

## **Psalms of David**

### **Psalm 51, Have mercy upon me, O God**

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

#### **Psalm 51: Have mercy upon me, O God**

Psalm 51 is titled, "To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." The Psalm was written after David committed adultery with Bathsheba and orchestrated the death of her husband. We have to go back to 2 Samuel 11 to remind ourselves of the precise circumstances.

David became idle and stopped leading his army into battle, choosing to remain at Jerusalem. One night, as he walked on the roof of his house, he saw a very beautiful woman bathing. That was the moment to judge the temptation that entered his heart. Instead, he made it his business to find out who the woman was and discovered her name was Bathsheba, the wife of one of his most faithful servants, Uriah the Hittite. That discovery was his second opportunity to judge what was in his heart. But he didn't. He chose to bring her to his palace and committed adultery. Soon afterwards, Bathsheba informed the King she was pregnant.

David descends further when, to cover his sin, he calls for Uriah the Hittite. After asking how the battle with Ammon was going, he encouraged his servant to return to his house to rest and be with his wife. Uriah's good character shines out when he slept at the door of the King's house with all the King's servants. When David asked why he had not returned home, he replied, "The ark and Israel and Judah are dwelling in tents, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are encamped in the open fields. Shall I then go to my house to eat and drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing." The following night, David got Uriah drunk, hoping he would make his way home. But he remained faithful to his word and slept again with the servants. David had a further opportunity to deal honestly with the situation. But he did not.

What happened next was horrific. David wrote a letter to Joab, his general, to arrange the death of Uriah in battle, and he gave the letter to Uriah to deliver to Joab. Joab did not attempt to protect Uriah; he was soon abandoned on the battlefield and killed. He died a brave and faithful servant of a king who betrayed him. David's plan had succeeded, and after Bathsheba had mourned her husband, she became David's wife and bore him a son. The chapter ends with the words, "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD."

In the following chapter, the LORD sent the prophet Nathan to David. Nathan tells the King a story of two men, one rich, the other poor. The rich man had large flocks and herds. The poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb he had bought and nourished. It grew up with the poor man and his family. A traveller visited the rich man and instead of taking one of his sheep from his vast flocks, he took the poor man's lamb, killed it, and prepared it for his visitor.

When King David heard the story, he was enraged and said to Nathan,

As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity (vv. 5-6).

Then Nathan said to David, You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel: I anointed you King over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your keeping and gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if that had been too little, I would have given you much more! Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun (vv. 7-12).

This dreadful series of events led David to write Psalm 51, a psalm that gives us a profound understanding of the mercy of God and its outcomes.

Mercy is the expression of pity toward someone who is overcome by a need that can only be met by the intervention of someone else with the resources and willingness to meet that need. Mercy not only addresses material poverty but also the deep spiritual needs caused by sinfulness and guilt.

David, a great and powerful king, had no material needs but was the poorest man in his kingdom under God's conviction. He knew he could not retrace his steps and was consumed with guilt. Each verse of Psalm 51 teaches about our need and God's mercy.

### **Verse 1: A cry for God's mercy**

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;  
according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my  
transgressions.

David calls on the LORD to have mercy on him. He doesn't make excuses or plead weakness. He recognises his guilt and appeals to God based on His lovingkindness and tender mercies. David wrote in Psalm 23 that goodness and mercy would follow him all his days. There was never a time when he needed God's goodness and mercy more. As a young man, he had learned about the God of creation as he sat watching over his father's sheep and looked up at the glorious heavens that filled the skies. He wrote.

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world (Psalm 19:1-4).

Paul would later write in Romans about the voice of creation,

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made (Romans 1:20).

Hebrews adds,

By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible (Hebrews 11:3).

But David also discovered the Creator God was his shepherd,

The LORD is my Shepherd (Psalm 23:1).

He had experienced the goodness and tender mercies of God as a young shepherd, as the saviour of a nation, a hunted warrior and as powerful king. But he failed God so dreadfully. Yet David did not flee from God. He moved toward God in repentance and confession, seeking Him to "Blot out his transgressions."

### **Verse 2: God's mercy washes**

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

In Revelation chapter 1, John worships with the words,

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (vv. 5-6).

Salvation is not based on who we are but on who God is. We cannot wash our sins away.

When Pilate took a bowl of water to wash his hands and declare,

I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it (Matthew 27:24).

It was a futile gesture.

Only God can forgive sin and he does this based on the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus,

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29).

Centuries before Christ entered the world as our Saviour, David understood only God could cleanse him from his sin.

### **Verse 3: God's mercy leads us to repentance**

For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

David believed in God's mercy, which caused him to seek repentance. God had led David on "paths of righteousness" (Psalm 23:3), but God also allowed David to discover what we are by nature and the depths to which we can fail if we don't cast ourselves on God's mercy when faced with temptation.

In Genesis, Joseph was not sitting on a throne when he was tempted by Potiphar's wife. He was a slave who could have taken advantage of Potiphar's complete trust in him. But the first question Joseph asked himself is,

How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?  
(Genesis 39:9).

And when Potiphar's wife persisted in her attempts to seduce Joseph, he simply ran from her presence. David could have followed the example of his great ancestor and judged what emerged in his heart and fled into his palace. Thankfully, God's mercy caused him to eventually flee into His presence. The goodness of God leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4).

#### **Verse 4 God's mercy is consistent with God's righteousness**

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.

David understood God's righteousness and sought to live humbly and faithfully before Him. He had shown mercy, outstandingly to Mephibosheth, the lame son of his great friend, Jonathan. Mephibosheth had a permanent place at King David's table. David had lived his life conscious of his responsibility to shepherd his people. But his life came crashing down the day he gave way to temptation and fell victim to the maelstrom of evil which followed. He is an object lesson in how the godliest of men can fall prey to the lust that rises in our hearts and a warning to us all.

This is why self-judgement is a vital aspect of the Christian life. We are redeemed, but we still have an old nature within us that responds to temptation and needs to be dealt with swiftly and decisively.

In Galatians 5:19-21 apostle Paul lists what he calls the works of the flesh.

Now the works of the flesh are evident, adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Then Paul lists the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit,

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

We speak a lot about the first eight of these characteristics, but not as much about the last characteristic, "self-control."

Paul points out that there is no law against the noble characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. It would be a different world if everyone sought to bear this spiritual fruit each day. What prevents us is our fallen, sinful nature.

This is why the last characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit, self-control, is so vital. Paul writes,

And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit (vv. 24-25).

By the power of the Spirit, self-control is how we put to death the temptations we face at the earliest moment, recognising God's goodness and holiness.

David refers to what he had done, not before men but in the sight of God. We can hide our sin from others but not from God. Understanding that we live in the sight of God makes us aware of the dangers of sin, and when we fall, it encourages us to seek God's mercy, which is, as David wrote, at hand "all the days of my life."

### **Verse 5: God's mercy deals with sin**

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

David recognises he was born with the problem of sin. Whatever our beliefs, we cannot deny the reality of sin. We can rename it and excuse it, but its power is as evident today in thought, word, and action as it has ever been. We know it personally, in our families, communities, nation, and worldwide. And all our advancements have never overcome its presence or power.

### **Verse 6: God's mercy deals with the heart**

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

David's spiritual defeat began in his mind and heart. It only took an instant for him to be enslaved to lust and set him on a course of secret immorality and wicked conspiracy. Nathan, the prophet, exposed David's secret dealings. The conviction of David's heart and soul did not lead him to excuse himself or rest on his previous good character.

Naaman, the Syrian general healed by the prophet, Elisha, stripped off all his glorious attire to reveal his leprosy before he was washed in River Jordan and made clean. In the same spirit, David's confession was the stripping away of all pretence, outpouring of his guilt, casting of himself on the mercy of God, and a plea to be made clean.

### **Verse 7: God's mercy cleanses**

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

Verse 7 describes David's deep longing to be spiritually cleansed, expressed in the line "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean." The word purge describes purity by cleansing. It is an applied purity provided by another Person. The hyssop is the plant that was used to apply the blood of the Passover lamb to the lintel and two doorposts of the houses of the children of Israel on the Passover night. David uses "Synonymous Parallelism", a poetic technique used in the Old Testament and most frequently in the Psalms. This is where the second line repeats the meaning of the first line in similar words to emphasize the thoughts and feelings of the writer. "Whiter than snow" is used by Isaiah when he writes,

Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

David uses the two lines of verse 7 to express his need of God's cleansing.

### **Verse 8: God's mercy brings joy and healing**

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

David was broken-hearted and grief stricken by what he had done. He longed for the joy that came with forgiveness. When the Good Samaritan found the half-dead man beaten and abandoned on the road to Jericho in Luke 10, he was filled with compassion and went to where the man lay when others had walked by on the other side. He healed the man's wounds by pouring oil and wine into them. The last we see of the man is when he is being looked after in an inn. The day would come when his broken body would be healed, and he would be able to walk again. What joy it must have filled his heart, just like the man in the temple whom Peter healed; I am sure he would have leapt with joy. This was the experience David yearned for, the joy of God's salvation.

### **Verse 9: God's mercy removes sin**

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

Paul knew the power of God's forgiveness, and he writes to the Ephesian church,

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Only God's mercy could remove David's sins and iniquities.

### **Verse 10: Mercy creates a clean heart**

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

David also wanted "a clean heart" and a "steadfast spirit". He wanted to be inwardly cleansed so that he could walk steadfastly with God and not be led astray by temptation. [Psalm 119 begins,](#)

[Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD!  
Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart!](#)

[Then, in verse 11, we read,](#)

[Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.](#)

David's downfall plunged him into the darkness of replacing God's will with his own. He experienced the misery that comes from turning away from God. He desperately wanted to return to the place of fellowship with God and its blessing. This could only happen if his heart was cleansed by God.

### **Verse 11: God's mercy does not send us away**

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

David's sin broke his communion with God. He prays not to be cast away from God's presence and for him not to lose the joy of the Holy Spirit working in his life. God's recovering mercy makes

us understand the distance our sin places us in, but at the same time, it teaches us to depend entirely upon the same mercy to remove that distance.

We see this in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which Jesus told to those who trusted in their own righteousness and despised others (Luke 18:9-14).

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess. And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me a sinner! I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

It was God's mercy that led the tax collector to the temple and put his simple prayer in his heart. God's mercy shows how far we are from God and how near God is to us.

### **Verse 12: God's mercy restores and upholds**

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

David prays for God to restore the joy of His salvation and to uphold Him by His "generous Spirit." He prayed, believing God could do what He asked. He had sought joy in the arms of another man's wife, he had coveted his neighbour's wife, committed adultery, and organised the murder of his faithful servant (see Exodus 20:17, 14, 13). His joy in God and in life had been sacrificed on the altar of self. Like the prodigal son in Luke 15, he had squandered all that God had given him. Yet, God's mercy would restore the joy of salvation, and David would be upheld in the richness of God's grace.

### **Verse 13: God's mercy teaches how to be a blessing**

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

Peter denied the Saviour three times, the third time with curses and swearing, swearing "I know not the man" (Matthew 26:74, KJV). But Jesus had already prayed for him, "But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32). He was restored in John 21 when the Lord asked the third time "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter replied, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus told him, "Follow Me" (vv. 17, 19). In Acts 2, Peter preaches at Pentecost, and 3,000 people are saved. In chapter 3, Peter preaches again and accuses his hearers of denying Jesus, "But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead" (vv. 14-15). On that occasion, 5000 men trusted in Christ. God's mercy restores us to proclaim its power to others to lead them to salvation.

### **Verse 14: God's mercy glorifies His salvation and righteousness**

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

David gets to the matter which tormented his soul, “the guilt of bloodshed.” God’s mercy addresses the deepest sins. Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul, was complicit in the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr and led the pitiless persecution of the early Church. God’s mercy drew him out of the darkness of his sins. He wrote, “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14). It is a righteous salvation. The cost of it was borne by Jesus, our substitute and Saviour.

### **Verse 15: God’s mercy leads to praise**

O LORD, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise.

David had it in his heart to build a temple to the Lord, but God told him “You shall not build a house for My name, because you have been a man of war and have shed blood” (1 Chronicles 28:3). Instead, his son and heir Solomon, whose mother was Bathsheba, would build it, “It is your son Solomon who shall build My house and My courts; for I have chosen him to be My son, and I will be his Father. Moreover I will establish his kingdom forever, if he is steadfast to observe My commandments and My judgments, as it is this day” (vv. 6-7). God uses the most dreadful circumstances to reveal His victorious, matchless and astonishing grace, “But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (Romans 5:20). Although David did not build the temple, he assembled the vast array of materials needed for its construction. Towards the close of his life, he announces to the nation what will happen, and a glorious song of blessing and praise bursts from David’s heart in 1 Chronicles 29:10-13.

Therefore David blessed the LORD before all the assembly; and David said: “Blessed are You, LORD God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honour come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. Now therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name.”

God did open his lips, and his mouth did express praise to God’s glorious name.

### **Verse 16: God’s mercy cannot be bought**

For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering.

David’s restoration could not be accomplished by the offering of animal sacrifices. A deep inward work of conviction and repentance was needed, which he explains in the next verse.

### **Verse 17: God’s mercy values a broken spirit and heart**

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart — these, O God, You will not despise.

God brought David to a place where he understood his utter failure and overwhelming guilt. He comes before God with a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart. When Jacob wrestled with God in Genesis, he was crippled, but he clung to God with the words, “I will not let you go until you bless me!” (Genesis 32:26). God answered by asking his name, and he simply replied, “Jacob.”

His name was a description of who he was naturally, “a deceiver”, a sinful man. And it was a confession of his entire dependence on God’s mercy. God changed his name to Israel, a prince.

David’s Penuel was Psalm 51. His name was not changed. It means “beloved”. He was “Beloved by God”, but he only understood what that meant when his spirit and heart were broken in the confession of his sin. God would not despise him.

Psalm 69 foretells the broken heart of Christ as He was rejected by His own people and condemned to be crucified, “Reproach has broken my heart, and I am full of heaviness; I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none” (v. 20). I do not believe we will ever know in time or eternity what it cost our Saviour to redeem us. But the value of that redemption is eternal, and we rest in it.

### **Verse 18: God’s mercy builds**

Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem.

The penultimate verse of Psalm 51 does not speak of brokenness, but of building. David would build his kingdom and ensure a peaceful land in which Solomon would reign in wisdom.

### **Verse 19: God’s mercy leads to sacrifices of righteousness**

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.

The final verse of the Psalm looks to the time the Temple would be built and become the centre of sacrifice and worship. It would be the place where God’s mercy, lovingkindness, tender mercies would be known and where sin would be dealt with and forgiveness and recovery experienced. It looked forward to the one great sacrifice that was to come, Jesus, the Lamb of God. David’s awful failure brings into focus the majesty of God’s mercy. That mercy was fully expressed in the sacrifice of the Son of God at Calvary and His powerful resurrection and ascension into glory. Mercy, love and grace surround us, “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).”

Never let us doubt its richness and witness to its power.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Psalm 51: Have mercy upon me, O God. Talk number T1429.

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