

Psalm 51 is a psalm for everyone who needs forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to repentance and forgiveness it has been called “The Psalm of all Psalms.”<sup>2</sup> This Spirit-inspired psalm instructs the people of God in the need for full forgiveness as the foundation for spiritual renewal and human flourishing.<sup>3</sup> Since we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), we can identify with Psalm 51. The prophets are right, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:6). “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). The apostle’s testimony is true. We are dead in our transgressions and sins and we gratify the cravings of our flesh and follow its desires and thoughts (Eph 2:1-3). Psalm 51 is the necessary soul-carving tool for forgiveness and renewal.

Tradition lines up Psalm 51 with a specific event in the life of David. The superscription reads: “For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.” The historical narrative behind one of the most powerful personal confessions in the Psalter is found in 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

### *The Back Story*

When our children were young, I recall reading the Samuel narrative in family devotions (2 Samuel 11-12). When I got to the part that described David taking Bathsheba, Jeremiah, who was nine or ten at the time, interrupted to ask, “Is this the same guy who killed Goliath?” The paradox is striking. How could a person with such a faith and trust in God sin so catastrophically? Why would “a man after God's own heart” commit adultery, deception, and murder?

Then and now the human condition is marked by a persistent and pervasive depravity that makes any culture extremely unfavorable for living for God. “The cultural embodiments of violence and sex, war and promiscuity don’t seem to have changed that much. And because they’re human conditions, they’re the only conditions in which a holy life can be lived.”<sup>4</sup> The war within feeds off of a culture of violence and sex. Walter Brueggemann writes, “This narrative is more than we want to know about David and more than we can bear to understand about ourselves. We might wish the story about David could be ‘untold.’”<sup>5</sup>

The narrator begins with seemingly innocuous details about spring time and war plans, but there’s enough in just one verse to raise our suspicions that trouble is brewing. David delegates his responsibility. The whole Israelite army went into battle and David remained in Jerusalem. David’s perfect storm occurred on a sea of tranquility. A confluence of pleasant circumstances

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 51 is seen as a penitential psalm along with Pss. 32, 38, 102, 130, 143.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Waltke and James Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2010), 446. “‘The Psalm of All Psalms’ is the title the Anglican liturgist J. M. Neale ascribed to this psalm! In the medieval Roman Breviary, Psalm 51 was recited every hour at the conclusion of each monastic service, with the exception of Christmas and the forty-day session of Lent. For thirteen centuries it was repeated seven times daily.” 446.

<sup>3</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, vol. 2, (Kregel, 2013), 199.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over The Wall*, 215

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 272.

and seemingly routine choices add up to an immense crisis. “All the terror of war and the confusion of battle are bracketed out, making way for another kind of terror and confusion.”<sup>6</sup> He outsourced his public war, but kept his private war. He was already behind enemy lines and he didn’t even know it. The late Scott Peck observed, “We are not forced to be trapped by evil. We set up the trap ourselves.”<sup>7</sup>

On the night that David took Bathsheba, there was more to his restlessness than insomnia. The battle was not between a single impulsive act and its aftermath as much as David’s whole way of thinking about himself, his power, his responsibility. The narrator makes his case with a single word repeated for emphasis. “David *sent* Joab . . . David *sent* someone to find out about her . . . David *sent* messengers to get her . . . David *sent* word to Joab: *Send* me Uriah the Hittite.” The operative word is *sent* and the message is simple, David is in control. He is in control of Joab, the army, his servants, Bathsheba, and Uriah. He can order people around to do what he wants. What he says goes.

From the roof of his palace David saw a woman bathing. Bathsheba was bathing in the privacy of her own courtyard late at night cleansing herself from her menstrual period. The narrator wants the reader to know that she could not have been pregnant before David slept with her. Bathsheba did nothing to seduce David; David seduced himself. David saw what he wanted and he took what he saw. He sent for her. She came to him. He slept with her. Then she went home again. These staccato statements imply that it was only a “one-night stand.” David used her to fulfill his lust and then dismissed her. The affair would have been forgotten, if “the woman” had not conceived “and *sent* word to David, saying, “I am pregnant.” News of the pregnancy forced David to plot a cover-up of his adultery, but the sin would not have been forgotten, not by Bathsheba, not by David, and certainly not by the Lord.

Probably any other Near Eastern king would have handled this situation differently than David. Kings were ruthless dictators. In another culture Bathsheba might not have even informed the king for fear that he might have her or her husband killed. David’s morality prevented him from reacting barbarically, but it didn’t stop him from plotting a cover-up. His “biblical” morality only served to complicate matters. David wanted the appearance of goodness without being good.

Unlike the stark description of adultery, the narrator takes us through the cover-up step by step. David sent for Uriah under the guise of wanting a report from the battle field. He offered him some R&R: “Go down to your house and wash your feet.” But Uriah the Hittite, a foreigner and converted Jew, didn’t want to spoil his reputation with his troops. Uriah said to David, “How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!” Ironically, Uriah had no idea how convicting and indicting his words must have been to David. Uriah was the kind of man David used to be before he was corrupted by his own power. On the second night, David invited Uriah to eat and drink with him. David got him drunk, but once again Uriah refused to go home. Finally, David was through finessing the situation. “David could no more control the principled Uriah than he could manage the

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann,

<sup>7</sup> Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*, 118.

pregnancy of Uriah's wife."<sup>8</sup> He sent a secret letter to Joab ordering Uriah to be put on the front lines so that he would be killed. The courageous and conscientious Hittite could be trusted to carry his own death warrant back to Joab without breaking the seal on the envelope. Knowingly, Joab complied with the order, even though he had to use bad military tactics to send Uriah on a suicide mission. Others died as well.

When David heard the news, he must have thought, "It's over." He sent word back to Joab to encourage him. David was cynically detached and seemingly oblivious to the awful thing he had done. He was philosophical about war: "Don't let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another" (2 Samuel 11:25). "Uriah's death is not an excusable accident of war but a dark necessity of royal power. In this message back to Joab, David is either morally numbed, so that he cannot 'discern between good and evil' (2 Samuel 14:14; 1 Kings 3:9), or he is incredibly cynical, because he no longer cares to notice what he can discern."<sup>9</sup>

David wanted closure. We all do when we have done something wrong. But closure didn't come with Uriah's death nor when Bathsheba completed her period of mourning. There was no closure when David brought her into his house and she became his wife and bore him a son. There was no closure because "the thing David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Samuel 11:27). In a psalm attributed to David during this time, he wrote, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer" (Psalm 32:3). The Lord left David alone for almost a whole year to stew in his sin. Without repentance and without remorse, David maintained a semblance of normalcy, but inside he was in moral pain and spiritual exhaustion.

The narrator's operative word for power in this story is *sent*, but its final reference is not to David but to the Lord. "The Lord *sent* Nathan to David." Picture Nathan the prophet being ushered into David's presence. He has no premonition of what is coming. He feels no sense of doom, no pending judgment. David has learned how to cope with his pain and malaise. Nathan tells a story about two men, one rich, the other poor. It is a parable, but David hears it as an actual incident. Nathan anticipates David's moral sensitivity. The rich man is really rich. He has large herds of sheep and cattle. The poor man is really poor. He only has one little ewe lamb which he has raised to be part of the family. The little lamb is more like a child than a pet. The story continues. The rich man offers hospitality to a traveler who has come to town. But instead of taking one of his sheep or cattle to prepare the meal, he takes the poor man's little ewe lamb. David is outraged. He is filled with righteous indignation. He burns with anger and says to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

Perhaps his zeal against the rich man for his egregious behavior may have had the unconscious effect of assuaging his own conscience. "David had become very harsh toward other people. The law did not say anything about the robber of a lamb being killed, although it certainly said he had to restore fourfold. But David said that a man who behaved like that should be killed also. Have

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<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, 276

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, 278

you observed that when you excuse sin in your own life you become very critical of it in other people? The person who hides an uneasy conscience and a sense of guilt may flash out in anger against the sin of another.”<sup>10</sup> Nathan lets David’s anger burn-off. With the reverberation of “. . . had no pity” still echoing off the cedar walls, Nathan looks David in the eye and says, “You are the man!” And without hesitating a moment, launches into his message,

“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: “**I** anointed **you** king over Israel, and **I** delivered **you** from the hand of Saul. **I** gave your master’s house to **you**, and your master’s wives into your arms. **I** gave **you** the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, **I** would have given **you** even more. Why did **you** despise the word of the Lord by doing what is in evil in his eyes?” (2 Sam 12:7-9).

David thought he was listening to a news story about somebody else, but it was all about him. In the Spirit, Nathan’s message hit home. The first words out of David’s mouth were exactly what they should have been: “I have sinned against the Lord.” In Psalm 51, David expands on this confession. He composed it afterwards “as a theological reflection on the moment he was made aware of his sin . . . it is a contemplative piece focusing on the penitent’s need for forgiveness.”<sup>11</sup>

### *Penitential Devotion*

*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.  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me.  
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.  
Surely I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.  
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;  
you taught me wisdom in the secret place.*

Psalm 51:1-6

Psalm 51 divides into three stanzas. The first stanza focuses on *repentance* (1-6), the second on *restoration* (7-12), and the third on *renewal* (13-19). These divisions may be helpful but we don’t want to reduce the beauty and depth of the psalmist’s spiritual direction to three nouns and a

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Redpath, 201.

<sup>11</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.2, 177.

explanatory statement. The Psalms resist bottom-line thinking. Soulcraft aims for the soul, not a tidy propositional statement.

David begins with a cry. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.” His plea depends upon the character of God. In this opening stanza two characters meet, the holy God and the heart-shattered psalmist. The penitent makes his appeal on the basis of two fundamental attributes of God: God’s covenant love is loyal, unfailing, and steadfast; and God’s compassion is great and merciful. To show respect rather than presumption David used the general term for God and made his appeal for forgiveness on the basis of God’s grace, love, and compassion.<sup>12</sup> David’s meditation on that moment of confrontation, when Nathan said, “You are the man!” is free of any excuses or rationalizations. He says nothing to defend himself. His only purpose is to declare his sin: blot out my transgressions // wash away all my iniquity // and cleanse me from sin. He uses three terms to describe his evil. Transgressions are willful violations of covenant trust. “Picture it as a raised fist against God’s standard.”<sup>13</sup> Iniquity literally means wayward, the result of having going astray. “Picture it as twisting or bending something straight, or of diverting/deviating from a standard.”<sup>14</sup> Sin completes the triad and means missing the mark, falling short of the standard, violating the rules.<sup>15</sup> “Picture it as jumping up to reach a bar and being disqualified for falling short of it.”<sup>16</sup>

Four imperatives shape the psalmist plea for forgiveness, beginning with the first line of the psalm, “Have mercy on me, O God,” followed by a second triad. Forgiveness is pictured in three images for cleansing: to blot out means to “wipe out my bad record,” to scrap it all off, so as to completely remove my sin. The second figure of speech compares laundering to forgiveness. “Scrub away my guilt.” The third figure, “cleanse me from sin,” references the temple ritual for cleansing. “It normally would describe the process of ritual purification with washing with water followed by sanctifying with blood.”<sup>17</sup> In David’s case however his capital offenses against God’s Law, adultery and murder, required the death penalty. “Leviticus makes it clear that no sin offering could be made for such offenses. All David could do was acknowledge his sins and plea for God’s mercy. And the repetition of requests lets us see how intensely he was praying for this.”<sup>18</sup> David’s need for forgiveness points beyond the ritual itself to what the ritual foreshadowed. David did not know it at the time, but his plea for forgiveness pointed forward to the atoning sacrifice of the Son of David.

The painful tragedy that follows David’s sin is recorded in 2 Samuel and serves as a type foreshadowing the Son of David. Nathan reassures David, “The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.” Nevertheless the consequences for his sin will hound him for the rest of his life. His sons will copy their father’s sinful behavior and David will suffer for their

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<sup>12</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 184.

<sup>13</sup> Waltke and Houston, 468.

<sup>14</sup> Waltke and Houston, 468.

<sup>15</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 182.

<sup>16</sup> Waltke and Houston, 468.

<sup>17</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 183.

rebellion. However, the most tragic consequence for David's sin was the immediate death of his son. The child "that Uriah's wife had borne to David," was struck ill. David pleaded for his life. He fasted and spent seven nights lying in sackcloth on the ground, but to no avail. His son died. David's unnamed son who died because of David's sin causes us to think of Jesus, the Son of David, who died for our sins. It doesn't seem fair that David should live and his son should die. Nor does it seem fair that Jesus should die so we may live. David's anguish over his son's suffering, compares to God's love for us. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not die but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The repetition of the personal, possessive pronoun "my" five times with "me" the direct object of God's cleansing shows that David owns his sin personally. "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." In other words, "I know how bad I've been; my sins are staring me down." He not only owns his sin existentially; he owns it theologically. "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" (51:4). David declares that his sin "is first and foremost against God."<sup>19</sup> He is not implying that he did not sin against others. The exclusivity of his statement is inclusive of everyone he has sinned against by his wilful and rebellious actions because they too belong to God. When David says to the Lord, "against you only have I sinned," he acknowledges "the relationship between *understanding sin* and *knowing God*."<sup>20</sup> G. C. Berkouwer writes,

"In all the multiformity of sin there is always a common trait: sin is always against God. Never can we get at the essence of sin as long as we ignore this relation of sin and God and regard our sin as a mere 'phenomenon' in human living. This fact is apparent when sin is described as enmity and rebellion, disobedience and alienation from God."<sup>21</sup>

Apart from God we can neither recognize our sin nor know enough to cry out for mercy. "Sin can be understood only from the vantage point provided by God."<sup>22</sup>

### *Prophetic Gospel*

The line, "so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge" reinforces David's recognition of God's absolute holiness and righteousness. Everything that has been said is grounded in this truth and rooted in this conviction. David knows, and he let's us know, that his only recourse is to throw himself on the mercy of God. He says in effect, "Whatever your sentence, God, *you are just* for only you have the right to make that judgment. *You are blameless when you judge*. . ."<sup>23</sup> Paul will use this theological insight in Romans 3 to help build his case that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Jews and Gentiles alike are subject to the just and holy judgment of God. Both those who have been given the Law and those without the Law are under God's judgment. Even David, a man after God's own heart and

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<sup>19</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 186.

<sup>20</sup> Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 183.

<sup>21</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Eerdmans, 1971), 242. Quoted in Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 183.

<sup>23</sup> Waltke and Houston, 471.

precursor to the coming Messiah, stands condemned by the Law. There is nothing anyone can do to earn forgiveness; everyone is dependent on the mercy of God.<sup>24</sup>

Paul does not quote any other line from Psalm 51, but it is not difficult to see how the whole Psalm fits his Romans' argument. David's next line articulates a paradox, placing in juxtaposition the depravity of the human condition and the dignity of being made in God's image. "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in the secret place" (51:5-6). David describes the deeply rooted tension we all share between living in a state of sin and living to please God. David describes human nature by "contrasting the state of sin with the divinely prepared capabilities." Our sin fits with our sin nature, but runs contrary to God's design. "God prepared the human spirit (also in the womb) with the capacity for truth and wisdom, which is what makes sin so painful to God."<sup>25</sup> Paul reveals this same vital truth when he says that the requirements of the law are written on our hearts and embedded in our consciences (Rom 2:15).

The intertextual correspondence between Psalm 51 and Romans should not surprise us. Romans gives us a good idea of how Paul would have prayed and preached Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 11-12. The rhetorical structure of Romans 1-3 recapitulates the narrative structure of the story of Nathan's confrontation with David. Richard Hays explains:

"The reader of Romans stands in David's role, drawn by the invective of Romans 1:18-32 to pronounce judgment on pagan immorality, then unmasked and slapped by Paul's Nathan-like pronouncement: "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Rom 2:1). Romans 3, then, like the denouement of the David story, sets forth a pattern of human guilt, met by divine judgment and mercy; for the reader of Romans, as for David, there no escape from the righteousness of God."<sup>26</sup>

### *Full Forgiveness*

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.*

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<sup>24</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 187, comments, "He was affirming that from the very beginning of his existence there had never been a time that he had not been in a sinful state – he was human after all. The verse does not mean that a little baby is a wicked sinner; but it does mean that everyone who is born is born in a state or condition of sin, and that state unchecked will naturally lead to acts of sin."

<sup>25</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 188.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, Yale University Press, 1989, 49-50. Hays continues, "There is little evidence in Romans to suggest that these structural parallels are deliberately crafted by Paul. It is more likely that the subconscious structural parallels between Paul's message and Nathan/David encounter led Paul to hit on Psalm 51 as an appropriate text to cite." On the other hand, when you see the intertextual correspondence between Romans and Psalm 51, that Hays so brilliantly identifies, it is difficult to imagine that Paul was not full aware of the thematic and textual connections that he was making. When the apostle prayed and preached Psalm 51 I imagine it sounded a lot like Romans!

*Hide your face from my sins  
and blot out all my iniquity.  
Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*  
Psalm 51:7-12

David's whole-hearted repentance is followed by a plea for full forgiveness and complete healing. He wants much more than a stay of execution; he wants complete restoration. He walked into his doctor's office with a deadly terminal illness; he wants to walk out with a clean bill of health. He was down and out; he wants to be up and in. He captures the freedom of full forgiveness with a collage of images drawn from the rituals of atonement, celebration, and devotion. "Cleanse me with hyssop" draws us back to Moses and mount Sinai when Moses took the blood of the sacrificial animals and splashed it against the altar and then sprinkled it on the people. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exod 24:8). This solemn act united covenantal obedience and sacrificial redemption in the mind of the people. The sprinkling of the blood reminded the people of the Passover and the instructions given to each family to sprinkle the blood of the Passover lamb on the three sides of the doorframe (Exod 12:5-7). The apostle Peter echoes this purifying ritual when he identifies believers as "chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and *sprinkled with his blood*" (1 Peter 1:2).

I remember sitting in a crowded New York restaurant with a young lawyer discussing the significance of the Passover and Christ's atoning sacrifice. "Do you know what happens when you take the blood of the lamb and sprinkle it with a hyssop branch against the door frame?" my lawyer friend asked. In a gesture that caught the attention of others in the restaurant, he jumped up from his seat and swung his imaginary hyssop branch dipped in blood to one side and then to the other and finally straight up and down. "Do you see?" he said. "There in the doorway the sprinkled blood makes the sign of the cross!"

Once again David returns to the image of being scrubbed clean, "Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." The prophet Isaiah will use this figure as well, "'Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool'" (Isa 1:18). 1 John 1:9 echoes Psalm 51 and captures the essence of David's plea for full forgiveness and complete cleansing. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

David follows up his plea for spiritual purification with a plea for emotional healing. He not only wants to be forgiven, he wants to feel forgiven. "Let me hear joy and gladness." The combination of "joy" and "gladness" denotes "enthusiastic celebration and the juxtaposition of physical

hearing and psychological exuberance underscores complete well-being.<sup>27</sup> The effect of sin is complete, rendering us dead to God and deaf to the sound of joy. Only full forgiveness can revive the body, mind, and soul. David captures what this holistic healing looks like in striking metaphor, “let the bones you have crushed rejoice.” In an age without modern medicine and orthopedic surgery, a crushed bone meant acute chronic pain. David compares once-crushed bones dancing to once-crushed spirits rejoicing.

Metaphor follows metaphor as David elaborates on the meaning of forgiveness. He pleads with God, “Hide your face from my sins,” as he repeats once again his opening petition, “blot out all my iniquity” (51:9). Yet it is not enough for the psalmist to have his slate wiped clean and for God to let up on the scrutiny. He needs God to give him a fresh start, a pure heart, and a steadfast spirit. He requires divine atonement and forgiveness, but he also “needs from God an inward spiritual grace to accept his forgiveness and to build on it.”<sup>28</sup> But even as he says this, he pleads, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” (51:11). David is not listing items on a spiritual formation list. He is crying out for God’s help to put his sin behind him and to move forward in the power and fellowship of the Holy Spirit. He is a broken man who earnestly wants to be remade by God. He sums it all up with his final plea, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (51:12). He knows that his “steadfast spirit” and his “willing spirit” are dependent on the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. He saw first-hand the devastating results of God’s withdrawal of the Holy Spirit from his predecessor King Saul. David does not want that to happen to him (1 Sam 18:12).

### *Spiritual Renewal*

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

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

Psalm 51:13-19

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<sup>27</sup> Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 475.

<sup>28</sup> Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 475.

Forgiven, restored, and empowered by God, David is ready to serve. He is eager to teach rebels, like himself, the “ways” of God’s redemptive love and grace, “so the lost can find their way home” (51:13 msg). The psalmist is fully aware that his testimony of praise is voiced in wake of his deliverance “from the guilt of bloodshed.”<sup>29</sup> “You who are God my Savior” becomes the focus of his praise and witness. “Praise transforms petition from self-absorption to God’s exaltation. True repentance concerns itself with God’s reputation, not the penitent’s.”<sup>30</sup> “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise” (51:15). The broken and contrite heart “knows how little it deserves yet how much it has received.”<sup>31</sup> To know how lost we were and how loved we are frees us to be God’s ambassadors of grace. “When our lips are opened, we do not speak of ourselves but of God’s praise.”<sup>32</sup>

David’s capital sins have exposed the inadequacy of the Law to bring about redemption. The whole sacrificial system was put in place to point forward to the ultimate atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In the Spirit, David has the wisdom to see that the prescribed rituals do not save – only God in his mercy and grace saves. It is in the spirit of full forgiveness that David declares, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.” At this point in the arc of repentance and redemption David is not so much affirming “the inappropriateness of hypocritical worship,”<sup>33</sup> as he is declaring the redemption beyond the sacrificial system. Going through the motions to be seen by others, all the while harboring unconfessed sin, is always offensive to God. What David says here taps into the theme that runs throughout Scripture. It can be heard in Samuel’s rebuke of Saul, “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 22). It is stated again by the prophet Hosea: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6).

The Book of Hebrews brings this line of reasoning to its most explicit revelation. The law, with all of its ceremonial procedures and external regulations, including the priesthood, the tabernacle, and the sacrifices, was designed by God to point exclusively to Jesus Christ, who “was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Heb 9:28). Hebrews calls for a decisive end to religion, even the best religion ever conceived and strategically designed by God for our salvation. Hebrews demonstrates the Sinai Covenant’s inability to atone for sins in the face of God’s judgment.<sup>34</sup>

David has come to realize that his sacrifice is “a broken and contrite heart” and God’s mercy and grace makes possible full forgiveness and complete redemption. Roberta Hestenes explains,

“This ‘brokenness’ speaks not of self-worthlessness nor a malformed personality,

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<sup>29</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 196. Ross explains, “The word used is ‘bloods’ (literally), the plural referring to shed blood (‘bloods’ is a metonymy of effect for murder); so it is translated ‘bloodguiltiness.’”

<sup>30</sup> Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 478.

<sup>31</sup> Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 111.

<sup>32</sup> Keller, 111.

<sup>33</sup> Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 197.

<sup>34</sup> O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 482.

nor deep clinical depression. It points toward a deeper reality, the response to a prompting of the Spirit in certain circumstances of need, demand, or spiritual yearning and hunger. Brokenness is a yielded heart open to God, a heart emptied of pride and self claims, of all arrogance, knowing our sin, our self-deception, our frailty, weakness and inadequacy. We discover ourselves again to be hungry and thirsty, poor and needy when we had thought ourselves full and needing nothing. Along with this awareness comes a rediscovery of God's love, mercy and forgiveness--His affirmation of us, care for us, and claim upon us."<sup>35</sup>

David's "brokenness" is precisely the state of grace described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Beatitude-based believers are aware of their desperate need for God. We never graduate from being poor in spirit. We never advance beyond a broken and contrite heart. This is the spiritual profile of the follower of Jesus Christ. It is who we are, if we are committed to Christ. The Beatitudes are not an ascending order of accomplishments but the full picture of the grace of Christ at work in our lives. Years after his dramatic conversion, the apostle Paul said, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:15-17).

Finally, the benefit of full forgiveness and spiritual renewal extends to the city as a whole. Jerusalem's prosperity is captured in two images: well-fortified walls and God-pleasing worship. The whole city is built up physically and spiritually by the psalmist's genuine brokenness before God. The ultimate security of the city rests in the mercy of the loving God who forgives, redeems and restores to true service and worship.

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<sup>35</sup> Roberta Hestenes, "Personal Renewal: Reflections on 'Brokenness'" TSF Bulletin, Nov-Dec 1984, 23-24.