Have Mercy Upon Me, O God

Psalm 51

Since at least the 6th century, seven psalms have been marked as penitential: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, and 143. In Psalm 50 God reveals He doesn't ultimately want sacrifices, but thanksgiving, truthfulness, and cries for deliverance (50:14-15). That revelation continues in Psalm 51 where we learn the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit and contrite heart. The Lord gives us the gift of repentance and shows us how to confess our sins and exult in forgiveness.

Summary & Structure

Psalm 51 can be divided into three parts. The superscription sets the context of David's adultery with Bathsheba, murder of Uriah, and confrontation by Nathan the prophet. In the first section, David prays God would have mercy on him and according to His character blot out his transgression, wash him from iniquity, and cleanse him from sin (vv. 1-9). The second section is a prayer for personal renewal as an individual and as a king (vv. 10-17). The third section is a prayer for God to do His good pleasure in Zion, to build the walls of Jerusalem where He will receive sacrifices of righteousness, the ascension offerings of the dedicated people of God (vv. 18-19).

Thou Art the Man

The most famous parable in the Old Testament is told by Nathan to David about a rich and poor man who live in the same city (2 Sam. 12:1-15). David doesn't know it's a parable, and when he hears the rich man took the poor man's beloved lamb and fed it to a guest, he says the rich man should die and because he had no pity. Nathan then delivers the famous line: "You are the man!" (v. 7). David had wives, honor, power, the land of Israel and Judah, and God would have given him more, and still he took Bathsheba. She gets pregnant so he tries to make it look like Uriah, her husband's, by sending him to be with her. That didn't work so he killed him by sending him into hot battle. After Bathsheba mourned Uriah's death, David married her: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Sam. 11:27). His whole plan was to keep it quiet, thinking God won't do anything about it. Nathan exposed his hypocrisy and told him the child would die. David fasted and pleaded with God for a week anyway but to no avail (2 Sam. 12:18). David could have remained permanently in sorrow and worldly grief, but instead he called upon the Lord for mercy.

Against You Only

David uses three words for sin and three to describe the removal of that sin by God. He asks God to blot out his transgressions, his active rebellion and intentional crossing the line into evil (v. 1). He wasn't thinking, "I want to do evil. Hey look, there's Bathsheba." But instead of being at battle, he saw her and took her. Second, he asks the Lord to wash his iniquity, which means twisting and perverting what is straight and good (v. 2). Third, he prays for cleansing from sin which connotes missing the mark or wandering away (v. 2). There are no do-overs after sin, no way to make up for breaking the law of God. How could David undo adultery and murder? He needs God to blot it out, to take it away so that he doesn't have to live with it every day of his life. Just because Uriah and the child are dead does not mean he can live at peace, and he isn't pretending any more that he can. The battle against the Ammonites was justified, and Uriah was a good soldier. David used good things—battle, the chain of command, a faithful soldier fighting on the right side—to do iniquity. For blood guilt to go away, it must be washed. His wicked heart, broken desires, lustful eyes, and proud spirit must all be cleansed. David calls on the Lord to do this not because he is very sorry, has a lot to offer, new ideas, or great plans, but "according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies" (v. 1). It's all about God, and must be, for real mercy—not just unmerited grace but *de*merited grace—to be shown. David is saying, "God, *because* You are like this, have mercy upon me." The singular holiness of God, the

fountain of all goodness and righteousness, is what's behind David's statement that against Him only has he sinned (v. 4). This does not mean he didn't sin against Bathsheba, Uriah, and many others. It means every sin is against God and we must first repent to Him with no excuses, comparisons, or but-he/she/they/then or theres. This is one of the slipperiest things that our slippery hearts do, making our sins sound reasonable (to us) because of the circumstances. A student who fails an exam will feel better if the whole the class also failed it. Usually, the teacher bears much if not all the responsibility. But what if the entire class fails because they cheated? This is our situation. We have a perfect teacher and instead of owning it before Him, we fight about who cheated more.

The Sacrifices of God

You probably don't have a palace roof to sin upon or an army to command, but this psalm is still for you. Jesus says whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart, and whoever is angry with his brother has committed murder (Matt. 5:27-28, 21-22). The penitential psalms are for the penitent, given to God's people to know at all times how to come to Him for mercy. "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts / And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom" (v. 6). God doesn't want good, tidy, squeaky-clean followers on the outside who stay off the grass and keep all the man-made rules. He wants truth known deep down in your hidden soul and spirit. David explains it's much worse than we thought. We sin because we are sinners, part of a fallen race in Adam, born from sinful mothers (v. 5). The iniquity David was conceived in may or may not refer to the specific circumstances of his conception. It certainly refers to our ungodly nature: "And you He made alive, who *were dead* in trespasses and sins… fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were *by nature* children of wrath, just as the others" (Eph. 2:1, 3). The despairing heart sees nothing but hopeless destruction. Uriah is dead. Bathsheba is widowed. The baby is gone. What does God want from him? How can this possibly get better? The proud heart sees the need to quickly move on: protect yourself, run to safety, cover your backside, start explaining, do damage control. This psalm is one of a man who has stopped managing his sins and started confessing them. His target is not survival or a little progress. If God purges, he'll be clean; if He washes, David will be whiter than snow (v. 7). He'll hear joy and gladness and his broken bones won't just mend but rejoice (v. 8). *The* sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart (v. 17). These are so much the point of the sacrifices that David can say God doesn't want the burnt offerings (v. 16). So why did He command them? To help us get to the contrite heart, and to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus. They are a means. God doesn't need the goats, but we need to give thanks (Ps. 50:13-14). God doesn't need our prayers, songs, or tithes. But we need Him. We're to do these things for Him, and only for Him. The contrite heart walks in repentance. Had David confessed his sin that day on the rooftop, lives would have been saved. By daily confession, only today's sins are ever before you and the joy of the Lord is yours (vv. 3, 12).

Christ our Repentance

Some Christians may wonder if they can forfeit the Holy Spirit (v. 11). When God regenerates a Christian, the Spirit comes to dwell permanently (2 Cor. 1:22). You can ignore, grieve, and sin against the Spirit, but you can't lose Him. David was anointed by the Spirit to rule as king, and he could lose that power and privilege, so he prays not to. If God preserves him, he will teach transgressors (v. 13)—meet Psalm 51. He wants his forgiveness to matter, for the walls of Jerusalem to go up and God to be glorified. This is what godly repentance aims at—at God's glory. Christ never sinned but was baptized for our repentance. He cleanses even our troubled repentance and presents us in His righteousness to the Father, which is why we are worshipping Him now at His altar (v. 19).