

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 51 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 51:1-19 ESV

1 To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. 6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken 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 right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. 14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. 18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; 19 then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

STRUCTURE

- I. Introductory Plea (1-2)
 - a. The basis of mercy: covenant love and warm affection (1a)
 - b. The need for mercy: transgression, iniquity, and sin (1b-2)
- II. Confession (3-6)
 - a. Unforgettable sinfulness (3)
 - b. Egregious sinfulness (4)
 - c. Lifelong sinfulness (5-6)
- III. Petitions (7-12)
 - a. Dealing with sin (7-9)
 - i. Purge me (7a)
 - ii. Wash me (7b)
 - iii. Restore me to community (8)
 - iv. Forget my sins (9)
 - b. Dealing with the heart (10-12)
 - i. Make me new (10)
 - ii. Hold me close (11)
 - iii. Sustain me with joy (12)
- IV. Vows (13-19)
 - a. When God answers me, I will worship Him rightly (13-17)
 - i. I will speak for Him (13-15)
 - ii. I will not offer vain sacrifices (16)
 - iii. I will offer Him a contrite heart (17)
 - b. When God answers us, we will worship Him rightly (18-19)
 - i. Establishment of God's City (18)
 - ii. Proper worship in God's City (19)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Psalm 51 is one of seven “penitential psalms” (see Pss. 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) focused on the confession of sin. The story behind the song amplifies its poignancy. The superscription tells us that the Psalm was written to describe David’s admission to stealing Uriah’s wife and having him killed in a nationwide coverup. Psalm 51 records David’s confession as he moves from desperate plea to confident assurance. The song holds an important place in church history. For thirteen centuries, the church repeated it seven times a day.

The Psalm begins with urgency—“Have mercy on me, O God”—as David appeals to God’s covenant love and warm affection. If any hope could be found, it would not be in God’s law, which demanded death, but in His love.

While the entire song fits the theme of confession, verses 3-6 provide us with the “confession proper.” Refusing to deflect guilt, David expounds upon his need for mercy: sin that is unforgettable (51:3), egregious (51:4), and lifelong (51:5-6). David’s thorough knowledge of his sinfulness models what true confession looks like. It denies nothing; it admits everything.

After explaining his need for mercy, verses 7-12 expand upon his introductory petition with twelve verbs: “Purge... wash... let... let... hide... blot... create... renew... cast me not... take not... restore... uphold”. David’s rapid-fire prayers paint a kaleidoscope of God’s grace. The first half of the petitions emphasizes David’s sinfulness, and the second half, his spiritual life. He desires to have the former dealt with so that the latter can enjoy full restoration.

In verse 13 and following, David promises to worship God rightly—not with empty sacrifices but with a contrite heart—in response to His answers to prayer. David’s faith exemplifies how we should approach God when we pray: not begging a reluctant God but rather counting on a merciful God.

David finishes Psalm 51 in a way that sounds strange to western ears, considering our individualistic culture. Jewish culture was more communal, partly explaining why he concludes with a focus on Israel’s future. In addition, David wrote from a king’s perspective. Just like presidential rumors of impropriety threaten our sentiments of national stability, David feels concern that “Bathsheba-gate” will wreck the nation. He finishes the Psalm, pleading with God for the future of his people, vowing to lead the whole nation in the proper worship of God. God will answer David’s prayer by building His kingdom, not on empty sacrifices, but on the sacrifice of Jesus and the broken-hearted saints who mourn over their sins like David.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

—“when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba”: David’s sin (adultery, deceit, murder) is told in 2 Sam. 11, and Nathan’s rebuke comes in 2 Samuel 12. It has been said that Psalm 51 occurs in the gap between 2 Samuel 12:13a (“David said, ‘I have sinned against the LORD’”) and 12:13b (“And Nathan said to David, ‘The LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die.’”). Since no actual break occurs in 2 Samuel 12:13, it can’t be that David literally paused to write a Psalm mid-conversation. However, it makes sense that David wrote the Psalm with that “gap” in mind—the space between David’s repentance and Nathan’s prophetic declaration of forgiveness.

—“Have mercy on me, O God”: the Psalm does not begin by beating around the bush, but with a drowning man’s cry for help. The cry is not just for any help, however. It is a cry for mercy—undeserved help to a vile, backstabbing, two-timing, blood-soaked villain. Based on what, does such a man think he can receive mercy?

- “according to your steadfast love”:
 - This is the Hebrew word, *hesed*—God’s covenant love. Despite David’s abandonment of God, He calls on God’s faithfulness to the covenant.
 - Kidner: “steadfast love is a covenant word. For all his unworthiness, David knows that he still belongs.”
- “according to your abundant mercy”:

- This is the Hebrew word “raham,” which is different from the prior word translated mercy (“hanan”). Raham speaks of God’s warm and tender affection (Kidner). David counts on mercy, not only because of the covenant, but also because of God’s character—God’s heart is soft. It’s not just a little bit soft, either. His mercy is “abundant.”
- Waltke: “‘Mercy’ denotes the tender yearnings, affections, and love by a superior for a helpless inferior rooted in a ‘natural’ bond by God’s common grace, as a mother for her child, or special grace, as the Father for the child he begat by the Holy Spirit. The depth of this love is reflected in its connection with ‘womb’ (rehem/raham, cf. Jer. 21:7).”

—“transgressions... iniquity... sin”: this three-fold characterization of sin captures the fullness of David’s violence to God’s law. Here is what I wrote about the same three-fold characterization in my Study Guide on Psalm 32:

- “transgression”: speaks of open rebellion, such as a military rebellion.
- “sin”: commonly defined as “missing the mark.” It is a general word for all forms of breaking with God.
- “iniquity”: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)*: “to bend, twist, distort.” When the distortion pertains to the heart, it can speak of our warped/perverse nature (Pr. 12:8), but if it speaks of God’s law, it means, “to sin, to infract, to commit a perversion/iniquity.”
- Spurgeon calls the three-fold characterization, “the three-headed dog of hell.”
- Spurgeon: “The trinity of sin is overcome by the Trinity of heaven.”

—“blot out”: the image is of erasing words from a document. David requests that his sins not be recorded in God’s book; that they be erased—forgotten.

—“wash me... cleanse me”:

- David longs not only for God to forgive the guilt of his sin but to cleanse him of its defilement. Sin is like a ball of slime. Even when you remove the ball, its remnants remain. David says, “cleanse me of what remains.”
- “wash”: this Hebrew verb normally relates to the laundering of clothes. David’s conscience feels like a muddy white robe. He is literally saying, “launder me.” In modern terms, “throw me in the washing machine,” or “bleach my soul.”
- “cleanse”: refers less to the defilement of one’s soul and more to one’s ritual impurity. David wants God to ritually purify him so he can freely worship.

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. 6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

—“For”: David explains his need for thorough cleansing and forgiveness in vv. 3-6.

—“I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me”:

- These parallel halves complement one another, informing one another.
- David knows his transgression intimately, not superficially. He neither denies nor minimizes his sin, which is crucial for true confession.
- David’s intimate knowledge of his own sinfulness owes to its being “ever before me.” Like a fussy baby, his sin never ceases screaming, “I’m here!”
- David wants thorough forgiveness and cleansing because he can’t forget his transgression. He knows that until God blots it from memory, neither can he.
- Kidner: “In a new image, his sin looms up as an accusing presence: cf. NEB ‘my sins confront me all the day long.’”

—“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight”:

- This does not absolve David of his sin against Bathsheba, Uriah, their families, or the covenant community. Later, David confesses “bloodguiltiness,” revealing his consciousness of sins against others.
- At its core, however, sin against people is sin against God. Just as the first and second commandments are to love God and love people—in that order—sin is first against God and then against God’s people—in that order.
- Sin against people is first sin against God because God made the laws we broke. Those laws govern how we relate to people, which means we sin against people also. However, “sin is lawlessness” (1 Jhn. 3:4), and God made the law.

- Poetically, then, David emphasizes his violation of a divine commandment to highlight his need for forgiveness and cleansing.
- Because sin is breaking God's law, only God can forgive sin. Even the religious leaders recognized this when Jesus forgave sin, thus claiming to be God (Mark 2).
- If I broke a law in Ireland, the US would not prosecute me for it. Unlike Ireland, however, God governs over all people. He has the right to prosecute everyone, for we all sin. Only His forgiveness and cleansing will exempt us.
- Since we all belong to God, every sin against another violates His property. If you steal my car, you sin against me; if you harm God's creation, you sin against Him.

—"so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment":

- David does not blame his sin on unfavorable circumstances like the stress of running a kingdom or the attire (or lack thereof) of Bathsheba. This verse shows how thoroughly he owns his sin.
- If we own our sin partially, we are partially set free. David models full ownership. Instead of denying his sinfulness, he denies his righteousness.
- "in your words... in your judgment": these parallel statements reveal God as the righteous Judge who declares with words the most accurate verdict.
- This verse is quoted in Romans 3. Here is the context:
 - [Rom 3:1-31 ESV] *1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2 Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. 3 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 4 By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged."*
 - Paul applies David's penitential psalm to everybody. God alone "may be justified" in His judgments. The rest of us, like David, are sinners.

—"For behold... for behold":

- The double "behold" marks a new thought, although it continues the thread that began in verse 3 where David explains his plea for mercy. In verses 5-6, his explanation is that he's been a rebel since the womb.
- The double "behold" draws our attention to David's moral impotence, which began in utero.

—"I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me":

- Ross: "'brought forth' basically means 'to writhe, twist' as with birth pains... 'conceived' usually refers to an animal in heat. The Psalmist is not demeaning his mother; but what he is doing is painting his birth in the earthiest tones possible... He was confirming just how human he was."
- The heretic Pelagius—who believed we could earn salvation—argued that these verses do not teach original sin (that we are born with the guilt and inclination toward sin), but rather that David was a child of adultery. In other words, Pelagius said, this part of the song focused on the sin of David's mother. Pelagius argued this way because he needed humanity to be capable of achieving God's righteous standard. If David and all humanity are guilty and corrupt sinners from the womb, it creates a problem for the Pelagian.
- The problem with Pelagius' view is that the whole song is about David's sin, not his mother's. The other problem with his view is that the whole canon testifies that we are guilty sinners from the womb (see below).
- David is not excusing himself ("my nature made me do this") but magnifying his lifelong corruption. Five times in verses 1-3, he says "my" ("my transgressions", "my iniquity", "my sin"—and then again—"my transgressions", "my sin"). This is not the verbiage of a man in search of excuses.
- David is highlighting his need for forgiveness and cleansing by displaying how long this has been a problem. If one walks in purity for decades but has a momentary slip-up, that is one thing; if one raises his fist at heaven over a lifetime, that is another. David is saying that he—that all of us—fit the latter portrayal. Before God, our RAP sheet is loooooong.
- Kidner: "The crime, David now sees, was no freak event: it was in character; an extreme expression of the warped creature he had always been, and of the faulty stock he sprang from."
- Other verses that teach original sin (sinful nature and guilt from the womb):
 - [Gen 8:21 ESV] *21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done."*

- [Job 15:14 ESV] 14 What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?
 - [Job 25:4 ESV] 4 How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure?
 - [Psa 58:3 ESV] 3 The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.
 - [Jer 17:9 ESV] 9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?
 - [Mat 19:17 ESV] 17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments."
 - [Rom 3:23 ESV] 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
 - [Rom 5:12, 19 ESV] 12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— ... 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.
 - [Eph 2:1-3 ESV] 1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.
 - [Tit 1:15 ESV] 15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.
 - We all inherit a sinful nature—an inclination to sin—which is why none of us has to teach our kids to break the rules. It comes naturally.
 - We also inherit Adam's guilt. The clearest articulation of this is in Romans 5, where "all sinned" and were "made sinners" because of Adam's sin.
- "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart."
- Bruce Waltke translates this verse, "Behold, truth you desired in the covered place; and in the bottled-up place you were teaching me wisdom." Modern translations typically render these "inward being" and "secret heart," or something to that effect, but Waltke maintains the literal translation.
 - He explains his reasoning for maintaining the literal translation: "English versions commonly gloss it by 'inward parts.' But what inward parts: entrails, kidneys, conscience, or womb? The context of verse 6 and its parallel ('in the bottled up/shut up place') suggest... the closed chamber of the womb."
 - I agree with Waltke that this verse focuses on the womb, for it makes the best sense of the parallel to verse 5, which clearly emphasizes the womb.
 - David's point in verses 5-6 is that God was teaching him spiritual wisdom in the same location where he learned sin—in the womb! No wonder he used the word "behold"!!
 - Unborn children are not just clumps of cells. They are spiritual beings, instructed in spiritual matters—including rebellion against and submission to God—from the womb. Our nature teaches us rebellion; God's Spirit teaches us submission.
 - In context, verses 5-6 communicate, "Even though I was born a sinner, God made His wisdom available to me even from the womb. Despite this early mercy, however, I chose sin. This is why I need forgiveness and cleansing."
- In sum, David needs God's thorough forgiveness and cleansing because he can't forget his transgression (3), he directly violated God's law (4a), he stands condemned before God's judgment (4b), this has been a longstanding problem (5), and he has rejected the wisdom made available to him from the very beginning (6).

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken 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 right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

—"Purge... wash... let me hear... let the bones... hide ... blot... create... renew... cast me not... take not... restore... uphold": this is overwhelming. It's like a machine gun blast of petitions. After beginning with a cry

for mercy (1-2) and explaining his need with a thorough confession (3-6), he now rattles off a concrete list of requests (7-12). Each one reverses the effect of sin in a unique way.

—"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean":

- TWOT: "Hyssop is a small plant that grows on walls (1 Kgs. 4:33), probably identified with... the mint family. It was used to apply blood and water in purification. The importance of the hyssop stems from the Exodus. God told Moses to have each Israelite family slay a lamb, dip a bunch of hyssop in the blood in the basin and then smear some of the blood on the sides and top of the doorframe (Ex. 12:22). When the Angel of the Lord passed by and saw the blood, he spared the firstborn son in that home. Thus, the hyssop functioned as a brush to apply the blood."
- The above lexicon goes on to describe how hyssop was used in purification ceremonies for those cured of leprosy (Lev. 14:4-6) or contaminated by corpses (Num. 19:6). Then it adds, "When David in repentance cried out to God, 'Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean' (Ps. 51:7), he referred to the laws of Num. 19. He knew that if he were not cleansed, he would be cut off from his people. Perhaps the mention of the hyssop plant given to Christ on the cross (Jn. 19:29) refers symbolically to the infinite purification that was accomplished through his death."
 - [Lev 14:4-6 ESV] 4 the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop. 5 And the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. 6 He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet yarn and the **hyssop**, and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water.
 - [Num 19:6 ESV] 6 And the priest shall take cedarwood and **hyssop** and scarlet yarn, and throw them into the fire burning the heifer.
- "Purge": parallels "wash"; basically means, to "de-sin" me (Kidner).
- In sum, David is thinking about ritual purity. He wants to remain in the worshiping community, rather than being cast away from God and people on account of his ritual uncleanness.

—"I shall be clean... I shall be whiter than snow": David's ritual cleanness parallels his whitened conscience, no longer stained by Uriah's blood.

—"let me hear... let the bones":

- These parallel statements emphasize God's activity and David's passivity. All he can do is "let" God act. When we sin, we feel paralyzed.
- God had "broken" David's "bones," but not literally. Rather, he felt the crushing consequences of his sin. How? It had isolated him. We know this because he wants to "hear joy and gladness," which parallels his request that "the bones you have broken... rejoice." David longs to be an insider again, not an outsider. To be an outsider feels like the crushing of our skeleton. Sin separates us from God and people; David wants reconciliation with both.
- Waltke thinks "let me hear" refers to the words of absolution—"you are forgiven"—from the prophet or priest. But I don't think so. Since he requests to "hear joy and gladness," we more naturally think of a celebrating community than of a prophet or priest pronouncing a decree.

—"Hide your face... blot out": these parallel statements request that God not "give face" to his sins, but rather forget about them. Blot them out of the book. Erase them forever."

—"Create a clean heart... renew a right spirit":

- These parallel statements request that God do surgery on his inward being. I don't think he intends us to split hairs over the distinction between a "heart" and a "spirit" or "create" and "renew." As parallels, they intend the same thing.
- David is not requesting to be born again (he already has been) but rather a brand new start—so new—that it's almost like being born again *again*.
- He knows his heart has lost its way. This began even before he sinned with Bathsheba. Unwilling to fight with his men, he rested on his laurels (2 Sam. 11:1). Walking on the roof of his palace, David's elevated position matched the state of his heart. Pride came before his fall (2 Sam. 11:2; cf. Pr. 16:18).

—"Cast me not... take not your Holy Spirit":

- These parallel statements reflect David's experience with Saul, who lost the Holy Spirit just before David received the Spirit (1 Sam. 16:13-14). In the Old Testament, God's Spirit empowered certain leaders—kings, judges, prophets—to perform their duties (cf. Num. 11). After Pentecost, Jesus made the Spirit available to all God's people (Acts 2).

- When David asks God not to remove His Spirit, he is not asking to “stay saved.” He’s asking God to continue providing the Spirit for him to lead Israel as king. By receiving this answer, he will avoid the fate of his predecessor, Saul.

—“Restore/joy of your salvation... uphold/willing spirit”:

- These parallel statements clarify that the joy of our salvation strengthens our spirit to willingly persevere.
- Having lost the joy of his salvation—his sins being ever before him—he found himself unwilling. Obedience became drudgery. He longed to obey God willingly and from joy, as before.
- We can be assured of our eternal destiny (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; 1 John 5:13).

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. 14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

—“Then”: this begins a new section focused on the results of David’s absolution.

—“I will teach transgressors... my tongue will sing... my mouth will declare...”:

- The effect of feeling absolved of sin affects our *speech*.
- Horizontally, we declare God’s goodness to people; vertically, we declare it to God.
- People say, “My religion is private,” as if it is a virtue, but it reveals one’s inexperience. When God forgives our sins, we can’t stop declaring His praise. In this way, worship and evangelism are inseparable. It explains why the Psalms are the most evangelistic book of the Old Testament. Volcanos of praise explode indiscriminately—upward and outward.

—“I will teach transgressors... sinners will return”: the best candidates for helping addicts are former addicts. They become a living testimony, inspiring hope that “I can change too.” God never saves us only for our own sake. He delivers us from darkness so we can deliver others. With whom have you shared your testimony recently?

—“Deliver me from bloodguiltiness... I will sing aloud of your righteousness”:

- David sinned “against you, you only” (51:4), in the sense that all sin is first and foremost against God. Here he confesses its impact on the community.
- Speaking of sins against the community, Walkte makes a fascinating conjecture that I think is likely true: “Bathsheba probably was Ahithophel the Gileonite’s granddaughter, for she was the daughter of the famous war hero Eliam son of Ahithophel and wife of the equally famous war hero Uriah (cf. 2 Sam. 11:3; 23:34). If so, Ahithophel probably never forgave David and counseled Absalom to defile his father’s wives (2 Sam. 16:21). Probably many in the nation, not only Eliam, never forgave David and fought for Absalom against David.” In other words, David’s betrayer was getting revenge for David’s betrayal!
- David by this point has still not felt the answer to his machine-gun prayers. Here he expresses faith that those prayers will be answered. When we pray for forgiveness, we don’t necessarily feel it immediately. However, the “I will” statements reflect the necessary faith. To feel forgiven, we must believe we will be.
- It is strange that David would sing of God’s “righteousness” for saving him from “bloodguiltiness.” If a judge forgave a murderer, we would label him wicked, not righteous. What is David saying? He’s saying there’s a difference between God’s deliverance from bloodguilt and that of a wicked judge who winks at crime. When God forgives, cleanses, purges, washes, and blots out iniquity, it is TRULY removed. By the time He saves us from wrath, He has already de-sinned us. At that point, it is righteous to save—for He is saving the truly righteous.
- This reminds me of what Paul says in Romans 5:9, “Since, therefore, we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from the wrath of God.” To be justified is a legal term, meaning “declared righteous.” Paul is saying, “If we are declared righteous, of course God will save us from wrath!” David articulates the same thing. For God to deliver David from bloodguilt would be righteous, for the sin by that point would have already been purged. No wonder David can’t help but sing to the “God of my salvation.”

—“open my lips... my mouth will declare your praise”:

- Why does David need God to open his lips? Because a heavy conscience silences us. We feel incapable of praising God when our heart feels defiled.
- Kidner: “the prayer ‘open thou my lips’ is no mere formula but the cry of one whose conscience has shamed him into silence.”

- Lifelong worship requires more than just obedience to God's commands; it requires the grace that forgives and then opens our lips.
- If we have trouble praising God exuberantly, could it be that we haven't felt the cleansing shower of God's grace? Have we lost the joy of our salvation (v. 12)?

16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

—David has been saying, "I will"; now he shifts to "you will not".

—God "will not delight in sacrifice... will not be pleased with burnt offering... [and] will not despise" a penitent heart. Why does David state each in the negative?

- Verse 16 begins with "For" because it explains why David will "sing aloud of your righteousness" (v. 14) and "declare your praise" (v. 15). The emphasis of these verses is David's worshipful response, where there is no mention of sacrifice. In a culture where worship always comes with a sacrifice, David perceives the objection: "where is the bull or goat for your offering?! You're getting off easy, praising God but not sacrificing to Him!!"
- David clarifies in verse 19 that God will indeed receive "right sacrifices", implying that a contrite heart makes the sacrifices meaningful. Sacrificing bulls with a stubborn heart achieves nothing before God.

—It is not that God is inherently displeased with the very sacrifices His law required. Instead, He is displeased with outward acts of sacrifice if unaccompanied by inward feelings of contrition.

—"a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart":

- David has displayed what this looks like throughout, but especially in vv. 2-6.
- Chrysostom: "If we are unwilling to lament in this life, there will be no option at all in the next life but to mourn and lament."
- The early church borrowed a medical term of the time—"compunction"—to speak of piercing remorse for sin (like doctors pierced bodies). Waltke comments about the desert-abiding monks who sought to avoid compromise with the world by retreating to the desert: "As the Desert Fathers realized, we can become tepid in our words of repentance, unless we exercise perpetual compunction as evidenced by *penthos* ('the gift of tears')."

18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem;

—David does not imply that Jerusalem is torn down and needs new walls, as in the days of Nehemiah. Some interpreters, taking this too literally, interpret the final two verses as additions made to David's psalm during the exile. But I doubt it. David employs the figurative device, "synecdoche," which means "part for the whole." By "build up the walls," he means "protect Jerusalem." He is aware that the king's sins determine the nation's direction. After dealing with his sins before "you, you only," David shifts his focus first to the community he directly sinned against (v. 14) and now to the nation (v. 18). David is asking God to protect the nation from the stain of his transgression and instead to "do good" to Zion, to build up Jerusalem.

—Leaders who sin transgress against everyone they lead. We can't quarantine the sins of leaders. Israel displayed this often: for righteousness or wickedness, as it went with the king, so it went with the nation. We have observed the same principle often in churches. When leaders transgress, they bring many with them. The opposite is also true.

—"in your good pleasure": God will not be "pleased" (Heb. *rasa*) with burnt offerings unaccompanied by contrite hearts, but it is His "good pleasure" (Heb. *rason*) to build up Jerusalem. Like the English words "pleased" and "pleasure," the Hebrew words "*rasa*" and "*rason*" belong to the same word family. By repeating similar expressions, David links verses 16 (about God not being pleased with wrong sacrifices) and 18 (about God being pleased to build Jerusalem). The connection implies that the City of God is built upon penitent hearts.

—We are to be a broken-hearted people: "Blessed are those who mourn..." (Matt. 5:4).

19 then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

—The "you will not" statements of vv. 16-18 set the conclusion in v. 19 in dramatic relief: "you will..."

—When the community rends their heart over sin, the city of God is built up, and God will delight in "right sacrifices".

—The emphasis of Psalm 51 is first upon David's sin and forgiveness but ultimately about the nature of God's kingdom. His kingdom concerns itself not with outward show but with the heart. To enjoy God's

salvation requires true contrition. Citizenship in His kingdom is not merely for those who “got their theology right” (though important) but for those who get their hearts right, confessing their sin and repenting.

—There is a highly public expression to this Psalm. It is one of seven “penitential” psalms, which were all sung publicly. David’s concern about being accepted back into the community (v. 8) implies they knew his sin, and he felt isolated.

—Historically, the church has practiced public confession through reciting the Lord’s prayer (“Forgive us our trespasses...”), singing the penitential Psalms, and other general confessions. General confession in public settings is holy.

—If a leader transgresses in a significant manner, he has sinned against his community, and he should confess publicly. Public sin merits public confession.

—Any Christian who sins must practice confession, at least with one trusted person (James 5:16). I often say, “If you can’t talk about it, it owns you.” Since God owns us, we should not behave as though our secrets do.