

Psalm 51:1-3

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David looks deep into his own heart and is confronted with his own sin. He comes to the realization that he needs more than forgiveness. He needs cleansing in the innermost being.

The heading of this *Psalm* gives us some context in which to consider the meaning of David's cry and prayer. *For the choir director* is a familiar term that is found in the heading of fifty-five of the psalms. While most of us have some familiarity with the term *choir director* and probably have a definite image of a person standing before a group of people and leading or directing them in a song, the term here is referring to a liturgical officiant. While we cannot determine exactly what comprised that role, there is certainly a connection to song, music, and expressions of worship.

The phrase *A Psalm of David* is used frequently throughout the psalms. The Hebrew word, "mizmor," translated as "A Psalm" describes a song sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. The reference to *when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba* gives us an historical setting that provides a context to how David arrived at this place to search his inmost being. The incident with *Bathsheba* is described in 2 Samuel 11:1-12:25. Through use of a story, *Nathan the prophet* caused David to see his own wickedness in committing adultery with Bathsheba, then indirectly killing her husband as an attempted cover-up.

Psalm 51 is usually categorized as a "penitential psalm." Biblical penitence is a condition of the heart that seeks reconciliation with God by taking responsibility for the wrong, offense, or sin that heart has done against God. There are seven of these in the Psalter (Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). As David approaches the Lord in these penitential psalms, there is a marked difference of the basis of where his hope lies when he seeks the Lord:

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;

According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions (v 1).

This opening provides a contrast to the beginning of other penitential psalms. Psalm 51 begins with a plea to God to be *gracious* to David *according to His lovingkindness*. Other psalms seem to first think of avoiding God's wrath, anger, and chastening:

- Psalm 6:1: "O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, Nor chasten me in your wrath."
- Psalm 38:1 begins "O Lord, rebuke me not in your wrath, and chasten me not in your burning anger."
- Psalm 102:1 cries out, "Hear my prayer, O Lord! And let my cry for help come to You."

But David begins this psalm with this petition: *Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness (v 1).*

The Hebrew word "hanan," translated as *gracious*, encompasses the grace and mercy of God, which are two sides of the same coin. When it comes to God, mercy is often thought of as "not getting what we deserve" while grace is "receiving something we have not earned." This is a reasonable thought regarding God since there is no standard that exists apart from God; from Him and in Him all things exist (Colossians 1:16-17). Therefore, no one can cause God to be indebted in any way. To the extent God casts His favor upon anyone, it is a matter of His being *gracious* to them.

King David has been caught, exposed, and held to account for his primary role in the circumstances surrounding the taking of Bathsheba and the death of Uriah the Hittite. While he has weathered the immediate political and relational

storms of consequences, there remains a critical matter to which David must attend: reconciliation with and restoration to *God*. The Lord—who is purity, love, and righteousness—hates sin; it is a barrier between Him and those created in His image (Psalm 5:4; Isaiah 59:2).

David begins the restorative journey with an immediate acknowledgement of his own need. His situation is of his own creation and not to be blamed on another. Knowing he has only his flaws to bring before the Lord, David wisely appeals for that which he does not deserve. *Gracious* (Hebrew “hanan”) describes the outcome for which David prays: mercy, favor, the bestowing of non-condescending pity without respect to merit. His first words establish the position from which he implores the boon of divine charity: David does not merit *God’s* kind attentions but nevertheless will seek them. Even the psalmist’s direct address to *God* (Hebrew “Elohim”) is a reflection of subordination. Here David’s use of *God’s* name is not the relationally inviting personal name of *God*, Yahweh, but a more formal title that underscores divine supremacy over mortal beings.

“Hanan” (*gracious*) is the Hebrew word used in the blessing the Lord gave Israel’s priests to bless the children of Israel:

“The Lord make His face shine on you, And be gracious [“hanan”] to you.” (Numbers 6:25)

The mercy anyone can receive through Jesus Christ is that we do not receive the death that is eternal separation from God (Romans 3:23-24). The grace of God is that we receive by faith what we cannot earn: the free gift of eternal life in Christ (John 3:14-15; Ephesians 2:8-9).

David makes no appeal to his own circumstances, but he knows that the only hope he has is the *graciousness* that comes from the *lovingkindness of God*.

The basis upon which humans are reconciled to God is unchanged from Old Testament to New: we are saved by grace, through faith. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Then he adds in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” All of us have sinned and what we deserve is the death that is eternal separation from God.

But God has mercy toward us in the current era, as Romans 5:6 says, “For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” Then, in Romans 5:8, Paul follows with “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Eternal life and the forgiveness of sin is a gift of God to anyone who believes in Jesus (John 3:16).

To learn more about how to receive this gift, see the Bible Says article: [“What is Eternal Life? How to Gain the Gift of Eternal Life.”](#)

This mercy and grace toward humanity is all *According to Your lovingkindness*. God’s *lovingkindness* encompasses His divine love: His unfailing, unconditional, lavishing, eternal love. This *lovingkindness* is always initiated by God, as the Apostle John wrote:

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

Though David sees his own sin as he reveals in this Psalm, he comes to the place that his only hope is the mercy, grace, and love of God. As we see later, his penitence is complete, open, transparent and with total culpability for his own sin.

Believers in Jesus are also encouraged to confess their sins both to God (1 John 1:9) and to one another (James 5:16). This confession is not necessary to retain God's free gift of eternal life. Since believers are placed into the Body of Christ, for Jesus to reject any believer would be to deny Himself. As Paul asserts:

“If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (2 Timothy 2:13)

So in addition to highlighting the reality that humans are sinful by nature, and in need of a savior, this psalm of David also demonstrates what God's people should do when they become aware of sin. We often commit sin of which we are unaware (1 John 1:8). Thankfully, every sin was nailed to the cross with Jesus (Colossians 2:14). Therefore, His blood covers even sins of which we are unaware (1 John 1:7).

However, when we become aware of sin, we have the responsibility to confess and repent. If we refuse to do this, it breaks our fellowship with God:

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

King David believed on God. He is called “a man after His own heart” even before he became king (1 Samuel 13:14). Here David demonstrates how to approach God's throne and receive forgiveness in order to restore fellowship with Him. Those who have believed upon Jesus need to have their consciences cleansed; each person can do so by entering into God's presence and receiving God's mercy (Hebrews 9:14, 10:19).

David's example shows us to come to God with honesty and true confession and repentance. If we seek to justify ourselves and offer God disclaimers, then we are not following this pattern of repentance. That is of course a temptation when we think first of our situation, circumstances, or the actions of others. We can infer that David rationalized his actions prior to being confronted by the prophet Nathan and shown his sin before God (1 Samuel 12:1-13). He now confesses the darkness of his own sin and casts himself upon God's graciousness and His *lovingkindness*.

Confession is the first thing a believer should do after recognizing that he has sinned against God. See the Bible Says article—[“Guilt and Repentance: The Healthy Way to Deal with Remorse.”](#)

David continues his prayer of confession, asking *According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions* (v 1b).

The words *compassion* and *transgressions* are not necessarily words we would use together and yet we find them both here in this sentence. In the next few verses David will use three terms almost interchangeably: *transgressions*, iniquity, and sin. *Transgressions*, as used throughout the Psalms and the Old Testament, points to the breaking of a law or statute. These *transgressions* are, specifically, violations of the law of God.

God gave His law to show humans how to live according to His (good) design. His design was for humanity to live in social harmony, justice, and flourishing. When we listen to God's ways, and choose to love one another as we love ourselves, our communities gain this great benefit (Matthew 22:37-39; Galatians 5:13-15).

When one transgresses God's law they are operating outside God's (good) design; that is considered sin. Any willful violation of the known law of God is deliberate sin. David came to a point of taking full responsibility for his sin against Uriah. David's use of the three terms (*transgressions*, iniquity, and sin) in the context of his own repentance, is to declare the completeness of sin in his own inner being as well as his actions. In this he is like the Apostle Paul who declared:

“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.” (Romans 7:18)

As David contemplates his sin nature he appeals to the *compassion* of God. The Hebrew word translated *compassion* is also translated “mercies.” It is used throughout Scripture as an expression flowing from the deepest level of the inner being. In making this petition, David is expressing faith that God’s innermost character is full of *compassion*.

When David cries out for God to *blot out my transgressions*, it is much more than just a legal transaction, it is with the hope and belief that God cares about us at His deepest level. As ought always to be the goal of our confession before God, David seeks here to restore his fellowship with God.

David makes no pretense about his culpability. He does not seek to avoid nor deflect blame for wrongdoing as he makes his plea to *God*. The psalmist king is seeking an undeserved forgiveness that will end the separation sin has created between himself and *God* in whose image humanity was lovingly created. The multiple *transgressions* (Hebrew plural “psha’im”)—rebellions, breaches, crimes—are clearly David’s handiwork. Only *God* can unmake—*blot out*—lift the stains, the enduring and otherwise soul-permeating guilt resulting from such betrayals of the divine-human relationship.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin.

Verse 2 serves as a poetic repetition of the plea David initially makes in the psalm’s opening verse. This is not a prayer asking that he might avoid the consequences that accompany and follow *iniquity* and *sin*, equivalent terms referring to the transgressions committed by the king. In 2 Samuel 12:11–12, the prophet Nathan made it painfully clear that consequences must come although David is to be forgiven. Yet, even though he will not escape the results and heartache to follow, the psalmist seeks to repair that most vital life relationship which he has broken: communion with his *God* (Isaiah 40:31). The life and ministry of Jesus Christ clarified the importance and eternal character of our relationship with *God* (John 3:16; Romans 5:8).

David requests:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin (v 2).

David is not asking God to simply take the *sin* off his record. He is asking God to purify his heart (Psalm 51:10). He is asking God to make him the kind of person who loves to do God’s will rather than his own.

Just as David has used multiple words to describe his *sin*, he now calls on God to *blot out, wash, and cleanse* the completeness of sin in him. Though we may consider this a penitential Psalm, David does not use the word forgiveness when he refers to his own repentance or contrition. While there may be little or no significance to this fact, it may help us better understand the New Testament concept of forgiveness.

When we hear David’s rich and varied appeals to God concerning his sin, it can help to remind us of the completeness of sin. In addition to the words *blot out, cleanse, and wash*, David in Psalm 103:3 refers to a God “Who pardons all your iniquities” and in verse 4 “Who redeems your life from the pit” and in verse 12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

In these admonitions we are reminded of the words of John the Baptist in John 1:29, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” As David faces and admits his *sin*, he opens himself to God’s provision for *sin*. He asks for God to *Wash* his iniquity, but not just *Wash*, but to *Wash me thoroughly*. The action *Wash* is an admission that forgiveness is of God. David is not claiming he is owed anything. He is, rather, asking God to do the work, to *wash him thoroughly*.

Wash (Hebrew “kabas”) suggests a vigorous scouring of readily visible, easily reached dirt. *Cleanse* (Hebrew “tahir”), on the other hand, suggests a deeper, purifying, whole-being detoxification and eradication of elements foreign or harmful to one’s bodily and spiritual health.

We might imagine a child asking his mother to scrub behind his ears (*Wash me thoroughly*). In the New Testament era, when we pray, we might invoke the picture that Jesus bore all our sins upon the cross (Colossians 2:14). We might further recognize that *sin* breaks our fellowship/harmony both with God as well as with other people (Matthew 6:14-15). We can trust the nature of God to forgive us, and cleanse our conscience from *sin*. However, this process begins with both knowing as well as admitting our *sin*.

For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me (v 3). As we read the historical context in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, we may ask the question, “When did David *know* his *transgressions*?” David was a man anointed by God to be king of Israel. God said He picked David to be king because he had a heart like His own (1 Samuel 13:14).

Consistent with the description of David as having a heart after God, he had depended on the Lord and sought the Lord on many occasions. He had been blessed by God many times over. Certainly, he knew the law of God and would have known when he transgressed that law. We do not know the complete context of what David thought and did that led him to the place where he could say to himself and to God, *For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me*.

What we do know from 2 Samuel 12:1 is “Then the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to David.” Nathan brought the word of the Lord to David, showed him the evil that had been done, and the righteousness of the Lord. That led David to the inevitable conclusion in 2 Samuel 12:13, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

For followers of Jesus in the New Testament era, we may not have a prophet like Nathan to reveal the word of the Lord to us. However, all believers in Christ have the indwelling Holy Spirit, who is always contending against our flesh, and leading us to walk in God’s (good) design, which is what the Bible calls “righteousness” (Galatians 5:17). Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit in John 16:8 when He says, “And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” As we allow the Holy Spirit to search our heart, He will convince us of the holiness, righteousness, and love of the Father, and in that light we will *know our transgressions*.

David also acknowledges that *My sin is ever before me*. We can certainly see how David could say that, because in his case he is pondering his own transgressions of adultery, deceit, and murder. But in the following verses, David goes beyond just his actions, but to what motivated him or led him to do these evil things. As the prophet Nathan had said when confronting David:

“Why have you despised the word of the Lord by doing evil in His sight?” (2 Samuel 12:9)

David realized he needed something radical to take place within him so he could move forward and fulfill the purpose of God for his life. David recognized his inner darkness when he saw that *My sin is ever before me*.

Paul stated something similar of himself, that nothing good dwelt within his old nature, what he called the Flesh (Romans 7:18). The Apostle John points to this as well:

“If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:6-7)

These verses all tell us that although we are made new creations in Christ when we believe, we still have our old, sinful nature (2 Corinthians 5:17). And although there is nothing that can redeem the old nature, we can walk apart from it in the power of the Spirit. However, that is not possible without first acknowledging this reality, that we are sinful by nature. Thus we can say, like David, *My sin is ever before me*.

As the LORD told Cain before he murdered his brother Abel: “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Genesis 4:7), so is our *sin* always crouching at our door desiring to consume us. Until we are given our new bodies in the new creation, our *sin* will *ever be before* us. The

only way we can “master it” (Genesis 4:7) is through relying on God’s Spirit as Jesus did when He encountered temptation (Luke 4:1, 17).

When we acknowledge this reality of our old nature, it helps us recognize that the path to walking in, and gaining the benefit from, our new life in Christ is to confess this reality, set self aside, and walk in the newness of life through the power of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16).

Sometimes our *sin* may not seem as dramatic as that of David, but if we do not face it, acknowledge it, and cry out to God to *blot out*, *wash thoroughly*, and *cleanse me*, we will slip into the darkness of our old nature. This is tragic, because we have been freed from the slavery, addiction, separation, and dysfunction of *sin* through the resurrection power of Jesus, but we can choose to slide back into it (Romans 6:17, 20-23).

When believers choose to walk in the darkness, our heart can become hardened to the prompting and convicting of the Holy Spirit (1 Timothy 4:2). The way to avoid all this is to acknowledge the reality of our inner self.

Biblical Text:

For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Be gracious to me, O God according to Your lovingkindness;

According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity

And cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,