

Text: Psalm 51

Title: “A Plea for Pardon and Purity”

(First in a series, “Praying the Psalms in the City”)

“Most of Scripture speaks **to** us... the Psalms speak **for** us.” So wrote the leading theologian of the third century, Athanasius of Alexandria. He wanted people of his day to realize how great a gift the Psalms are for our relationship with the Living God. “Most of Scripture speaks **to** us... the Psalms speak **for** us.”

Ever since they were penned and set to music, the Psalms have given the people of God words and images with which to communicate with God... in any circumstances of life. The Psalms embrace and help us articulate the full-range of human thought and emotion. I have come to agree with what Martin Luther of the sixteenth century wrote:

“The Psalms is the book of all saints, and everyone in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.” (*Word and Sacrament I, Vol. 35, “Luther’s Works”*, 255-256)

Most of Scripture speaks **to** us *about* the Living God. The Psalms speak **for** us *to* the Living God.

I have also come to agree with John Calvin, also of the sixteenth century, when he argued that in the Psalms we have “an anatomy of all the parts of the [human] soul.”

Nowhere, for me, is the blessing of the Psalms more fully experienced than in Psalm 51. James Houston, in his recent book on the Psalms, cites Christian thinker after Christian thinker throughout the whole of Church history who say of Psalm 51, “This is the boldest prayer anyone can ever pray.” Bold because of the bold words and images used. And bold because of the specific life situation out of which the bold words and images are so boldly prayed.

I preached Psalm 51 from this pulpit seven years ago, in 2004, as a guest preacher. Now I get to preach it as an active member, this “community following Jesus with a heart for the city.” When we read the Psalm you were will how timely it is for this moment in our city’s history. This Psalm gives voice to the cry of so many of us, as we wrestle with what happened in the Stanley Cup riots. As I told the staff this week, I wish I – or someone – one of you! – could read Psalm 51 on every street corner of the city, over every home in the city!

Like many of the Psalms collected for us in the Bible, this Psalm comes to us with a title. In the Hebrew Bible, these titles are often considered the first verse of the Psalm, letting us something of the context in which the Psalm was just prayed. Psalm 51 comes with the title: “For the choir director. A Psalm of David (about whom God said many times, “he is a man after my own heart”), when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he (David) had gone in to Bathsheba. The title tells us that this “boldest of prayers” was first prayed out of one of the most horrendously agonizing life-situations imaginable.

Psalm 51 (NIV)

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
- 5 Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- 6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

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

- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
- 14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
- 15 Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
- 17 My sacrifice, O God, is [b] a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

18 May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
19 Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Review with me the context in which this bold prayer was **first** prayed.

One spring afternoon, King David was walking around in the garden plaza on top of his capital office building in downtown Jerusalem. And he noticed a beautiful woman bathing in her apartment across the street. He found her irresistible. So irresistible that he asked his advisors about her: Who is she? What is her name? And, is she married? He is told her name is Bathsheba, that she **is** married... to an army officer by the name of Uriah... who just happens to be deployed in combat in the desert... and would be away for some time.

The wheels begin to turn.

David sends a messenger to Bathsheba, inviting her to come to his office. Since the invitation came from her King, she could hardly refuse. They meet in David's private suite. One thing led to another, until they end up in bed. She then quietly, discreetly, returns to her apartment.

A little spring flirtation. Easily forgotten. Until David receives a note from Bathsheba with the words: "I am pregnant."

Oh, great! Now what? This has all the makings of a terrible scandal that could cripple his government.

What is David to do?

The wheels of fear begin to turn. And as it often is the case when we are afraid, the wheels of manipulation began to turn, the wheels of deceit.

David sends word to the commanding officers of the Israeli Army, to Joab, asking that Bathsheba's husband Uriah be sent home for some "R and R." the hope was that while he was home, Uriah would have sex with Bathsheba ... and then no one would ever suspect anything about her pregnancy.

Shrewd plan. Except for an unforeseen glitch. Uriah was a "career" military officer, one of those officers who lives and breaths loyalty to his troops. If his soldiers could not have the pleasures of time with their wives, then why should he? So, out of loyalty to his guys still in harm's way, Uriah declares that while "on leave" he would not sleep with Bathsheba.

Wonderful! Now what?

The wheels keep turning. David decides to send Uriah back to the front lines with sealed orders that he is to be placed in the most dangerous battle zone... where he most certainly would be killed.

A week or so later word comes to the capital that Uriah has died. After an appropriate period of mourning, David and Bathsheba were married and the child was born.

The manipulation and deceit seemed to have worked.

But David could not find any peace of mind. A sign of grace! Thank God that when we sin and try to scheme our way to peace it does not work.

For nearly a year David wrestled with what he had done. He tried to forget... he tried to sweep it under the carpet. But nothing worked. As he prayed in Psalm 32, "When I kept silent, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long... my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer" (32:3-4). David learned that although we might be able to play games with our minds, we can never play games with our bodies; our bodies are never deceived, our bodies will not let us avoid reality.

Then something totally unexpected happens. Enter a man named Nathan. Nathan is a prophet, a faithful prophet. It turns out that God had seen all that David did... God had seen all that David tried to hide. God knows David's secret wrestling. So God sends Nathan to speak a redeeming word. Although, it did not at first feel redeeming.

Nathan approaches the king "through the backdoor" so to speak, as prophets tend to do. Nathan tells the king that there is a problem that needs David's expert advice.

Nathan begins, "There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor."

"Yes," says the King, "go on".

2Samuel 12: "The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb; which he bought and nourished and it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him."

By the way, Nathan is giving David all kinds of clues: The Hebrew word for "daughter", for instance, is the short form of the name Bathsheba!

Nathan continues: "Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him. Rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

Nathan stops. And waits.

Then the text says, “David’s anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. And he must make restitution for the lamb four-fold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.’”

Nathan then looks David in the eyes. And speaks the crushing but redeeming word: “You are the man!” “You are the man! Why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, you have taken his wife to be your wife.” You are the man!

It was then that David prayed Psalm 51, which explains the references in verse 14 to “bloodguiltiness.” “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God....” David was guilty of shedding an innocent man’s blood.

Psalm 51 has been called the highest moral and spiritual peak of the Old Testament. It is a plea... a plea for pardon... and a plea for purity. Verse 1: “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.”

What else could David do but pray as boldly? What could he possibly do to rectify the situation: he cannot make Uriah come back to life. What could he possibly do to atone for everything he had done?

Apparently he thought about offering animal sacrifices. As the King of Israel he had it at his disposal countless sheep and goats and rams and bulls. Whatever the sacrificial system demanded, David could give.

But David knew the laws of sacrifice. He knew that the sins he had committed had no prescribed remedy. His sins are “capital sins.” No sacrifice was available for such sins! Which is why he prays in verse 16, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.”

David realizes that he has only one option... only one hope. It is the only option anyone ever has. All he – and we – can do is offer the sacrifice of what David calls “a broken spirit and a contrite heart.” The sacrifice of a life with nothing to plead but the mercy and grace of God. Verse 17 ... please fix your eyes on verse 17. “My sacrifice, O God”... or “The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

How David knew this ... we do not know. What we do know is that David had no other option. Neither do I. Neither do you. Neither does anyone else in our city.

The question is: What is this “broken spirit and contrite heart”? What does this sacrifice – which God will not despise – look like in concrete, practical terms?

Well... here is why Psalm 51 is such a gift to us: the whole Psalm comes out of and models David’s broken spirit and contrite heart.

As David pours out his heart, three characteristics of the sacrifice-God-will-not-despise emerge for us. Three characteristics of the only sacrifice any of us can offer when we realize the gravity of our sin.

I.) First, “the broken and contrite heart” comes clean. It stops denying reality. It “gets real”... it comes clean before God and others.

David admits that he was wrong. He aggress with God that what he has done is terribly wrong. He does not play the game many of us play.

1. He does not bargain, saying: “Yes, but look at all the other good things I’ve done with my life.”
2. He does not argue theology saying, “A God of love would not condemn.”
3. He does not rationalize or offer excuses, saying “it’s a genetic thing, God” or “the present immoral climate unconsciously influences me”, or “she was so beautiful, and so lovely, and I wanted to make her happy” or “it was consensual.”
4. Nor does David water down God’s revealed will saying, “adultery is not adultery when done in love!”

No, David calls a spade a spade. Nathan’s “You are the man!” had set him free from the games. He “comes clean”. He stops running and hiding.

Indeed, David boldly faces reality. Verse 4, “Against You, You only, have I sinned.”

Which is why he prays verse 9, “Hide Your face from my sins...” Verse 11, “Do not cast me from Your presence... do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.” It is God whom David has offended and violated. Yes, he has offended and violated Bathsheba and Uriah – Big Time!! But it is God whom David has fundamentally offended and violated.

Notice the words David uses in his come-clean-confession: sin, transgression, iniquity. He uses them in the first lines of his plea: verse 1 – “Blot out my transgressions”, verse 2 – “Wash me from my iniquity... cleanse me from my sin.” Sin, transgression, iniquity.

Sin. The Hebrew word means “miss the mark.” The verb is used of shooting an arrow... and missing the target. It means to fail to reach the goal set before us. “All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God,” says Apostle Paul (Romans 3:23).

Transgression. It means more than “cross the line”. It has to do with open defiance of lawful authority (John Goldingay, *Songs From a Strange Land*, p. 154). When I meet a “No Trespassing” sign... but trespass anyway... I have not only crossed a forbidden line, I have defied the person who put up the sign. Transgression is too mild a translation. It should be rendered “rebellion”. David admits that he not only missed the mark; he has rebelled against Yahweh as Lord. God said “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” David did it anyway. God said “You shall not steal.” David took Bathsheba anyway. God said, “You shall not commit adultery.” David did it anyway. God said “You shall not murder.” David did it anyway! All said, however big or small, is rebellion. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it so well. Speaking of David’s specific actions, he says,

“the sin of that episode is not finally sexual violation (against Bathsheba) or murder (against Uriah), but it is the sin of pride against Yahweh, of imagining that one is autonomous and can live one’s life without reference to Yahweh and Yahweh’s commandments. The sin is thinking that the commandments can somehow be superseded” (p. 102).

Sounds so contemporary!

Miss the mark. Rebellion.

And iniquity. A strong word. It refers to that deeply rooted thing in us by which we choose, deliberately so, the wrong road. Imagine that: deliberately choose the road that ends up hurting us. Iniquity. We could use the synonyms “waywardness” or “twistedness”. That strange perversion that keeps choosing the wrong, destructive way.

I have shared in other contexts that when I was in Beijing, China a number of years ago, I had the privilege of a number of “secret” meetings with Chinese pastors and students. The highlight for me was a meeting with a graduate in psychology. He had been given a copy of the Bible, and had a number of questions he wanted to ask to “visiting theologians” – me! The question which most concerned him most was “what does the Bible mean by sin?” He said he understood failure and he understood rebellion. But he sensed the Bible was meaning something more, something deeper, something more insidious. When we talked about “iniquity” the lights went on! And he said, “*that* is what is ruining China... and for that we need a Saviour.” *That* is what is ruining Vancouver, Canada, and the US, and Australia, the Philippines, Russia, Korea... for *that* we need a Saviour.

Sin, transgression, iniquity. Missing the mark again and again. Rebelling against God, again and again. Twisted perversity, again and again.

David presses the matter even further. Verse 5: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Actually it is stronger: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (51:5). Not a “politically correct” line, is it? David realizes and acknowledges that this missing the mark, rebellion, twistedness, has been the atmosphere in which he has lived his whole life. “I was brought forth in iniquity.” He is not saying that the act of conception is sinful. Nor is he implying anything about his mother’s morals. Nor is he saying that sin is somehow genetically transmitted. He is simply saying that human nature is infected... and all of us suffer the infection from birth. Even our best deeds are affected by mixed motives. Right? We not only miss the mark, we not only rebel, we not only perversely choose the wrong way... we are prisoners to it all... from birth. Which is why we need a second birth. We need someone to come and get us out of prison, cause us to be born again (John 3).

The first characteristic of the “broken spirit and contrite heart” which God does not despise: Coming clean. No more playing games.

II.) The second characteristic: casting oneself... casting oneself on the revealed character of God.

In specific, David casts himself on the character of God revealed to the people of God from the beginning of salvation history: mercy, unfailing love, great compassion. David brings them to the forefront in the first line of his prayer. Verse 1: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love.... According to Your great compassion.”

David is going back to square one, to the foundational revelation given to Moses. Moses asks to see God’s glory, to see God as God really is. God told Moses to hide in a cave, to protect himself against the luminosity of glory. God then passed by the cave, saying – Exodus 34:6-7 – “Yahwah, Yahweh, the God compassionate and merciful, slow to anger, but rich in unfailing love and truth. Who shows his loyalty to thousands, who forgives iniquity, rebellion and failure.” (with help from Goldingay, 160).

David throws himself on that revelation. “Have mercy on me, O God” – act toward me with unearned favor. “According to your unfailing love.” The word *hesed*, God’s unfailing love sealed in the Covenant. O God, act toward me out of Your *hesed*... your loyalty to the Covenant. We Christians can add, “Act toward me out of Your loyalty to the New Covenant, sealed in the Blood of Jesus. “According to the abundance of Your compassion.” O God, act toward me out of Your tender feeling for me. The word “compassion” is related to the Hebrew word for “womb” and therefore, implies the feelings a woman has for the children of her womb.

David has no other option but to approach this side of God’s character. Neither do I. Neither do you. To appeal to God’s mercy, to appeal to God’s commitment to the Covenant of grace, and to appeal to “the pull of God’s feelings” for those who know they are helpless.

A “broken and contrite heart” first “come clean” and second, casts itself on the very heart of the Living God. “This is who You say You are... and I throw myself on You.”

III.) And third, the “broken spirit and contrite heart” cries out for a miracle. On the basis of the revealed character of God, it asks for nothing less than a miracle. It is this third characteristic of the plea that David majors on in Psalm 51.

In verses 6-14 David prays a series of imperatives. Teach me, purge me, wish me, fill me, create in me, put within me, restore to me, uphold me, deliver me. All imperatives. Not because David is presuming to command God. But because David knows only God can do what needs to be done. Only God can deal with sin, transgression, and iniquity.

Now here is the interesting thing about the verbs Daniel uses. They all come from everyday day life; they were not originally “religious” words. And they paint vivid pictures of the miracle he is requesting.

Verse 7, “Cleanse me, wish me, purge me”. It is his way of saying, “remove the stain from my life.” I cannot do it Lord. David could echo what God later said through the prophet Jeremiah: “Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your iniquity is still before me” (2:22). You, O Lord; You must remove the stain!

The verb “cleanse” is the same verb the leprosy victim would use – “cleanse me of this disease.” The verb “wash” is the same verb launderers use. It’s a strong verb, referring to the treading of dirty clothes on the banks of the river. David is not asking for a gentle rinse. He is asking for a thorough scrubbing (Goldingay, p. 162)! “Scrub me,” Lord. “Get the dirt out.”

The verb “purge” is stronger yet! As Derek Kidner says, the nearest English equivalent would be “de-sin” (*Psalms 1-72*, p. 191). Yes, Lord, de-sin me. Do a miracle! “Cleanse me, wash me, purge me.” Is that your desire? Of course it is!

Another picture of the miracle he requests: “blot out”. Verse 1: “Blot out my transgressions/rebellions” (51:1). Verse 9: “Blot out all my iniquity” (51:9). David is working with the image of a record book. He sees his transgressions and iniquities, his rebellion and twistedness, listed in God’s ledger. And he dares to plead for God to erase of all if! To wipe the slate clean. Erase the rebellious and erase the twisted perversion. David has no other hope. Neither do I! Had some prophet once told David that God would later say through the prophet Isaiah, “I, I am He who blots out your rebellion for my own sake, and I will not reverse your sin” (43:25).

And wonder of wonders! The Living God does it... He erases the record. As Old Testament scholar John Goldingay says, God erases the record so thoroughly “that He never says, on some future occasion, “oh, you’ve done that again, have you?”” (p. 165). What a miracle! God will never say, “Oh, you’ve done that again” because He has chose to erase it from the ledger; it no longer affects our relationship with Him.

Wash me, cleanse me, purge me, blot out all my sin.

And verse 10 – “Create in me.” “Create in me a pure heart, O God.” To the Hebrew mind, the heart is the center of the personality. The heart in the place where all the input is sorted out and where decisions are made. Create in me “a new control center,” O God. David is asking for a new creative work of God!

Which is why he uses the verb he does. “Create.” In Hebrew, *bara*. Ring a bell? Only God can *bara*. No where in Scripture is this verb used of every other subject than is this verb used of every other subject than Yahweh. No human can *bara*. We can create in other ways; we can *asah*. We can take one thing, and out of it make something else. So can God. But only God can *bara*. For to *bara* is to take nothing... and out of nothing make something. Genesis 1 – in the beginning... nothing. And out of the nothing God *baras* the heavens and the earth. Only the Living God can create in that sense. Only God can create a brand new person.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God.” *Bara* in me a whole new control centre. With a “right spirit” (51:10), and a “willing spirit” (51:12). Firm, steady, delighting to do the will of my Creator. Is that your desire? Of course it is!

Oh God... start over... again... and make me new... again.

Which is precisely what Jesus Christ comes to do! As C.S. Lewis said, Jesus does not come to make us “nice people”. He comes to make us “new creations.”

I told you it is one of the boldest prayers any human can ever pray! A bold prayer the Living God will *never* despise!

From all we can tell, David lived the rest of his life in a spirit and heart of Psalm 51.

But I wonder how often he wondered if it were all true. That is, I wonder if he had any assurance that his plea was heard and answered. For you see, David knew that a sacrifice for sin was still necessary. That is why he ends his prayer – verse 19 – referring to “righteous sacrifices” on the altar. Foundational to Biblical faith is the conviction that “without the shedding of blood there is no pardon” (Hebrews 9:22).

Which brings us to the miracle of miracles. David did not know why God did not demand a blood sacrifice from him. But I know! So do many of you! For I know, as you know, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We know that in Jesus God Himself became the sacrifice for David! And for me! And for you! On a Roman cross in 33 A.D., in the same city where David seduced Bathsheba and made plans to murder Uriah, Jesus of Nazareth, Son of David – the Son of David, the Son of God, the Son of Mercy, the Lamb of God – offered Himself as the one complete, sufficient, final sacrifice for sin. The debt I owe was cancelled, blotted out, when Jesus took the record of my sin and nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:14). And having risen from the dead, He is now at work making out of this regularly-missing-the-mark, rebellion-prone, twisted person, a brand new creation.

And all I have to do... all you have to do... all the people of our city have to do... is come to Him with a “broken spirit and a contrite heart.” All we need to do is come clean, cast ourselves on the revealed character of God, and cry out for the miracle.

Many of you know the hymn “Just As I Am.” It was made famous by Billy Graham who had it sung at the conclusion of his messages in his evangelical crusades. “Just as I am without one plea... O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” Billy would speak just after singing “How Great Thou Art” and then lead into “Just As I Am” after speaking. It is an appropriate hymn for those who are coming to Jesus Christ for the first time. But it was not written for such an occasion. The woman who wrote it, Charlotte Elliot, in 1834, had been a Christian for 17 years. And after years of wrestling with the weight of sin, the gospel of Psalm 51 finally broke through to her soul. It was then that she sang:

Just as I am without one plea,
but that Thy blood was shed for me.
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come....
Just as I am, and waiting not,
to rid my soul of one dark blot,
to Thee, whose blood can cleans each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come....
Just as I am Thou wilt receive,

wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, release;
Because thy promise ... I believe...
“a broken spirit and contrite heart You will not despise.”
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.