

Is It Possible To Be Forgiven?

Psalm 51

Introduction: 1) When I have the joy of doing marriage and family conferences, I also warn couples about the danger and heartache of adultery. I give them the same warning I give teens who are striving to maintain their sexual purity. The warning: The wrong person + the wrong place + the wrong time = the wrong thing happening.

2) No one understood this truth better than King David. The Bible describes him as a man “after God’s own heart” (1 Sam.13:14), yet because he was with the wrong person at the wrong place and at the wrong time: 1) He committed adultery with Bathsheba, 2) murdered her husband Uriah and 3) lied to his people about the whole shameful affair. You find all this recorded in 2 Samuel 11. It appears David hid his sin for almost a year. However, God sent His prophet Nathan to confront David about this “Jerusalem Cover-up.” And in 2 Sam. 12:7 some of the most familiar words in the Bible fly from the prophet’s mouth at David, “You are the man.” David’s heart was torn and his conscience broken with conviction. He was guilty and he knew it. No temple sacrifice or good works could atone for his sin. All he could do is what every sinner must do. He threw himself completely on the mercy and grace of God. Though undeserved, he found loving-kindness and forgiveness, and out of deep gratitude, he penned the greatest song of confession ever written: Psalm 51. The superscription to this psalm concisely sets the stage: “To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet went to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba.”

3) Psalm 51 has touched many a heart since it was written by David 3000 years ago. The greatest of the penitential psalms, it was recited in full by Sir Thomas More & Lady Jane

Grey as they were martyred. Henry V had it read to him as he lay on his death bed, and William Carey the father of the modern missionary movement asked for it to be the sermon text for his funeral (Boice, vol. 2, 424).

Transition: Is it possible to be forgiven, to be forgiven no matter how grave or horrible is the sin? Thankfully the answer is yes, and in 6 decisive movements Psalm 51 provides the path to forgiveness, cleansing and restoration.

I. Ask God to cleanse you. 51:1-2

David begins the psalm on a very personal and intimate note. Indeed he will utilize a personal pronoun some 34 times, while also referencing God in various ways some 30 times. He starts with an appeal to the character and nature of God.

1) Request His tender mercies. 51:1

David cries to God for forgiveness because He knows that God is gracious and compassionate. Three words highlight his request: mercy, loving-kindness, and tender mercies (*NIV*, “great compassion”).

→ Have mercy – an imperative in the form of an urgent request. Be gracious, show favor, do not give me what I deserve.

→ Loving-kindness (*hesed*) – deal with me according to your covenant faithfulness not mine, your loyal love not my disloyalty, your gracious goodness not my ugly badness.

→ multitude of tender mercies – (*NASV*, “greatness of your compassion”)

- David needs grace not justice, he appeals to God’s mercy and not his own merits. Neither performance or position will do him any good.

2) Receive His thorough forgiveness. 51:1-2

David's 3-fold appeal to God's gracious nature is now matched by a 3-fold description of sin and a 3-fold description of forgiveness. Each word demands a careful analysis. First, note the 3 descriptions of sin.

→ Transgressions – rebellious action that is intentional and willful. The plural is significant, not accidental. David in his sin willfully rebelled against the commandments of God, specifically and defiantly breaking 5 of them.

Ex. 20:13, "You shall not murder." He took the life of Uriah.

Ex. 20:14, "You shall not commit adultery." He slept with Bathsheba.

Ex. 20:15, "You shall not steal." He stole another man's wife.

Ex. 20:16, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." He lied and tried to conceal and hide his sin by making it appear Uriah was the father of the child in Bathsheba's womb.

Ex. 20:17, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." He saw Bathsheba, knew she was another man's wife, and lusted for her.

→ Iniquity – to bend or twist, hence to pervert; or to go astray or depart from the right path. David took a good gift from our great God, the gift of sex, and he turned it into a perversion of immorality. He took the good gift of sex to be enjoyed in the covenant of marriage, and he departed from the right path down the avenue of adultery.

→ Sin – to miss the mark, the goal, the right way. David missed the mark. He took life rather than save life. He lied rather than tell the truth. He took what was not his rather than give out of his wealth and abundance.

In any direction you look or turn, David saw his sins. Indeed he says in v. 3, “my sin is always before me.”

Now note the 3 words for forgiveness.

- Blot out – remove or wipe clean my slate. Sin may be seen here as an insurmountable debt that cannot be paid, only forgiven.
- Wash me – sin is a stain that needs to be laundered, a defilement of dirt needing to be removed by a thorough washing. David pleads for the Lord to wash him completely.
- Cleanse me – is a temple term for religious, ritual cleansing. Some see a connection with the cleansing of a leper. Sin is seen as an infectious disease that spreads and kills if it is not cured. This is how David felt. This was where David stood before the Lord.

When we sin we must first turn to the Lord. Only His grace, mercy and loving-kindness can cleanse us, wash us, and blot out the record of our sin.

II. Ask God to convict you. 51:3-6

1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (*NKJV*). Verses 3-6 contain David’s confession. Here he will make clear a crucial theological truth: we are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. At this point we must reject a popular saying, “Let your conscience be your guide.” No, at this point “only Scripture should be our guide.”

1) We need conviction of sin. 51:3-5

God’s Spirit, His Word, and His prophet have laid bare David’s soul exposing his

sin. In rapid fire succession David agrees with the Lord and His judgment about sin. Note that David again utilizes the same words for sin we saw in vs. 1-2. To that trio he adds the word “evil” in v. 4.

v. 3 “I acknowledge (*NASV, NIV* “know”) my transgressions” The I is emphatic. Acknowledge is the Hebrew *yada* which can denote intimate, personal knowledge. David is saying I, myself deeply and intimately am constantly in full knowledge of my sin. I could not escape it if I tried. It is with me every moment of every day, indeed “my sin is always before me.” I see the filth of my immorality. I hear the last cry of brave Uriah. I’ve touched the dead body of my little baby. In mind and heart, body and soul, there is no escape.

v. 4 “Against You, You only, have I sinned.” Ultimately all sin is ultimately against God. Yes David sinned against Uriah, Bathsheba and the nation, but it was sin because it was against God’s law. Further, wounding and hurting those in God’s image and likeness is to wrong and offend God. Thus David concludes, I have “done this evil in Your sight.” I hid it from others for awhile, but never was I able to hide it from You.

David readily acknowledges the rightness of God’s judgment on his sin, whatever the verdict might be. In essence he says what you say about sin is true and how you judge sin is right. Like the repentant thief on the cross in Luke 23:41, David confesses that no one can find fault with God’s verdict and judgment of sinners and their sin.

Eugene Petersen says it well, “You’re the One I’ve violated, and you’ve seen it all, seen the full extent of my evil. You have all the facts before you; whatever you decide about me is fair.”

v. 5 David now gets to the root, the source, of our sin problem. Bottom-line: I came into this world a sinner, with a nature and will bent toward sin. There was nothing sinful about my conception or birth. There was something sinful about me! From my beginning of existence never has there been a time that I have not been in a sinful state with sin as my close companion. I did not come into this world positive or neutral in my nature. I came kicking and screaming as a little sinner who has grown up to be a big sinner. Adam’s sin marked me, and I have lived with it all my life.

Transition: We need the conviction of sin. David certainly experienced it in full measure. We need it too.

2) We need instruction in truth. 51:6

- The truths of v. 6 anticipate the great spiritual declaration of v. 17. What is inside a man, in the “inward parts”, is the crucial issue. As Prov. 23:7 reminds us, “as a man thinketh in his heart so is he.” The verse also stands in sharp contrast to v. 5.
- David recognizes that what God desires is “truth in the inward parts”, and that he would “know wisdom,” be taught God’s wisdom in the secret or hidden part of a man. God’s plan and purpose for David from the womb is that he would embrace God’s truth and knowledge. However, in spite of God’s desire for David, he sinned, because he had been a sinner by nature from birth. God has wired all of us on the inside with the capacity for truth and knowledge, but foolishly and

contrary to God's design we sin. He desires truth and wisdom but we pursue lies and foolishness. Only by being purged of the ravaging effects of sin and made clean (v.7) can we embrace God's truth and walk in His wisdom.

Transition: Thus there is a 3rd step in the process of forgiveness which we need.

III. Ask God to refresh you. 51:7-9

David has fully and completely confessed his sin (vs. 3-6). He no longer hides or denies it, but lays bare his soul before the Lord. Confident that God is a God of mercy, loving-kindness and tender mercies (v.1), he now pleads with the Lord for a complete and full forgiveness. Nothing less will satisfy his soul. Nothing less will cleanse his conscience. His petition follows a 3-fold path.

1) Let God wash you. 51:7

- “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.” Interestingly the root of the word “purge” is the Hebrew word for sin. David ask the Lord to “un-sin” or “de-sin” me. Hyssop was a small leafy shrub that was used as a brush to sprinkle and splatter blood or water in rituals of purification in the temple. Lepers, in particular, would come before a priest and go through such a ceremony. David asks the Lord to cleanse him completely from sin, to remove its disease-like debilitating effects.
- Further he asks that God would “wash” him, and in doing so make him “whiter than snow.” Picking up again on the idea of washing from v. 2, this washing would result in a full and complete cleansing. Every spot and stain of sin would be washed away, resulting in a soul as white as snow. This was something only God could do. This is something only Jesus could do.

2) Let God gladden you. 51:8

- With forgiveness comes gladness. David asks of the Lord that He would make him “hear joy and gladness,” that is “joyful gladness.” Purge me, make me clean, wash me and make me whiter than snow and cause me to hear joy and gladness once again.
- David uses a powerful image to convey the joy of forgiveness. The bones God broke in conviction and discipline will now rejoice in their healing and restoration. His spirit which had been crushed can now praise the Lord for the free and underserved forgiveness given to him by God. Some speculate that sin had ill-effected David’s health. If so, then God’s forgiveness could provide healing to David’s body as well as his soul. Isaiah 53:4 reminds us that in His death, the Lord Jesus, “bore our sicknesses and carried our pains.”

3) Let God clear you. 51:9

David asks the God would hide His face from his sins (v. 2,4,5) and blot out (v.1) his iniquities. (v. 2, 5). David compares forgiveness to turning away and not seeing or noticing his sin. He does not see it because His eyes are somewhere else. I know where those eyes are. They are on His dear Son, the Lord Jesus. Seeing Him instead of me, He sees perfect purity and spotless sinlessness. He sees His Son on my behalf, therefore He blots out all my iniquities, wiping my sin slate clean. Perhaps Paul had this in mind when he wrote in Col. 2:14, “He wiped out the certificate of debt with its requirements that was against us... He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” The cross clears the certificate of sin against me. What gladness and joy fills my soul.

IV. Ask God to restore you. 51:10-12

David has confessed his sin. Now he wants to forsake his sin. He has experienced redemption. Now he wants renewal and restoration. If he is to go forward and not backwards in his relationship with God, he needs several important gifts from God. The same is true for you and me in our relationship with the Lord as well. Three wonderful truths, each set in beautiful Hebrew parallelism, reinforce what it is that we need from our God.

1) You need a clean heart. 51:10

“Create” is the word “*bara*.” It denotes and describes something only God does. It is His work of creation or renovation whereby He produces something new.

David asks from the Lord a new, clean heart, a “pure heart” (*NIV*).

Complementing this clean heart, David also requests that “God renew a steadfast spirit” in him. Alan Ross says, David “wants renewed in him a steadfast sort of attitude... he wants to be reliable and steadfast in the choices that he makes.”

Warren Wiersbe notes of this verse,

“Sin not only defiles the heart, but also sin weakens the spirit within. All of us want to have an enthusiastic spirit, a steadfast spirit. But David was vacillating. Every time someone walked in, he wondered, What does he know about me? Whenever people were talking together in a corner, David wondered, Are they talking about me? He had a dirty conscience, a vacillating spirit.

God can create a new heart and give a steadfast spirit. How? Not by our excuses but by our confession. We are so prone to excuse our sin. Instead, David confessed his sin, and God forgave him. Oh yes, David had to pay dearly for his sin. He suffered the discipline of God. But God did wash his heart clean, strengthen his spirit and create something new within.”

2) **You need the Holy Spirit.** **51:11**

The positive requests of vss. 10 and 12 bracket the negative petition of v. 11. David needs forgiveness so he will not be forsaken. On the one hand he asks the Lord not to cast him away from His presence. That is easy to understand. However, it is the 2nd line of the verse that troubles us: “do not take your Holy Spirit away from me.” For those of us who believe Scripture teaches the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer, what are we to make of this troubling statement?

First, Old Testament believers like New Testament believers were regenerated and born again by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Jesus in John 14:16-17 helps us see a new work of the Spirit that began at Pentecost. Whereas He was with believers prior to Acts 2, now He “will be in you” and forever.

Third, aside from the saving activity of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament,

and His ministry by which believers are sanctified and enabled to live holy lives, the Holy Spirit was poured out on select individuals to empower and enable them to perform important tasks in the covenant community of Israel. For example:

- (1) Craftsmen who worked on the tabernacle/temple (Exod. 31:1-6)
- (2) Civil administrators (such as Moses and the 70 elders in Num. 11:16-17, 25-26)
- (3) Military commanders (such as Joshua; Num. 27:18)
- (4) Judges (appointed and empowered to rule over Israel as in Judges 3:10; 6:34)
- (5) Samson (Judges 14:5-6, 19; 15:14; 16:20)
- (6) Prophets (1 Chron. 12:18; Micah 3:8)
- (7) Kings over Israel (Saul in 1 Sam.10:1, 6, 10; 16:14; and David in 1 Sam. 16:12-13)

There was a ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, unrelated to personal salvation or character, designed solely to empower and enable and equip someone for a task to which God had appointed him. Such is what David has in mind in Psalm 51:11. His prayer is that God would not withdraw His enabling Spirit as He did with Saul in 2 Sam. 16:14, but that He would allow His Spirit to remain with Him strengthening, empowering and guiding him as he led the nation of Israel as her King.

Practical Application: We are no different than David. To be faithful and effective servants in the body of Christ, we need the presence and power of the precious Holy Spirit of God.

3) You need the joy of your salvation. 51:12

- As those kept by the power of God (1 Pet. 1:5), we cannot lose our salvation. However, we can lose the joy of our salvation because of unconfessed sin in our lives. Thus David asks the Lord that the joy of God's salvation would be restored. This would happen as he was as the *NASV* says, "sustained with a willing spirit." David had lost the joy of his salvation and desperately wanted it back. This joy would be accompanied by a willing spirit sustained or upheld by God.
- A willing spirit to obey God is the avenue to the joy of one's salvation. Joy and willing obedience go together. Those who obey God know His joy. Those who disobey God know only sadness and disappointment. You can be saved and still lack joy. Why would anyone live like that, especially when they don't have to?

V. Ask God to break you. 51:13-17

Having experienced the forgiveness of God and the return of joy in his salvation, David looks forward to a renewed walk with God. Several vows are voiced to God indicating David's desire to be the renewed man (v.10) he is by God's grace and forgiveness. Such vows can only come truly and genuinely from those who experience the broken spirit and heart of v. 17. Therefore ask God to break you, to humble you, that you might be made fit for service.

1) It prepares you to teach. 51:13

Renewed and restored, broken and contrite, David says I will teach transgressors (vs. 1, 3) your ways and sinners (v. 2, 4, 5) shall be converted (*NIV*, "will turn

back”) to you. I will teach them Your word and the promise of Your forgiveness and the power of Your cleansing. I will instruct them concerning your gracious character (v. 1) and the joy of your salvation (v. 12). Hearing of your grace and goodness, sinners will repent and return (be converted) to you. David pledges to do the work of an evangelist, if you like, of a soul-winner. What he has experienced in grace he must share with others.

2) It prepares you to praise. 51:14-15

These verse follow a purpose/result structure. “Do this and I will do that.” David asked God to deliver him from the guilt of bloodshed, of bloodguiltiness. He was the murderer of Uriah, perhaps not directly but ultimately none the less. Only the God of salvation could acquit him of such a charge. Trusting once again in God’s full forgiveness, David responds with praise.

- “My tongue shall sing aloud of your righteousness.”
- “ My mouth shall show forth your praise.”

As the Lord opens his lips he will bear further witness of the Lord’s salvation. Full forgiveness leads to public praise! His guilty conscience had shamed him into silence. His lips were sealed shut because of his sin, guilt glued shut his mouth of praise. Oh, but forgiveness frees us! It sets the soul free and liberates the lips for praise! Broken in spirit, a new song of praise is born in the soul.

3) It prepares you to worship. 51:16-17

God’s gracious forgiveness has changed David’s perspective on what real worship truly is. It is an issue of the heart pure and simple. In and of themselves alone, God does not desire mere sacrifice nor does He delight in burnt offerings alone.

Bottom-line: outward religious rituals count for nothing apart from a genuine heart of humility and contrition. In fact verse 17 makes a startling declaration. There is a damaged and broken sacrifice God will accept and sinners may bring. It is “a broken and contrite heart.” God broke David’s bones in v. 8 that He might break his heart and spirit in v. 17. When we come before our Lord humble, broken, contrite and submissive we can be assured that such sacrifices God will not despise, He will not reject.

- A broken spirit will then bring a beautiful sacrifice.
- A humble heart will bring a honorable offering.

God will not reject these, He will receive them.

God will not despise these, he will delight in them.

VI. Ask God to bless you. 51:18-19

At first glance these final verses seem out of place, causing some scholars to see them as a later addition. However, the vocabulary here echoes previous themes in the psalm, and the figurative language provides a fitting commentary to the connection that existed between Israel’s King and his people.

1) Let the Lord build you. 51:18

David requests that the Lord “in your good pleasure made Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem” (*NIV*). David did not sin in a vacuum. We never do. His sin hurt him and many others. He in essence asks the Lord to overcome what his sin had done not only to himself, but also his people. Again it could only come out of grace, out of God’s “good pleasure.” Again it was only something God could do. You Lord please build up what I in my sin have torn down.

2) Let the Lord guide you. 51:19

What the Lord builds He accepts. What the Lord redeems He receives.

Restoring what sin had destroyed, what sin had ruined, God now welcomes:

- the sacrifices of the heart.
- the sacrifices of the hands.

The purity of the former ensures the acceptance of the latter. Heart and hands are not in contradiction when it comes to true and genuine worship. They will always go together. But, the heart comes first! Then the hands will be clean and pure, fit for sacrifice, fit for service.

Conclusion:

- It is one of the most famous songs in American religious history. Written by Charlotte Elliot (1789-1871) and sung at the conclusion of almost every Billy Graham Crusade service, it is the hymn “Just As I Am.” Having studied Psalm 51, the 2nd verse of this hymn now finds its inspiration, being the heart-cry not only of David, but untold millions who have looked to Jesus for cleansing and forgiveness.
- “Just as I am and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot.
To thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come! I Come!”