

Psalm 51

Title: A Penitent Prayer for Pardon

Author and Date: David

Key Verses: Psalm 51:17

Type: Penitential

Outline

- A. Petitioning God that he would be forgiven (verses 1-12).
- B. Promising God that sinners would be taught (verses 13-17).
- C. Praising God that Jerusalem would be blessed (verses 18-19).

Notes

Title: “For the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David; when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bath-sheba.” See the notes on Psalm 4 for the meaning of “For the Chief Musician.” Psalm 51 is the first of several psalms in Book II that are attributed to David (see Psalm 51-70). The story of Nathan coming to David “after he had gone in to Bath-sheba” is found in 2 Samuel 12:1-15.

Summary: Psalm 51 is the fourth of seven penitential psalms – psalms that deal with sin and forgiveness (Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143). This psalm and Psalm 32 may have been composed after David’s sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12). Psalm 51 is a contrite sinner’s prayer for forgiveness. First, the psalmist petitions God for forgiveness of his sins (verses 1-2). The psalmist is willing to honestly and humbly confess his sins (verses 3-6) and he wants to return and be restored to the relationship he had with God before his sin (verses 7-12). Second, the psalmist promises that he will teach sinners how to be forgiven and he will praise God (verses 13-17). Finally, the psalmist praises God that he would bless Jerusalem and accept the righteous sacrifices that are offered (verses 18-19).

Verses 1-2: The psalmist is a contrite sinner who makes a number of requests to God (see also verses 6-12): “have mercy”, “wash me” (2x), “cleanse me”, “purify me”, “make me”, “hide thy face”, “blot out”, “create in me”, “renew”, “cast me not”, “take not”, “restore unto me”, and “uphold me”. For a study of the words “transgressions,” “iniquity,” and “sin,” see the notes on Psalm 32:1-2.

Verses 3-4: We learn some important truths about sin from these verses. First, sin must be owned and accepted (no blaming or excuses). Second, sin must be honestly and truthfully confessed (see verse 6). Finally, sin must be recognized as sin against God because it is the violation of his word (Gen. 39:9; 2 Sam. 12:13). Sin is transgression of God’s

law (Rom. 4:15; 1 Jn. 3:4). Since all sin is against God, God is “justified” and “clear” (KJV) when he speaks against and judges the sinner (verse 4b). The last part of verse 4 is quoted by Paul in Romans 3:4 and applied to God’s appropriate actions (his faithful and righteous actions) against Israel’s sin.

Verse 5: This verse is commonly used by Calvinists to teach the doctrine of “Total Depravity” (the first of the Five Points of Calvinism, or TULIP). Calvinists teach that babies are born with Adam’s sinful nature; they are born sinners because their parents are sinners. They say that babies inherit a “sinful nature” or “depraved nature” from their parents going back to Adam’s “original sin”. But, this verse must be read carefully. The psalmist says, “I was brought forth in iniquity”, not, “I was born a sinner”. The psalmist is using a Hebrew idiom (a bold poetic exaggeration or hyperbole) to say that he was brought forth in an environment of iniquity and sin. He was born into a sinful society and surrounded by sin from an early age (Psa. 58:3; Isa. 6:5).

Verse 7: Hyssop refers to small branches used to sprinkle water or blood (Ex. 12:22; Lev. 14:51).

Verse 8: The psalmist believes that God broke his bones when he caused him to have guilt feelings (depression) over his sin.

Verse 14: David was charged with “bloodguiltiness” when he killed Uriah (2 Sam. 12:5, 9, 13).

Verses 16-17: God does not want an animal sacrifice that is not accompanied by a contrite heart. He does not want a burnt offering without a broken heart. He does not want a sinful Israelite to bring an animal and just go through the motions of sacrifice (see the notes on Psalm 40:6 and 50:8-13). He wants the sinful Israelite to be genuinely humble and repentant (inward sacrifice) when he brings his animal sacrifice (outward sacrifice).

Verse 19: “Sacrifices of righteousness” are sacrifices that come from someone with the right attitude (verse 17) and with the right actions (Psa. 4:5).

Questions

1. What petition does the psalmist have for God and upon what is it based (verse 1)?
2. What does the psalmist want washed and cleansed (verse 2)?
3. What does the psalmist know (verse 3)?

4. What is the psalmist willing to admit and confess (verse 4)?
5. How does the psalmist describe the circumstances of his birth and conception (verse 5)?
6. What does God desire (verse 6)?
7. What further request does the psalmist have for God (verse 7)?
8. What does the psalmist want to hear (verse 8)?
9. What does the psalmist want hidden and blotted out (verse 9)?
10. What does the psalmist want created and renewed (verse 10)?
11. What does the psalmist want to hold on to (verse 11)?
12. What does the psalmist want restored and upheld (verse 12)?
13. What does the psalmist promise to do after he is forgiven (verses 13-15)?
14. What kind of sacrifice does God not want and what kind does he want (verses 16-17)?
15. What does the psalmist want God to do for Jerusalem (verse 18)?

16. What will God delight in (verse 19)?

Applications for Today

1. God is merciful and gracious to forgive the penitent sinner. He is willing to cleanse the sinner from his sin (verses 1-2). What does God use today to blot out, wash, cleanse, and purify sin (Acts 3:19; 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 2:14; 3:5; Heb. 9:14; 9:22; 10:22; 1 Jn. 1:7-9)?
2. A person's sin must be responsibly owned, honestly confessed, and humbly repented of (verses 3-4, 6, and 17). What did the publican do in Luke 18:13-14? What does godly sorrow do (2 Cor. 7:10)? What must the erring Christian do (Jas. 5:16; 1 Jn. 1:9)?
3. Sin hurts the sinner, sin hurts others, and sin hurts God (verses 4 and 8). What did Joseph not want to do (Gen. 39:9)? What comes with sin (Jn. 8:34; Rom. 6:23; Heb. 3:13; 11:25)?
4. Sin surrounds us, but it is not something we are born with; it is something we choose (verse 5). What is the state of each person when they are born (Eccl. 7:29)? Who is responsible for sin (Ezek. 18:20)? When does a person sin (Jas. 1:13-15; 1 Jn. 3:4)?
5. The sinner needs to return to God and be restored (verses 7-12). What happens when a sinner repents and returns (Lk. 15:3-32)? What attitude should be used in the restoration of sinners (Gal. 6:1)?
6. Our forgiveness should cause us to tell others of how they can be forgiven and it should cause us to praise God (verses 13-15). What did the Ethiopian Eunuch and the jailor do after their baptism (Acts 8:39; 16:34)?
7. God wants the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart – genuine repentance (verses 16-17), and he wants the sacrifice of righteousness (verses 18-19). Who are blessed in Matthew 5:3-6 and do these verses relate to Psalm 51:17?