

# Psalm 51

**Introduction** – “*Pardon and purity! Those are the two great needs of every human being*” – Boice. Learning to pray, learning to sing like the Psalm-singer, requires an honest assessment of oneself before the face of God. Many churches do not teach on sin, judgment, repentance, and instead teach that God accepts us just as we are. The result is spiritual lives that are dull and stagnant, self-centered rather than Christ-centered, joyless and lifeless, with no reason to be in awe of the amazing mercy of God. “...to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little” (Luke 4:47). God does meet us where we are, but something else must happen for God to accept us.

The title words of the Psalm indicate that this was written at a time of a particular event, and yet it is evident God has given this (in the canon of scripture and with the words, “to the Chief Musician”) to be suitable for your private and personal confession, as well as for our corporate prayer and singing. This Psalm is one of the glories of the Scriptures, treasured by many over centuries, for in it we learn the true depth and despair of our sin and the true nature and greatness of God’s forgiveness (Heb 8:8-12).

**The Plea for Mercy** (vv1-2) – David comes before God as Toplady wrote, “Nothing in my hands I bring.” He cannot point to how obedient he had been in the past, his good and courageous works over the years. There are no excuses made, no blaming of God or others for the circumstances, no victimhood. Mercy is what we plead when we have no merit to earn God’s ear or favor. David’s plea for mercy (and glory to God for this) is God’s character, His lovingkindness and His tender mercies. God’s lovingkindness (*hesed*) is not only His mercy, but His covenantal faithfulness based on His character (Ex 33:19, 34:5-7). In confession of sin, do not plead according to anything in you, but only on the mercy of God.

By God’s mercy, David asks that God cleanse him all the way – “*blot out,*” “*wash me thoroughly,*” “*cleanse me.*” Sin is like a tarpit: we can’t wipe it away. Only God can cleanse us.

**Honest Confession** (vv3-6) – Confession requires naming particular sins. *Homologeō* means “to say the same thing.” And while we do sin against others, ultimately that sin is against God. Consider, it is only because God exists that doing a wrong against our neighbor is a sin against them. Also, a heart turned to God in confession, while grieving what has been done to someone else, grieves even more deeply what he has done before the living God. It is before His holiness and justice that we are truly guilty, our relationship with Him torn apart. When Nathan confronted David with his sin, David replied, “*I have sinned against the LORD*” (2 Sam 12:13).

David also confesses his sinfulness (v5). This was no freak accident (“I can’t believe I did this; this is not who I am”). Rather, our confession of sin should include the recognition of what warped men and women we are. “*The fountain of my life is polluted as well as its streams*” – Spurgeon. Even regenerate Christians must deal with remaining sin in their flesh (Gal 5:17). David’s sin was part of a war in his soul between flesh and spirit. For those following David in honest confession, we may also acknowledge that God desires and will perfect in us a pure nature and upright conduct (v6, cf. Phil 1:6). Confession includes a cry for God to change us from within and not simply forgiveness to go on sinning.

**Restoration: The Work of Pardoning** (vv7-9) – In true confession and repentance there are no half measures. The recognition of what sin is and what sin requires leads a repentant sinner to cry out for cleansing all the way down. Hyssop was a small plant used in the ceremonial cleansings of lepers (Lev 14:6f) and for those who had come in contact with a dead body (Num 19:16-19). The first time it is mentioned is its use in Passover (Exod 12:22) where the blood painted on the doorposts caused the angel of death to “pass over” the household. Hebrews 9:19-22 records that “*without the shedding of blood there is no remission.*” That shedding of blood had to come from an innocent, clean substitute.

To “*purge*” was to “*de-sin.*” To “*wash*” designated a thorough scrubbing as of a garment deeply tainted with impurities or leprosy. Only then would he be “*clean,*” and only God could make him “*whiter than snow*” (Isaiah 1:18). God would have to set the bones which were broken (either due to the sin or broken by God as a sign of repentance – stopping his sinful movements) so that those bones could dance with rejoicing. The blotting out of iniquities was the erasing of the valid charges against David (Psalm 103:12, Col 1:14, 2:14, 1 John 1:9). Sinners are reconciled to God by the finished work of Jesus (2 Cor 5:18-19).

**Renewal: The Work of Purifying** (vv10-13) – But David, and true repentees, want to be purified all the way down. They do not simply want to be clean to then go back to their old ways. They want a clean heart and a steadfast spirit that loves and keeps God’s ways, loves the covenant with God. But honestly, it might mean praying for what you know you should want but don’t yet want or have (v10). In verse 11, David is recalling the removal of the Spirit from Saul in his sins (1 Sam 16:14) and doesn’t wish the same to befall him. The repentant heart knows that to keep following God will require nothing less than being in the presence of God and full of His Spirit in us (Eph 5:18-20). He even must plead for the joy of his salvation to be given to him again by God; that glorious fruit of the Spirit would return when he was no longer grieving the Spirit. But note again, David had to ask for this, even plead for it. God would withhold these from us not only to require our confession and repentance, but to instruct us to persistently come to Him with our requests, to be in His presence, to seek renewal and the work of purifying from Him and no one and nothing else.

Verse 13 is very interesting on several counts. David promises that he will then teach other transgressors God's ways, and this Psalm is doing just that. Some would wonder why David did not specify his sins, but that seems to be so that this Psalm can be used by all with their specific sins. And some might argue that David is only privately praying to God and not confessing openly to those he sinned against. But here is his testimony in broad daylight, declared over centuries in fact. Those who will not confess their sins to those they have wronged, and those who are in a position of any covenantal headship who do not confess their sins towards those under their care, are doomed to lose the joy of their salvation and the blessing of God upon their work. And quite the opposite, in the home particularly, there is a great lesson taught when you confess your sins before all you wronged and all who saw.

**Worship: Joyful Contrition** (vv14-17) – And this is because true worship filled with joy and thankfulness is wrapped in a heart of brokenness and contrition. The Good News is only as good as the Bad News you recognize. His contrite heart cares less about the material consequences of his sin and more about relieving the guilt of his sin (v14). A guilty heart is shamed into silence, and gospel relief of that sin cannot withhold its praise to the God of his salvation (v15). God's delight is not simply in the sacrifice of the burnt (ascension) offering, but in the consecration of the whole person which the offering represented. Likewise, in this service of worship, our time of consecration by means of prayers, singing, reading and preaching of the Word, are to be exercised with broken and contrite hearts seeking the mercy of the Lord and declaring our praise for His lovingkindnesses. *"These, O God, You will not despise."*

**Our Worship and the Rest of the Body** (vv18-19) – *"A little leaven leavens the whole lump,"* Paul warns in 1 Cor 5:6 regarding allowing or even celebrating sin in the congregation. You cannot bring your unconfessed sin into this assembly and not have it weaken the body. But the covenant works powerfully in both directions. Faith-filled contrition, confession, and repentance, not only strengthens you, but builds *"the walls of Jerusalem"* (v18). Then our corporate worship is efficacious for tearing down strongholds and establishing the city in righteousness.

**Conclusion** - The road to joy is always a road of confession and honesty before God. You are no hypocrite to sing His praises and obey His Word when you don't want to – if you honestly confess that to Him as well. God restored David, granted him a contrite heart, renewed his joy, and gave him a steadfast spirit again. He will do so to every sinner who comes to Him in Jesus' name. If for you, He still has not, then Psalm 51 is for you even more – and so is Jesus.