

When God confronts and convicts you of sin, turn away from it with a broken and contrite heart and humbly approach him, crying out to God for the blessings associated with repentance, and vowing to bear the fruit of repentance. Use Psalm 51 as the ideal example of such biblical, penitential prayer.

Introduction – Last time we explored Psalm 50 in which God summons us, his people, about our worship. Psalm 51 comes next so we can get a much closer look at what godly repentance is.

Background – When Nathan the prophet went to king David, after David went into Bathsheba the wife of Uriah (v. 1a; cf. 2 Sam 11-12). It’s one of the most amazing stories ever told of sin and redemption.

I. The Approach of Godly Repentance

A. Ask God to forgive and cleanse you (vv. 1-2)

O God, I need your mercy and forgiveness (v. 1b). I need to be washed (v. 2). Help me according to your steadfast, covenant love. Sensitive souls will feel intuitively you can’t just say a few prayers, offer a few sacrifices, and issue an apology that will make sin go away. There is no prescribed sacrifice to cover premeditated and defiant sins (Jer 7:8-11). Levitical sacrifices were only ordained to atone for unintentional sins and failure to perform certain duties (Lev 1-7). God despises it when people treat morality and religious works as *sinsurance*, especially when they plan out such a deal with God before going ahead with the sin. David knew he was in big trouble because he knew the character of God. The only available outcomes for David are divine justice or mercy (Num 15:30-36; Isa 1:11-20). It’s the same for you and me. How can you get his mercy and get right with God?

B. Acknowledge to God your awakening conscience (vv. 3-6)

The first step is pleading for mercy. You have to ask, but you also have to see the gravity of what you’ve done. This requires an awakening conscience. Not only should you acknowledge to God what is happening inside you, but you should also give credit to God that the grace of conviction is doing its spiritual work on the eyes of your heart. “O God, I see clearly now my sin and my deserved punishment” (vv. 3-4). “I see clearly now that I am born a sinner, and you want to teach me inner wisdom” (vv. 5-6). Before we can move on to David’s cries, we need to address verse 4 because of the way it comes off as dismissive of those hurt by our sins. It sounds tone-deaf. But it’s not.

II. The Cries of Godly Repentance

A. O God, please don’t reject me! (vv. 7, 9, 11)

1. *Cleanse* me from my sin’s moral filth (v. 7). Not like a bath, but a ritual washing to cleanse of sin’s guilty stain. Scripture teaches the human heart must be washed of sin’s filth in a way that our best efforts to “do better” cannot cleanse—because you can only scrub so deep. The cleansing that washes away sin comes from the application of a blood sacrifice as a substitute punishment (Leviticus 14:1-7, 49, 52; Numbers 19:1-10, 18-20; cf. Hebrews 9:13-14).

2. *Remove* your gaze from my sinful record (v. 9). For God to no longer look upon our sins is to blot them out from his record book (Exodus 32:32). What a Savior! Thank God he reminds us our sins are forgiven and our record is purged. If you cry out like this and believe God won’t reject you, you’ll be set free! Because you won’t get stuck dwelling on your past sins and torment yourself by digging up wrongs that you’ve already repented of. God promises if you cry out to him, “blot out all my iniquity,” then he will remove your sins and cast them away as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

3. *Stay with me by your Holy Spirit* (v. 11). As the king, David fears God will remove his Spirit of anointing for kingship, just as God removed the Spirit's anointing from unrepentant Saul his royal predecessor (1 Samuel 16:13-14). But if we can make David's words our own, and if we can pray for God to not take the Holy Spirit from us, then the role of the Spirit must be more than kingly anointing. The function of the psalm as it shapes the repentance of the entire congregation is to fashion our hearts so we feel at the deepest level of our being our desperate need. We need the Holy Spirit to make us holy. In other words, you don't just need God to show up to accept you once and then leave the rest up to you. You need him to stay with you.

B. O God, please do restore me! (vv. 8, 10, 12)

1. *Permit me joy in my brokenness* (v. 8). The feeling of crushed bones is akin to living under the weight of God's displeasure (Psalms 6:2; 22:14, 17; 31:10; 32:3; 34:20; 38:3; 42:10). It is the painful conviction of objective sin, subjectively experienced in feelings of guilt and shame. But the feeling of God's favor can penetrate your soul just as deep (cf. Psalm 32:3-4). A well-spring of spiritual joy gently flowing, occasionally gushing, out of your brokenness!

2. *Renew me in a strong and pure heart* (v. 10). David pleads for God to "create" in him a clean heart. The sinner desires not merely a change of heart, but a *changed* heart that is so transformed it is created anew. Our natural inclination is to please ourselves. Since we are born sinners, we naturally want to please ourselves with forbidden pleasures. Jesus said it is impossible to see the kingdom of God unless one is born again by the Spirit (John 3:3-6). This is why we must, like David, cry to God for a pure heart and a right spirit within. Because we need to be more like Jesus, we need the heart of Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18).

3. *Keep me in the joy of my salvation* (v. 12). David was perhaps suffering from spiritual dullness. That condition left him vulnerable to temptation. In order to avoid disaster in the future, David prays for joy in his salvation. Why? Because a happy saint is content and can resist coveting. If you really are repentant then you'll want to regain that deep, abiding, spiritual joy that comes with knowing you are not rejected by God and you've been restored by God.

III. The Fruit of Godly Repentance

A. Personal vows to God (vv. 13-17)

Fruit grows when the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to your heart. O God, I promise to evangelize sinners in spoken word and song (vv. 13-15). I will consecrate to you my contrite heart (vv. 16-17). David is so overjoyed at the thought of God forgiving his sin that he vows to use his life from now on to help other sinners find the forgiveness that he found. A forgiven sinner who knows how very much he has been forgiven, how much mercy God has shown him, is prepared to be an evangelist. How can one who is forgiven so much be silent when so many need the same forgiveness (cf. Psalm 32)?

B. God will restore right sacrifice when he does good to his people (vv. 18-19)

These last verses are David's prayer as the shepherd-king on behalf of God's covenant people, Israel. He's pleading with the Lord to do good to Zion, the city of God, and that "right sacrifices" that God delights in will resume in God's house. David, along with all the faithful of the OT era, knew God is not ultimately interested in the blood of bulls and goats, but in the perfect and final sacrifice offered by the perfect and final high priest. The NT book of Hebrews reveals who that high priest is—Jesus Christ who offers his own body and blood on the cross to atone for repentant sinners (Heb 8:1-12).

Conclusion – How can you be certain all the blessings of Jesus' right sacrifice are applied to you? Put your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus the Savior of sinners, and continue to trust God for daily repentance, daily forgiveness, and daily holiness. Jesus your high priest and right sacrifice is all you need. Amen.