

# Psalm 51

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Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

[ 0 : 00 ] minds and our hearts with understanding, so that by your grace, as believers in your Son, we may live holy lives to his glory and yours.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Psalm 51 is our theme today.

We read it in the prayer book version a little while ago. I'm going to work from the ESV version, so I would ask you right at the outset to turn it up in the ESV, the Pew Bible.

It's page 474. Now, I think I should apologize in advance.

I believe I'm going to shock you, and it's early in the morning for shocks. But what I have to tell you is that repentance, our theme for this message, repentance is the measure of our spiritual reality.

[ 1 : 25 ] Most of us, I suppose, if asked whether we were Christians, would say, yes, we are. And if asked, well, what's distinctive that makes you a Christian?

We would say immediately, faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. But what I have to tell you is that our profession of faith, yours and mine, is no more real than our repentance.

And that may mean that some of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ, nonetheless, are much nearer to being phonies, spiritually, than we would like to recognize.

This is the searching challenge that Psalm 51 puts to us. You've heard, of course, of Martin Luther, and you think of Martin Luther as the one who drew the world church's attention to the fact that justification is through faith, something that had been forgotten, it seems, for centuries.

Luther's name is associated with the Reformation slogan, by faith alone. Yes, that's one of the focal points of the Reformation.

[ 3 : 08 ] And we make much of faith. But you know, it was Martin Luther, who in the first of the 95 theses that he nailed to Wittenberg church door, which touched off the whole Reformation movement, in the first of those theses, the first of those theses read, when our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said, repent, he called for the entire life of Christians to be one of repentance.

That's Luther. The entire life of Christians to be a life of repentance. And he's not out of line with the scripture when he centers repentance in this way.

Jesus did say, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. That is how Matthew summarizes his first preaching, Matthew 4 and verse 17.

John the Baptist had said the same before him. That's Matthew 3, verse 1. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And Jesus returned to the theme again, right at the end of his ministry before his ascension. In Luke's Gospel, chapter 24 and verse 46, we find him charging the apostles to go and preach repentance.

[ 4 : 55 ] Repentance and forgiveness of sins in my name shall be preached throughout the world, he said. And Peter, on the day of Pentecost, the first day in which the apostles got down to their work, we might say, Peter, when interrupted, as in fact he was, by the listeners, he told them of their sin of crucifying Christ, and they're convicted, and they shout out, what shall we do?

Peter knows the answer, and he tells them the answer, repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And you'll receive forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit.

Well, you can see from those texts, to look no further, repentance really does seem to be at the heart of everything, doesn't it? And the same is true of our Book of Common Prayer.

The word penitent recurs over and over in morning prayer, and the minister says early on, we pray for true repentance and God's Holy Spirit, that those things may please him, which we do at this present, and so on.

And in the Holy Communion service, of course, as I say, of course, for surely you've thought of this before I mentioned it. In the Holy Communion service, yes, the same emphasis is there.

[ 6 : 46 ] You that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, are words which we're going to hear very shortly. And in the confession, we are going to say, we do heartily repent.

No, we do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry, for these are misdoings. And in the form of absolution, the minister is going to say that, or remind us, that God has promised forgiveness of sins to all who earnestly repent.

Yes, we as Anglicans cannot excuse ourselves if we go from one, shall I say, one year's end to another without thinking seriously about repentance.

But some Anglicans do. And Psalm 51 calls us on that. Psalm 51 is a model prayer of repentance.

You say, what is repentance? Well, it's more than regret and it's more than remorse. It is actually a matter of reshaping one's life.

[ 8 : 17 ] Not simply saying that you're sorry and then going off and doing it again, but of turning to God and turning away from the sin that one has confessed and seeking a practice of holiness in its place from now on.

Change your ways. That's the essential message of repentance from beginning to end of the Bible. We are sinners and our ways are defective.

Acknowledge the defect. Change your ways. That's the thrust of the call to repentance. And what we have in Psalm 51, which is our focus now, is a sample prayer, indeed a model prayer, of a person who has heard that word and taken it to heart.

David, you say? Well, could be. And I am going to assume that it is David. David, after all, in the affair with Bathsheba, did, how can I say it, get very deeply into the reality of sin?

He broke the tenth commandment, coveting his neighbor's wife. He broke the eighth commandment, stealing her. He broke the seventh commandment, committing adultery with her.

[ 10 : 03 ] And then he broke the sixth commandment, arranging for her husband to be killed, which, in effect, was murder. You have to understand that in those days, kings were thought to be above the law, at least outside Israel they were.

And this story is a story of David lapsing into the ways in which kings of the nations all around him were behaving.

but that's not the way of it when God is the Lord. And you remember Nathan came to David and told a story which convinced David of his sin.

Nathan said to him, you are the man, the man who's guilty. And David had to acknowledge it. the church has always supposed that this 51st Psalm, which is ascribed to David, was actually written by him at that time as the expression of the repentance that Nathan jolted him into.

And that's what, as I said, I am going to assume as I zoom through it. it will have to be a zoom. There's much more here than one can get into a reasonable length for a Sunday communion service.

[ 11 : 45 ] A sermon, I should say. But now, we look at the psalm. And you see straight away it falls into two halves. And there is a gap, actually, in the printing of the psalm, in the ESV.

The first part is verses 1 through 12. And there you've got David expressing the depths of repentance, the various dimensions of the matter which make the sin of which he's repenting so grievous.

And then in the second half, which is a bit shorter, actually, verses 13 through 19, David expresses the fruits of repentance, which I guess were becoming reality in his heart, even as he spelled out what he says in the first 12 verses.

Altogether, there are seven sections here. Let's look at them very quickly. The first four deal, as I said, with the depths of repentance.

No, I didn't quite say that. The first four fill the 12 verses that deal with the depths of repentance. Verses 1 and 2, you see David pleading for mercy, stating, if we can put it this way, the theme that he's going to develop in this prayer.

[ 13 : 24 ] He knows that he's talking to a holy God. The reality of the situation has come over him quite suddenly and quite traumatically.

He acknowledges that Nathan is right to accuse him of sin, and now he must bow before the Lord and admit it and seek deliverance from it.

And that means that he must repent of it. And this is what he's beginning to do. He pleads for mercy. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, he says.

According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity.

Cleanse me from my sin. And here is David demonstrating something which is precious true for you and me, and which we must never allow ourselves to forget.

[ 14 : 45 ] Christians live by being constantly forgiven for the constant slips that we make, some small, some great, in seeking to live our Christian lives.

Christians have assurance because they know they're forgiven whenever they go to God in honest repentance and ask to be forgiven.

you've got that in 1st John. I expect you know the verses. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just.

Faithful to his word and just in terms of keeping his promise to us. Faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Where would any of us be were that verse not there? Well, here is David pleading for forgiveness and forgiveness and cleansing from a holy God whom he has deeply offended by what he has done.

[ 16 : 17 ] That leads on to the second item, second unit, verses three through six. David admitting his guilt, talking about it, facing it, telling God that he sees it or seeks to see it, as he knows God himself does.

He sees it as something clear to his mind, something he can't forget.

I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me, verse three. He sees it as an offense primarily not against Uriah, not against Uriah's wife, but against God, against you.

You only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. That doesn't mean that he's forgotten that in the first instance it was an offense against Uriah's wife and Uriah himself, but the central thing that he must focus on is that it's an offense against God.

And he sees it symptomatically, if I may put it that way. Sounds medical. What I'm thinking of is what he says in verse five, where suddenly he declares, behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and sin did my mother conceive me.

[ 18 : 08 ] That isn't, of course, saying anything about his parentage in human terms. That's a way of saying that he knows that he belongs to the human race, which is enmeshed in an anti-God twist of nature that we call original sin, and it's passed on from one generation to another, and nobody escapes this particular heritage.

So we are born, in that sense, sinners, and it's our nature to turn away from God and do all kinds of things that are anti-God in their thrust.

And David acknowledges it. my sins are an expression of original sin in my nature. I need cleansing in the most fundamental sense.

Lord, cleanse me. And he says then, verse 6, behold, you delight in truth in the inward being.

You look on the heart. many times in this psalm, in different ways, David celebrates the fact that God looks on the heart, and he judges the motive and the purpose, as well as judging the performance.

[ 19 : 42 ] You teach wisdom in the heart, says David. the wisdom that you taught me, I forgot or turned away from or whatever.

Forgive me, Lord, for my sin is very grievous. That's what he's saying. And then in verses 7 through 9, he cries out for cleansing.

In verse 7, there's a reference to hyssop, and you wonder what that is. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean, says David.

Well, I looked it up, and found that hyssop is an aromatic, bushy plant of the mint sort, not very large, but it's bushy.

And in the Bible, in the book of Leviticus, where the law of God for his people is given in Old Testament detail, in the book of Leviticus, the hyssop plant, a bunch of hyssop you see picked from the plant, the hyssop is used to sprinkle blood on the leper who has been cleansed, and water on a person who has defiled himself by touching a corpse.

[ 21 : 19 ] Well, all right, that's Leviticus, but in each case, you see, it's a ritual of purifying. And David picks up the thought and applies it to himself.

The purifying I need is a purging of my heart. That's what I pray for, Lord. Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean.

Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Then, verse 8, he says, this is really the thought, at the bottom, I should say, of countering infection.

David doesn't want the sin that he has committed in the past to infect him for similar performance in the future.

That's why he thinks of purging with hyssop. And then he says, verse 8, let me hear joy and gladness, let the bones that you've broken rejoice.

[ 22 : 26 ] Well, again, it's imagery. Joy is, of course, not imagery. Joy is the reality which he asks God to restore.

His joy has gone since the sense of his own sin hit consciousness with Nathan's parable. Yes, restore joy.

joy, I knew joy in fellowship with you once. Restore my joy by forgiving and purging the sin of mine. Let the bones that you've broken rejoice.

Well, again, that's imagery, be clear. It is true that when a person feels absolutely wretched, and maybe you've had this experience, you feel absolutely wretched because of your conviction of sin, your realization of sin, it's come over you, and it half paralyzes you.

You don't move easily, you don't move at all unless you have to. You're just stunned and, as I said, paralyzed by the pain of this conviction.

[ 23 : 49 ] Well, that's the state of affairs that David pictures by talking about broken bones. He doesn't mean that his bones are literally broken, he does mean that, honestly, Lord, I can hardly move because I'm so loaded down with the pain and the guilt and the misery of my sin.

Then, verse 9, hide your face from my sins, blot out all my iniquities. He's asking God here to look away from his sins and erase them from God's memory.

Well, prayer is going to be answered because David is asking it from his heart. He knows that God has promised to forgive sin where there's repentance and he's expressing repentance.

He wants to get away from the sin that's his supreme desire at the moment. And so he goes on, verses 10 through 12, to cry out for cleansing and ask, well, to follow his cry out, his crying for cleansing with asking for enlivening.

he's on the same theme really, as you can see. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.

[ 25 : 29 ] Cast me not away from your presence. Take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit, a spirit that wants to please you.

As my spirit was before I lapsed into this sin, and as I beg that it may be again through your mercy. And then, quickly to mention these things, there are the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh section of the prayer, all dealing with the fruit of repentance.

David knows what he needs, he knows what he wants, he knows what he's asking for. It's the inner assurance that through the mercy of God, which Christians know as we look at the cross of Christ, David's asking for the assurance that sin is forgiven and guilt is gone.

And then, well, fifth section, that's verses 13 through 14, David's purpose of witness. I'm not going to keep it to myself, he says, I'm going to share it with others.

Your forgiveness of sin is a glorious thing. And when I've experienced it, well, it'll be the most precious thing in my experience, and I shall be thinking of it often, and I shall be talking about it often.

[ 27 : 15 ] Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. I wonder if we purpose to witness in the way that David purposed to witness, because salvation is too good and too big to keep to oneself.

And then he says, the sixth section, he will take with him a perception of reality.

It's a perception that is of the reality of what goes on in the heart of God. Look at verses 16 through 17.

He says, I'm not going to spend my strength in burnt offerings and sacrifices. It isn't external sacrifices that you value in the way that you value the heart that is broken for sin.

And that's where I am, says David, that's where I've been. you want my heart, Lord. You delight not in sacrifices for sin.

[ 28 : 45 ] David has prophetic insight here. We know as Christians the sacrifice for sin has already been offered and doesn't need to be offered again.

No, the sacrifices of God, however, are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you'll not despise. That's verse 17, and that's what David is asking for.

And that's what David knows. He must seek to cherish true humility based on the knowledge of all the sins that you've been forgiven.

I want to live with that humility, says David. It will help me not to lapse in this way again.

And then finally, seventh section, David practices intercession. When your sins are forgiven and you're rejoicing in a conscious conscience that's been cleansed, well, your heart is filled with love to God and love to neighbor.

[ 30 : 02 ] It happens spontaneously. And intercession, praying that God will bless others, is the natural expression of what you're feeling.

And here David prays, do good to Zion in your good pleasure. Bless your people in this, your city.

God yes, that's the third expression of the reality of life, the fruit in life that will flow from knowledge of the forgiveness of sins through honest repentance, honest turning away from sin, honest recommitment to love and serve the Lord and not be distracted again the way you were distracted before.

well, this is the psalm and this is of course the end of the sermon. But I want to leave you with the question.

We've watched David repenting. There was reality in his repentance. How much reality of repentance is there in our lives, yours and mine?

[ 31 : 28 ] I said that this is the test of how much reality there is in our faith.

I'm going to add to that now by saying that where there isn't the ongoing reality of repentance in our lives, what you will have is the reality of formality, going through the motions, doing Christian things without any significant Christianity ruling your heart.

And would that be good? No, you may answer that question for yourself. Well, this is a call to us to look at ourselves very seriously before the Lord and learn the lesson of the life of repentance, which ever since Luther, the church has been asking us to learn.

The life of the Christian is to be a life of repentance. We constantly slip. We mustn't ignore our slips. we must repent of them and ask forgiveness for them.

And then, then will come the joy, then will come the witness, then will come the spontaneous intercession, then we shall be truly alive in the Lord, God granted.

[ 33 : 15 ] And may we take steps towards that, in our steps beyond anything that we've taken thus far in our lives. May we do that as we share in the Holy Communion right now.

God bless us. Amen.