

# *Pursuing God*

## In Step with the Psalms

### Lesson 16: Psalm 51

#### The Path of Forgiveness

##### *Stay on the Path ~*

The marble yard of Florence, Italy, is where an aspiring artist would go to cast a discerning eye over innumerable slabs of stone in anticipation of finding the one that would challenge his craftsmanship while at the same time attract the world's attention. There Michelangelo saw the Duccio block, a seventeen foot tall massive piece of stunning marble. Many craftsmen would look but pass it by once the enormous gouge in its center came into view. Michelangelo saw the severe flaw but he saw more, much more. He realized it contained a larger-than-life depiction of David that just needed to be let out. This master artist moved the stone into his studio, setting his heart and hands to the task and, as he did, the cold stone took on a breathtaking life form, a masterpiece unrivaled in modern time.

Similar to the slab of marble bearing his name, David had a serious flaw that almost ruined him. Had not his Master intervened, he may never have found the way to repentance and restoration. Psalm 51 contains David's humble prayer of confession for forgiveness after the worst moral failure of his life. He wrote it looking back on his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband Uriah that resulted in David breaking numerous commandments of the Lord. After harboring and hiding his sin for a year, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David, leading him to repent.

The message of Psalm 51 is that no matter how egregious the sin, all who come to God in a spirit of brokenness and humility can appeal for forgiveness. The psalm stands as a paradigm of prayer that has been used by saints of all ages to turn the course of their lives back to the Lord. Countless people have been comforted and encouraged to know that if David could be forgiven, they can too. The appeal to God's compassion, mercy and grace can lead not only to forgiveness but also to restoration of a Spirit-filled life of fellowship and service.

##### *Did you know ~*

Psalm 51 is one of 116 other psalms that have a superscription added to the beginning of the psalm that provides a notation identifying the author, historical context, and how it is to be sung. These were added at a later date and were included to assist the worship leader as the congregation sang them in praise to God.

## Psalm 51

### A Prayer of Repentance

To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David  
when Nathan the prophet went to Him,  
after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

1 Have mercy upon me, O God,  
According to Your lovingkindness;  
According to the multitude of Your  
tender mercies,

Blot out my transgressions.

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

3 For I acknowledged my transgressions,  
And my sin is always before me.

4 Against You, You only, have I sinned,  
And done this evil in Your sight—  
That You may be found just when  
You speak,  
And blameless when You judge.

5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
And in sin my mother conceived me.

6 Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts,  
And in the hidden part You will make  
me to know wisdom.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Make me hear joy and gladness,  
That the bones You have broken may  
rejoice.

9 Hide Your face from my sins,  
And blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me away from Your presence,  
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,  
And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,  
And sinners shall be converted to You.

14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,  
The God of my salvation,  
And my tongue shall sing aloud of  
Your righteousness.

15 O Lord, open my lips,  
And my mouth shall show forth  
Your praise.  
16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else  
I would give it;  
You do not delight in burnt offering.  
17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,  
A broken and a contrite heart—  
These, O God, You will not despise.  
  
18 Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion;  
Build the walls of Jerusalem.  
19 Then You shall be pleased with the  
sacrifices of righteousness,  
With burnt offering and whole  
burnt offering;  
Then they shall offer bulls on  
Your altar.

(Scripture from the New King James Bible, ©1980 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.)

**Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer.**

**Read Psalm 51.**

*Listen to the psalm ~ First impressions*

What is the *tone* of Psalm 51? What stands out to you from your initial reading?

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*Put a psalm in your heart ~ (Memory verse) Psalm 51:10*

(Write out the verse in the spaces below. Practice it each time you open your lesson.)

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast  
spirit within me.*

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## *Learn the lessons of the psalm ~*

*Selah* (Think about):

The path of forgiveness involves a genuine repentance that is accompanied by a plea to God on the basis of His grace and mercy.

### *I. Forgiveness begins with a plea for mercy. vv. 1–2*

David prefaces a plea for mercy by recognizing God’s loving-kindness, or on the basis of His compassion—*rehem*, Hebrew for “the bowels” of sympathy. His appeal, “Have mercy on me,” is a desperate request to not receive what he *does* deserve—punishment—but instead, what he *does not* deserve—mercy.

1. In what three ways does David phrase his appeal? vv. 1–2

In the first, *blot out*, means to erase from the record—never to be seen again. In the next, he refers to himself as a filthy garment, asking God to *wash away* his iniquity. In the last, the word *cleanse* is a reference to being purified for temple worship under the ceremonial law. All three reflect David’s desire for total forgiveness from his *transgressions*, *iniquity*, and *sin*.

## *Touchpoint ~*

The word *wash* (Hebrew *kabas* in vv. 2, 7) was commonly used to refer to laundering clothes. The word compares the concept of forgiveness with the washing of clothes to remove the dirt and defilement. In verse 7, David refers to the hyssop branch the lepers would use to cleanse their physical disease (Leviticus 14:6–7). David realized his sin had defiled him to the point that he could not do anything to help himself.

- Personal: Do you have a biblical view of yourself and your sin nature? Please comment.

## *II. Forgiveness involves the confession of sin. vv. 3–6*

Take a few minutes to read the account of David's sin in 2 Samuel 11:1–27 and 12:1–15. By committing adultery and murder, David crossed the line God had drawn in the law. He had missed the mark God had set for him by willfully rebelling and giving over to sin. Since there was no atonement provided in the law for such deliberate sin (Leviticus 20:10; Numbers 35:31–32), David's only hope was to appeal to God's mercy and grace. Notice that by accepting responsibility for his sin, David fully understood the gravity of it as well as the enormous consequence he had to pay.

1. Pick out the words that reveal David understood the enormity of his sin.
  - a. v. 3:
  - b. v. 4:
  - c. v. 5:
2. With full understanding that he had been living a lie, what does David declare that God wants from him? v. 6

The word *truth* (Hebrew *emet*) speaks of dependability, firmness, certainty, or faithfulness. It is an aspect of God's own character and a characteristic of those who belong to Him. Here in verse 6, it is used specifically to refer to that which conforms to the high standard God expects.

### *Pause & ponder ~*

It is presumptuous to think that we know the extent to which we would go; the lines we think we would not cross when tempted by sin. The Bible says only God knows the heart of man and He is very specific in determining that it is evil in nature. Jeremiah 17:9 says, *The heart is **deceitful** above all things, and **desperately wicked**; who can know it?* Briefly define the words in bold print.

- *deceitful—*
- *desperately wicked—*

*I, the Lord, **search** the heart; I **test** the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.*

- The consideration of David's sin in the context of the above verse is a wake-up call to appeal for forgiveness on the basis of God's mercy and grace alone, not on our own merit. If left to ourselves, we would all merit judgment. Do you have something to confess to Him today? Does this move you to appeal to God's **grace**—God's *riches at Christ's expense*?

### *III. Forgiveness requires the need for cleansing. vv. 7–12*

David's sins had taken a toll by affecting his whole person: his eyes (v.3), mind (v.6), ears and bones (v.8; see also Psalm 32:3–4), heart and spirit (v.10), hands (v.14), and lips (vv.13–15). David wanted his entire being completely cleansed—the stain of sin removed so that he could be fully restored.

Verse 7 contains an additional plea for pardon. David likens himself spiritually to that of a leper, using a hyssop branch dipped in blood and sprinkled seven times on the person at the altar (Leviticus 14:6).

1. What is the anticipated result of the forgiveness David seeks? v. 8 (See also Psalm 32:1–2.)

The sins that were always in front of David's face he requests to be removed from God's—blotting them out so that God would no longer see them!

2. Having confessed his sins and received God's forgiveness, what is David's prayer?
  - a. v. 10:
  - b. v. 11:
  - c. v. 12:

### *Pause & ponder ~*

God's law demands that "almost all things are purified with blood; and without shedding of blood there is no remission . . . so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation" (Hebrews 9:22, 28). Today believers find cleansing in the atoning work Jesus accomplished on the cross. What do the following scripture passages reveal to you about this completed work?

- Hebrews 10:19–23

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- Hebrews 4:14–16

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- 1 John 1:5–10

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The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart! Today the Holy Spirit indwells every believer's heart forever (John 14:15–18), but it's possible to hinder the Spirit's effectiveness.

## *Touchpoint~*

Look up the references that pertain to the believer hindering the sanctifying work of the Spirit, noting your findings below.

- a. Ephesians 4:30–32

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- b. Acts 5:1–3

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- c. 1 Thessalonians 5:19

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- d. Personal: Has God's Spirit pointed to one of these as pertaining to *you*?

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Be encouraged believer! A *steadfast spirit* or a *loyal spirit* (v.10) speaks of one that is not in bondage but is free, yielded to God's Spirit and willing to obey: *For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ*" (Romans 8:15–17).

## *IV. Forgiveness is followed by a commitment to holiness. vv. 12–19*

David makes a promise while reaffirming his commitment to holiness.

1. What does David promise to do? v. 13
2. Psalm 32 is the fulfillment of David's vow to communicate God's truth. Read through the psalm, concentrating on verses 8–11. What specifically did David tell God's people in fulfillment of his vow?

David wanted to sing the Lord's praises and witness to the lost and those that had wandered away from God.

The process of appealing for God's mercy and receiving His forgiveness had brought about the realization that sacrifices would not please Him (vv.14–15), and that the blood of animals could not wash away his sin.

3. David was not denying the validity of making sacrifices. What was he affirming? v.17

People tend to think that sin only affects the person committing the act; but the Bible teaches otherwise. David was aware of the connection between his holiness as king of Israel and the blessing of God upon His people. We see in this that the sins of those in leadership directly affect the lives of those around them! First things first—once David was restored and renewed, he prayed that Zion would prosper and the walls of Jerusalem would be protected from the enemy.

After forgiveness comes the sacrifices of obedience performed with a heart that is right with God. David had that assurance and you can have it too!



## *Live the psalm ~*

The flaw of unconfessed sin in your life can deal a blow that harms and hinders the effectiveness of the Spirit working in you and in others affected by your sin. If you have been resisting the Lord, not yielding to Him in an area of your life, now is the time to acknowledge it to yourself and confess it to Him.

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## *Pray the psalm ~*

Forgiveness is only a prayer away—you have the choice to allow the Master to make a masterpiece out of your life. In return for repentance and a right heart, He promises to perfect—to bring to completion everything pertaining to your life. You are being made in the likeness of Him—hold still and let Him work!

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*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God,  
You will not despise.*  
Psalm 51:17 NIV





