

Psalm 51 “The Sinner’s Prayer—part one” [**](#)

Main Idea: What should we as children of God say to God after we’ve sinned? In Psalm 51 we find the record of David’s prayer after he committed adultery and murder. David expressed six heartfelt things to God in his sinner’s prayer, and we can learn from him. We’ll look at the first three items this week, and the final three next week.

I. Ask for forgiveness (1-2).

- A. David knows he doesn’t deserve it.
- B. David appeals to the character of God.
 - 1. God’s love is unfailing.
 - 2. God’s mercies are great.

II. Admit your guilt (3-6).

- A. David confesses that he has sinned (3).
 - 1. He is guilty of transgression.
 - 2. He is guilty of sin.
 - 3. He is guilty of iniquity.
 - 4. He is guilty of evil.
 - 5. He is guilty of bloodguilt.
- B. David confesses that he has offended God (4).
 - 1. The real problem with sin isn’t that it messes up my life.
 - 2. The real problem is that I have rebelled against the Owner of the universe.
- C. David confesses that he is a sinner (5).
 - 1. We are not inherently good people.
 - 2. We begin life with a sin nature.
- D. David confesses that he lacks what God desires (6).
 - 1. God wants more than the absence of sin.
 - 2. God wants hearts that are loyal to Him.

III. Ask for cleansing (7-9).

- A. God doesn’t just overlook sin.
- B. God washes sin away by means of a cleansing agent.
 - 1. The result is snow white purity.
 - 2. The result is joy.

Make It Personal: Is there any unconfessed sin in your life?

1. We can't undo the past.
2. We can experience forgiveness through Christ.

Several years ago I began the discipline of reading through the Bible each year. It's such a wonderful privilege to feed my soul on the nourishing, God-inspired words preserved for us in the Scriptures. There are 929 chapters in the Old Testament and 260 chapters in the New Testament, each God-given and profitable for us.

But I must confess there's one chapter that I wish wasn't there, and my heart gets heavy every time I turn the page to it. I'm talking about 2 Samuel 11. Don't get me wrong. 2 Samuel 11 is a good gift to us from God and we, especially men in our midlife years, desperately need to read it often. It's a reminder of what happens when we stop pursuing God and His good will for our lives with passion and zeal and start coasting. The results are never good, *never*.

2 Samuel 11 records David's sinful choice to lust after Bathsheba, engage in God-defying adultery with her, and then concoct a wicked cover-up plot that resulted in the murder of Uriah her husband. And it didn't stop there either, for David's sin established a pattern that his sons followed, and it absolutely wrecked his family.

I've suggested in our current series in the Psalms that one of the reasons God gave us 150 psalms is to show us how to make Him *the gravitational center of our lives*. Sin is when we *don't* do that, when instead of making God the gravitational center of our lives, we pursue something else.

For David, it was illicit sex. For you and me it may be something else, but regardless, if we make anything other than the Lord God Himself the gravitational center of our lives, the results are always disastrous. If only David hadn't coasted in his midlife years, if only he hadn't lived to gratify the cravings of his sinful heart. If only, *if only*.

Perhaps those words are haunting you. *If only* I hadn't made that foolish decision that night. Or *if only* I had chosen the God-pleasing option that day.

The question before us this morning is this. What should we as children of God do *after* we've sinned? How do we make God the gravitational center of our lives *after* we've blown it? Thankfully, God graciously provided the answer for us! In Psalm 51 we find the record of what David prayed *after* he committed the adultery and murder. We might call it *The Sinner's Prayer*.

What do you say to your Maker and Judge after you've violated His holy law? Our tendency is to say nothing. Instead we run from Him. We fill our lives with distractions to drown out the pounding of our guilt-stricken conscience. Or, instead of speaking to God, we tell ourselves lies like, "Well, it wasn't my fault. She enticed me," or "I only did it *once*. I'm not nearly as bad as a lot of people."

That's what David did, too, at first. He tried to hide the truth for months, perhaps a year, until God graciously sent a man into his life to expose his sinful secret. He tells us so in the heading of the psalm: *A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba*. "You're the man," Nathan boldly told his king as he pointed his finger at him (2 Sam. 12:7).

So what do you say to God? What *can* you say? What *must* you say? David shows us. In Psalm 51, in his *sinner's prayer*, David expressed six heartfelt thoughts to God, and we can learn from him. In fact, David actually says he wrote this psalm *For the director of music* so that others would benefit from his experience.

This is not a psalm to rush through. Consequently, we're going to take two weeks to work through it, looking at the first three movements of the psalm this week, followed by observing communion, and then pondering the final three movements next week.

It's worth noting that this isn't the only penitential psalm in the Psalter. There are at least six other psalms that flowed from a penitent heart: Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143. The penitential psalms show us that God wants His wayward children to come back, and He kindly shows them the way, no where more vividly than in Psalm 51.

We're going to see a progression in David's prayer. At the beginning he is pleading, but by the end he's declaring his assurance. If we've blown it (and which of us hasn't?), we must begin where David began. First, we must...

I. Ask for forgiveness (1-2).

David is going to ask God for forgiveness in various ways at least nine times in this psalm. Notice how he begins in verses 1-2, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin."

Apparently, living near David's palace was the family of Eliam, the father of Bathsheba. Israel's king was supposed to protect God's people. Tragically, one evening King David violated one of the sheep he was commissioned to protect, a woman named Bathsheba whose husband was loyal soldier in David's army. Eric Lane observes, "This greatly aggravates David's sin, in that instead of protecting he abused her, placing himself among the lowest of the low, corresponding in our society to children's workers or child minders who abuse their charges... This was more than adultery... for the law-breaker was the law-maker himself, King David."[\[1\]](#)

David committed two sins for which the Mosaic law provided no forgiveness. In the cases of deliberate adultery and murder, no sacrifices were to be offered. The penalty was death.

So what then can you do if you've committed, as David had, sins worthy of death? There's *nothing* you can do, nothing that would make things right, and David knows it. So instead of doing something David begins by *asking* God for something.

If you could ask God for *one thing* after you'd blown it, what would it be? Notice the first words out of David's mouth. He asked for *mercy*. "Have *mercy* on me."

Why would David bring that petition to God first? He tells. David asks for mercy because he knows two things, indeed, he clings to these two realities. First, David asks for mercy because...

A. David knows he doesn't deserve it. He knows what he deserves is death. He knows there is nothing he could give God or do for God that would undo the sinful crimes he'd committed. *Have mercy on me, O God* is his only plea. Please, Lord, don't treat me the way I deserve! David knows he doesn't deserve God's forgiveness. And never forget, neither do we.

If he didn't deserve it, when then prompted David to ask God for forgiveness? Right out of the blocks David reveals the answer in verse 1...

B. David appeals to the character of God. "Have mercy on me, O God, *according to your unfailing love.*" There's the first hope-giving truth about God that prompts David to ask for what he doesn't deserve.

1. *God's love is unfailing.* David appeals to the *chesed* of God, one of the most important Hebrew words in the Old Testament, a term that speaks of God's covenantal loyalty to His chosen people. He's faithful even when they're not. It's His nature to demonstrate pity and kindness. That gave David hope. And so did this...

2. *God's mercies are great.* "Have mercy on me... according to *your great compassion.*" The word is actually plural, hence the KJV's, 'tender mercies.' David's not the first person in history to blow it. He knows about Adam and Eve's blunder, Noah's drunkenness, Abraham's lie, Jacob's deception, Samson's immorality, and on and on the list goes. And he knows that in each of those people's lives God's mercy was greater than their sin. Year's later Frederick Faber said it well in his hymn...

*There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.*

*There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in Heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given.*

*There is welcome for the sinner,
And more graces for the good;
There is mercy with the Savior;
There is healing in His blood.*

*There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this;
There is room for fresh creations
In that upper home of bliss.*

*For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.*

*There is plentiful redemption
In the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head.*

*'Tis not all we owe to Jesus;
It is something more than all;
Greater good because of evil,
Larger mercy through the fall.*

*If our love were but more simple,
We should take Him at His word;
And our lives would be all sunshine
In the sweetness of our Lord.[\[2\]](#)*

Beloved, that's what David did. He *took God at His word*. He didn't ask for forgiveness because he deserved it, but rather because God is merciful and loving.

And so in verses 1-2 he proceeds to ask God to *blot out, wash away, and cleanse* him from his sin. The imagery speaks of doing laundry, as Derek Kidner puts it, "as if David is comparing himself to a foul garment needing to be washed and washed."^[3]

That's me, says David. I've soiled my life by my sinful choices. But I don't want to be soiled any longer. I want to be clean. Wash me, O God, scrub this foul sinner clean!

Where do you begin after you've blown it? You *ask God for forgiveness*. Is that all there is to it? No. Forgiveness is free but it's not cheap. Something else is necessary...

II. Admit your guilt (3-6).

"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against 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. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place."

David confesses four very specific matters in this portion of his prayer. First...

A. David confesses that he has sinned (3). Not in vague generalities, either. In fact, he uses five different synonyms for sin in this psalm.

1. *He is guilty of transgression.* "I know my *transgressions* (3)." The Hebrew word *pasha* refers to crossing a forbidden boundary, doing so an act of rebellion and disloyalty. That's what I've done, says David. I went where I shouldn't have gone, and in so doing I rebelled against the King of kings.

2. *He is guilty of sin.* "My sin is always before me (3)." The Hebrew *chatath* speaks of falling short or missing the mark of God's revealed will, like an arrow that misses the target. Sex is a good gift from God when enjoyed within marriage, but to engage in sex outside of marriage misses the mark. That's what I did, cries David.

3. *He is guilty of iniquity.* Back in verse 2, "Wash me of all my *iniquity*." The Hebrew *aown* speaks of a crooked or wrong act, often associated with a conscious and intentional decision to do wrong.^[4]

4. *He is guilty of evil.* Verse 4—"And done what is *evil* in your sight." The Hebrew *ra* speaks of that which is not morally right, pure, or good.

5. *He is guilty of bloodguilt.* In verse 14 David cries out, "Save me from *bloodguilt*, O God." He uses the Hebrew word for blood, *damim*. I've got blood on my hands!

Do you see how nitty-gritty David's confession is? There's no vague generalities here, nor any blame-shifting. *I'm guilty*, he says to God, guilty of transgression, sin, iniquity, evil, and bloodguilt. Secondly, and more specifically...

B. David confesses that he has offended God (4). Verse 4—"Against you, you only, have I sinned." David isn't saying that he hadn't sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, his own family, and a whole lot of other people, for he had. But there's something horrendous about our sins that we tend to overlook, yet David didn't...

1. *The real problem with sin isn't that it messes up my life.* Nor that it messes up other people's lives, although

it inevitably does both. However...

2. *The real problem is that I have rebelled against the Owner of the universe.* At its root all sin is against God, “since it is only by God’s law that sin is defined as sin.”^[5] We could well say that at its core every sin is an act of *treason*. Allow me to illustrate...

Suppose I received a special invitation from a generous, wealthy king to come and spend six weeks with him at his beautiful, tropical resort. The vacation wasn’t going to cost me a penny. He generously offered me everything I could dream of, exquisite meals, daily tee times on his manicured golf course (with caddy, of course), free evening entertainment, the works. After enjoying five weeks at the king’s resort, one day I was walking down the main road, approached the king’s palace, saw a beautiful flower growing in the front flower bed, walked over and picked that flower and smashed the petals into the ground with my foot.

Now suppose you saw me do that, approached me at that moment, and asked, “Why’d you do that?!” And I said, “Ah, I don’t like that kind of flower.” You could rightly say to me, “The flower’s not the issue. To kill that flower is to insult the king who planted that garden in the first place, the generous king who’s showered you with undeserved blessing after blessing.”

That’s what we do every time we sin. When David went to bed with Bathsheba, he took a flower from God’s garden and smashed it under his feet.

“We never see sin aright until we see it as against God,” writes Jerry Bridges in *The Pursuit of Holiness*. “All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught...Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, ‘I have sinned;’ but...David said, ‘Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.’”^[6]

But not only did David confess that he sinned and that he offended God with his sin, thirdly...

C. David confesses that he is a sinner (5). Verse 5—“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”^[7] My friend, contrary to what you may have learned in your public school education...

1. *We are not inherently good people.* There have only been three “good people” on this planet. Adam and Eve, who were created by God and declared to be “very good” by God (Gen. 1:31) who later sinned against God and ceased being very good, and the sinless Jesus Christ. In fact, God made this statement to Noah about man’s condition in Genesis 8:21, “Every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.” It’s true...

2. *We begin life with a sin nature.* According to David, what he did with Bathsheba wasn’t some quirk event, some slip up. Rather, David admits that his wicked actions were the spillover of his wicked heart, the expression of something that had been there since conception and had now come out.

His problem was not merely that he sinned. It’s that he was by nature a *sinner*. Charles Spurgeon expresses David’s thoughts, “It is as if he said, not only have I sinned this once, but I am in my very nature a sinner. The fountain of my life is polluted as well as its streams. My birth-tendencies are out of the square of equity; I naturally lean to forbidden things.”^[8]

That’s true of us, too. If you aren’t a Christian, you are enslaved to your sin nature and cannot please God. But even if you are a Christian and heading for heaven, you still battle with sin. Even God’s people (like David) are sinners, forgiven sinners but sinners nonetheless. To use Spurgeon’s metaphor, the fountain of our lives is polluted, and if we fail to guard our hearts that rank residue of remaining sin will spill out of our hearts and into our lives.

Do you see how specific David is in his confession? This is no generic, “Father forgive me for I’ve sinned” recitation. First he confesses that he has sinned, secondly that he has offended God, thirdly that he is a sinner, and one more thing...

D. David confesses that he lacks what God desires (6). Verse 6—“Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.” David admits to God something we tend to forget...

1. *God wants more than the absence of sin.*

2. *God wants hearts that are loyal to Him.* “You desire truth in the inner parts,” David affirms. Sure, God wants us to stop sinning, but that’s only half of it. He wants our hearts and lives to be loyal to Him. And David lacks that. So do we.

Is there hope? Yes. The solution isn’t to try harder. The solution is *grace*. David recognizes that by His grace God alone makes possible what God requires. “You teach me wisdom in the inmost place,” he says to God. *You teach me. You make it possible.*

But David doesn’t get up off his knees, not yet. There’s more that must be said in a sinner’s prayer. First, ask for forgiveness. Second, admit your guilt. Thirdly...

III. Ask for cleansing (7-9).

“Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.”

Do David’s words sound familiar? He’s actually repeating the same requests he brought to God in verses 1-2: *cleanse me*, which comes from the Hebrew word for sin *chattah* and literally means “de-sin” me;^[9] *wash* me, that is, make me pure again; and *blot out* my iniquity—in Bible times since paper was very expensive, quite often instead of throwing away a used document a person would rub out the old writing and turn the papyrus sheet sideways and write new words on it.^[10]

That’s what David wanted God to do with him. He knew that sinful man cannot wash away his own sin. Pilate later tried, but merely dipping one’s hands in a basin of water doesn’t cancel out the wicked deed those hands committed. Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth tried the same, to wash her guilt away by rubbing her hands together. In the famous sleep-walking scene, Shakespeare shows Lady Macbeth desperately trying to wash the crime from her conscience by washing the blood from her hands, but to no avail (Act 5, Scene 1).^[11]

David simply asked for cleansing. What we cannot do for ourselves, God will do for us if we but *ask*.

This doesn’t mean that cleansing occurs without cost, however. Perhaps the most important words in the psalm are the first words of verse 7. *Cleanse me with hyssop*, David says. David understood two truths regarding the removal of sin.

A. God doesn’t just overlook sin. To do so would be to violate His justice. God has a better way...

B. God washes sin away by means of a cleansing agent. The *hyssop* was a small plant in David’s day, probably from the mint family. “Because of its shape and structure,” writes James Boice, “it was used as a small brush. In the ceremonies of the temple it was used to sprinkle blood.”^[12]

For instance, the first time we see hyssop in the Bible is in Exodus when the Jews dipped the hyssop plant in blood and sprinkled it on their doorframes. When the death angel saw the blood, he passed over that house and the inhabitants did not die (Ex. 12:22).

Later when God established a covenant with Israel, hyssop was again used, as Hebrews 9:19-22 explains, “When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the

tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

Don't miss those final words. In order for there to be *forgiveness*, there must be *the shedding of blood*. David knew that. He knew that God washes away sin by means of a cleansing agent. God doesn't overlook sin, but rather He washes it away *by means of the shed blood of a substitute*.

That's why Jesus died on the cross, my friend. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).”

How clean does God make a sinner after applying the cleansing agent? Hear David again, “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be *whiter than snow*.” When God cleanses a sinner...

1. *The result is snow white purity*. “You don't know what I did,” you may be thinking. “My sin is so great.” And that's true. But I know what Christ did and what God says about it. Here is what God's Word says in Ephesians 1:7, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.” When God makes you clean, He makes you snow-white-clean! What's more...

2. *The result is joy*. David prays in verse 8, “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.” God had been crushing David's bones—that's what He does with His children when they sin. He makes them feel miserable. Those guilt feelings are His good gift to them, His wake-up call.

But do you know what so many choose to do? Instead of dealing with the cause of guilt, they merely take steps to eliminate the *feelings* of guilt, through alcohol, through binge-eating, through indulgent living, through anti-depressants, and so on.

A friend of mine left his wife. I've pled with him to repent and return to his wife, but he has refused. Recently I heard he's become an emotional wreck and believes he needs help for his “depression.” But the fact is, his depressed feelings are working just the way His Maker intended them to work. He doesn't need an anti-depressant. He, like David, needs to ask for forgiveness, admit his sin, and ask God for cleansing. Then, and not until then, will he experience the joy he so desires.

Perhaps you're thinking, “I can relate. I too have sinned against God. And I am so thankful that God extends His forgiveness to me today. But how can I be sure I won't commit this sin again? What about my tendency to turn from God and transgress His commands? I need more than forgiveness for past sin. I need renewal of heart so I will obey my gracious God the next time I'm tempted, and the next, and the next.”

I'm glad you're thinking in those terms. Be encouraged. That's what David prays about in the next part of his prayer, the need for a renewed heart. And as we'll see next time, that too is something that God alone can give us and will give us, if we'll ask.

Make It Personal: Is there any unconfessed sin in your life?

There are two things for sure...

1. *We can't undo the past*. However...
2. *We can experience forgiveness through Christ*.

[\[1\]](#) Eric Lane , pp. 231-2.

[\[2\]](#) Frederick Faber, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*

[\[3\]](#) Derek Kidner, p. 190.

[\[4\]](#) See Willem VanGemeren, p. 271.

[\[5\]](#) As James Boice puts it, p. 427.

[\[6\]](#) W.S. Plumer quoted in: J. Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, p. 20. cf. Gen 39:9

[\[7\]](#) David isn't saying his mother was a wicked person. Apparently David had a mother and father who feared the Lord.

[\[8\]](#) Charles Spurgeon, p. 408.

[\[9\]](#) Observation by James Boice, p. 428.

[\[10\]](#) Boice, p. 428.

[\[11\]](#) Michael Travers, *Encountering God in the Psalms*, p. 259.

[\[12\]](#) James Boice, p. 429.