today cannot, must not, ever forget our great predicament: Just because we have been granted the forgiveness of sin, we still have before God the attitude of a repentant sinner. Sin still seeks to control us.

Against you – you only – I have sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. So you are just when you confront me; you are justified when you condemn me.

Where did sin come from? It certainly wasn't in the fruit of that tree that the couple ate, nor could it possibly have come from the serpent. God constituted us sinners. He put in us an enslaving force or

power that controls us and causes us to sin and offend God, necessitating either condemnation or mercy. Of course David did something heinous with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. But his act was ultimately because of sin, and sin offends a holy God. It's God who sets the norms and standards for us to follow, and it's God's justice that condemns disobedience. Sin steals from God the glory that is due Him.

Sin also drives us to God for mercy. In exactly the same way that David responded, as in this critically important verse, we all (should) know of our sinfulness and appeal to God for mercy. By grace, in the face of on-going disobedience, God placed all humanity under the power of sin so that we have an additional layer of accountability to God, one that's palpable, one that we actually experience. Everyone must realize that we *must* have the forgiveness of sin. In this present era, that mercy is in the Son.

Look, I was guilty of sin from birth, a sinner the moment my mother conceived me.

We all have a sin "nature" [what else to call it?] that's innate. We're not guilty before God because of the wrong things we do; we're guilty because of *who we are*! We're members of a corrupted race. This is why John penned 3:36, We only have rescue from sin thru Jesus, because apart from that offer, there remains only alienation, condemnation and wrath. By grace thru faith, union with the Son places us into a new humanity, one that's able to glorify God, one that's able to be in God's ineffably holy presence, one that receives the blessings of the peace, love and joy of participating with the Persons of the Godhead.

Look, you desire truth in the inner man; you want me to possess wisdom.

Truth? Wisdom? Why are *these* concepts here? David has wonderful spiritual insight. He understands that truth is not merely that which corresponds to reality (although of course it's that), it's deeper. Truth is God's Word. It's God's revelation of Himself and His will. It's God's Spirit personally engaging us internally, that is, to our spirit. And wisdom? Wisdom isn't merely knowing what's right (although of course it's that); it's deeper. Wisdom is our appropriate response to God, which is doing and being what God expects. If we suppose that believing in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and then living as we please, thinking that we have the assurance of heaven when we die, we possess neither truth nor wisdom.

Sprinkle me with water and I will be pure; wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Grant me the ultimate joy of being forgiven! May the bones you crushed rejoice! Hide your face from my sins! Blot out all my guilt! Create in me a pure heart, O God! Renew a resolute spirit within me! Do not cast me from your presence! Do not take your Holy Spirit away from me! Let me again experience the joy of your deliverance!

David cannot be in God's presence unless he's pure. Our great predicament is, we're anything but pure. And so we *cannot* be in God's presence. But that's exactly David's burning desire, to be with God. Theologians call this the "beatific vision." It's the joyful experience of knowing and being with God, in His very presence, to be blessed by His infinite and good Person. It's what we all should desire more than anything. Forgiveness of sins and the resulting purity enables the kind of relationship that joins us to God through the Holy Spirit, for supernal and eternal blessing.

Sustain me by giving me the desire to obey!

Obedience! The sin nature prevents us from obeying; it snatches from us even the desire to obey God. Only if God first somehow moves in us can we be appropriately obedient to our Creator and sovereign God. And it's only by obeying God, by serving Him according to His revealed will, that we maintain our loving relationship with Him. Forgiveness of sins is merely the entry into a relationship that only can exist if we're willing to submit to God by continual obedience to His will.

Then I will teach rebels your merciful ways, and sinners will turn to you.

David understands something that we don't. We're not individualists. We don't live inside a bubble, isolated from others. We are part of a race of humans, we live in society, and we have God-given responsibilities for each other. So if God, in love, does something wonderful for David, he's then under moral obligation to share that with others so that they too may experience God's good gifts. Having a heart for God means – *necessarily* means – having a heart also for others. What does "a heart for God" look like? It looks like this: Loving God by obeying Him and loving others by sharing God's blessing with them.

Rescue me from the guilt of murder, O God, the God who delivers me! Then my tongue will shout for joy because of your deliverance. O Lord, give me the words! Then my mouth will praise you.

Rescue. Deliverance. David isn't merely afraid of God's judgment. That's not his concern. David has a heart for God. What he desires is a restored relationship, one that he ruptured by murdering innocent Uriah, one that he ruptured by abusing his role as king. He craves the delight, the joy of being rightly related to the living God, the God of Israel. So he wants more than anything to be restored. If so, that will provoke from his inner being the worship God deserves.

Certainly you do not want a sacrifice, or else I would offer it; you do not desire a burnt sacrifice. The sacrifices God desires are a broken spirit – O God, a humble and contrite/repentant heart you will not reject.

Sin cannot be dealt with by any ritual act. Sin ruptures a relationship. It alienates. So the relationship has to be restored, and doing something like offering an animal sacrifice is absurdly unrealistic. No religious rites or deeds of any kind can deal with an offended holy God. What's needed is a radical change of being, a transformation of the offender into one who pleases God. No proud person will accede to that. Only someone who knows who God is and is appropriately humble before Him will do that. When we realize how offensive we are to God, and realize how great and good God is, we'll be broken and submissive. But submission to God's will means repentance; it means being changed into a different person.

Because you favor Zion, do what is good for her! Fortify the walls of Jerusalem! Then you will accept the proper sacrifices, burnt sacrifices and whole offerings; then bulls will be sacrificed on your altar.

David's Psalm ends with the anticipation of future glory. He sees a day coming when sin will be no more and God's Spirit will fill and empower all of Israel. The nation will be glorious. Righteousness will prevail, and then worshipful sacrifices will please God.

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We need to ask, On what basis could (did) God forgive David? God cannot simply say, "I forgive you," and that's it. The atoning work of the greatest son of David, Jesus, Israel's Messiah and King, is what allowed God to forgive David. The atonement, that is, the defeat of sin and the propitiation and reconciliation that Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension obtained, was effective backward in time as well as it is forward to us. David's Psalm anticipated Jesus' work. We can also say that David's psalm anticipates the restoration and regeneration that the nation of Israel will experience at Jesus' Return.

The great issue for us today is, Do we have the same heart for God as did David, 3,000 years ago? This Psalm is here in Scripture to make us want it. The creational blessing of the beatific vision is on offer; we'd be fools to ignore it.