

## Psalm 51

**Context:** Perhaps the best known of the seven traditional penitential psalms<sup>1</sup>, Psalm 51 was written by King David after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan for committing adultery with Bathsheba and arranging for the death of her husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11-12). In this deeply passionate and transparent psalm, David confesses his sin and pleads to God for forgiveness. Although intensely personal, the psalm's instructional elements (vv. 16-19) show that it is meant to be used as a hymn through which members of a worshipping congregation confess their own sins and affirm their trust in the gracious character of God to forgive.

### Verses 1-2: Have Mercy on Me

1. David knows that God's unfailing, covenantal love is the basis for God's mercy.
2. The word translated "compassion" in the NIV usually refers to the tender care one gives to an infant in its most vulnerable state. It is a rich word rooted in tenderness and mercy.

### Verses 3-6: I Own Up to My Sin

1. David's declaration that his sin is against God alone is startling given its terrible effects on Bathsheba, Uriah, and his own child. Although the Bible does not deny that sin can cause terrible suffering, David recognizes the deeper truth that ultimately, all sin is a grievous offense against God. Even when one considers the terrible effects of sin on the human level, that is nothing compared to the rupture sin causes in the divine-human relationship. Because of this, David can assert that his sin is against God alone.
2. In v. 5, David traces his sinfulness to the very beginning of his existence, to the moment of his conception. He is not saying that the act of conception is sinful.

### Verses 7-12: I Seek Restoration and Renewal

1. David prays that the Lord, like a priest, will cleanse him with "hyssop" (v.7). The unclean, such as lepers, used to present themselves before the priest for purification. If the unclean person met the requirements for purification, the priest would use "hyssop" (a plant with hairy leaves and branches) to sprinkle the unclean person with water in the symbolic act of ritual cleansing.
2. In v. 10, David asks God to create in him a new heart. David's point is that his sin has so tainted his heart that he needs a completely new one. Only God can do this because only God can create.
3. The goal of this confession is not self-abasement, but a renewal of the joy and gladness the faithful have in God's presence.

### Verses 13-17: Then I Will Worship Truly

1. David's experience of restoration and renewal enables David to share firsthand the gracious character of God with others. The "bloodguiltiness" in v.14 probably refers to the slaying of Uriah. If God can forgive David this evil, he can certainly forgive all else!
2. In v. 16, David refers to insincere sacrifice without a proper heart attitude. No sacrifice, on its own, was sufficient for forgiveness. Sacrifice had to be accompanied by a repentant heart. However, v. 19 does show that God delights in proper sacrifices; those offered with a broken and contrite heart.

### Verses 18-19: Do Good to Zion

1. The significance of these verses for us today lies in the community identification with David's sin, the need for grace, and the anticipation of divinely bestowed joy.

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<sup>1</sup> The other penitential psalms are 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143.