

Summer in the Psalms

Penitential Psalms: Psalm 51

1. Pardon (vs. 1-4)

2. Problem (vs. 5-9)

3. Purity (vs. 10-13)

4. Promise (vs. 14-17)

5. People (vs. 18-19)

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Summer in the Psalms Penitential Psalms¹ (Psalm 51)

We are continuing in our sermon series called “Summer in the Psalms.” If you are like most people, you’ve read a few of the Psalms when you were dealing with a particularly difficult issue, or maybe you passed by them on your way reading through the Bible. But many of us have missed the incredible depth and richness of the Psalms. So we’re spending some time in them this summer. One thing we’ve discovered is that the Book of Psalms is designed for this purpose:

Psalms is a book of prayers to help you obey God’s Word and stay faithful to Jesus Christ.

I hope it has helped you in that – it certainly has for me. The Psalms are actually prayers, whether they are sung or prayed or spoken, they’re prayers in order to help us obey God’s Word and stay faithful to Jesus Christ. Our goal is that, by the time we are through, you will have a greater ability to pray with more depth and authenticity, no matter what it is you are praying about or what you are going through.

We started out this series by looking at an overview of the entire book of Psalms and how it is organized, and why it is organized that way. Last week, I showed you a very informative video that also gave us a bigger picture of the structure and purpose of the Psalms. If you weren’t with us, I encourage you to go to our website or on our church app and find that first sermon and the link to the video.

As we’ve gone through this, we’ve talked about the different types of Psalms – there are different styles or types that we recognize and can group them in. For the last few weeks we’ve kind of been on the heavy side of those types of psalms – we looked at lament psalms, then the cursing psalms, and today the type we are looking at is the “penitential” Psalms. I’ll explain that in a minute. But next week we will be concluding our series with a morning of praise. We started this series on praise

¹ **Sources of research:**

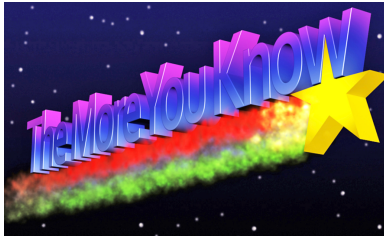
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psalms, and we will appropriately conclude the series on praise, so next Sunday will include a lot of music and singing and declaration. I know it's the long holiday weekend so some of you will be taking advantage of that, but if you *are* in town, I think you'll want to be with us.

This morning, then, we are talking about "**penitential Psalms.**" The title of this style says everything about them; the word "penitential" comes from the word "**penitence**" which means "**the action of feeling or showing sorrow and regret for having done wrong; repentance.**" The title or name for this style of Psalms was given by a sixth century Church scholar by the name of Cassiodorus, in his commentary. Here's a picture of the handsome fellow – I don't know, maybe that's his senior picture? Actually, his full name was Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator (c. 485 – c. 585), commonly known as Cassiodorus. *Senator* was actually his last name, not his rank. He was a Roman statesman, a renowned scholar of antiquity, and a writer serving in the administration of Theoderic the Great, king of the Ostrogoths. He also founded a monastery called Vivarium, where he spent the last years of his life. So (*bom bom bom*) "the more you know." Anyway, he's the guy that identified these



types of psalms, there are seven of them, and five of them were written by King David. We still recognize them today.



The penitential psalms have been important from the time of the Primitive Church. Historically, the Primitive Church was the early church from the book of Acts to the third century. Here's why that's important: from the very

beginning of the Church, these Psalms were used as prayers by the Apostles and by the early believers from the very, very beginning.

Each of these Psalms contains the essential things that are involved in real confession and repentance – the stuff Jesus tells us to do. All these Psalms have the same elements – here's the basics of penitential Psalms. They all include:

- Recognition of the severity of sin

We'll see that in the one we'll look at today. But these are about more than just feeling bad and changing our actions; changing our actions won't change our heart, so they speak to that problem. They also demonstrate:

- The burden and sorrow of sin

David realizes how horrible sin is, how destructive it is, how much it hurts the God who loves him and destroys the relationship he has with God. These also model for us the:

- confession of sin

This means that we see our sin in the same way that God sees it, and we admit it.

Also:

- repentance includes changed conduct

The prayer for God to forgive us by his grace includes prayer for direction, instruction, and help to change. The prayer renounces sinful actions and associations, and turning away from sinful people and places. Then there is:

- a promise to be used of God to teach others

You'll see that in the Psalm we look at today. Then there is an expression of:

- the joy of forgiveness

The only true joy comes from being totally forgiven and set free and restored to a right relationship with God. From this point, the psalm is all *joy*.² These elements are present in all the Penitential Psalms. Let's get to it because I think this is going to be very helpful for you in your own prayers and relationship with God. The most famous of all these types of Psalms is Psalm 51. This particular Psalm was actually recited by the Primitive Church at the close of the *daily* morning worship service. The believers would gather in church or in a home or in a building every morning to worship and pray together, and they would recite Psalm 51 every day before they left to go out into their day. So this has been a significant, important, formative prayer throughout the history of the Jewish people and from the very beginning of the Christian Church. That also means we've lost something by *not* using this prayer in our own lives. We'd better take a good look at it, starting with reading it.

Since it was prayed together, I'm going to ask you to stand and recite it with me, instead of me just reading it to you.

Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night.

Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just. For I was born a sinner—yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.

But you desire honesty from the womb, teaching me wisdom even there. Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Oh, give me back my joy again; you have broken me—now let me rejoice. Don't keep looking at my sins. Remove the stain of my guilt. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me.

Do not banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you. Then I will teach your ways to rebels, and they will return to you.

² https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/vincent/the_penitential_psalms.htm

Forgive me for shedding blood, O God who saves; then I will joyfully sing of your forgiveness. Unseal my lips, O Lord, that my mouth may praise you. You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one.

You do not want a burnt offering. The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God. Look with favor on Zion and help her; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Then you will be pleased with sacrifices offered in the right spirit—with burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings. Then bulls will again be sacrificed on your altar. (Psalm 51, nlt)

Okay thanks, you can be seated. Some of that your heart probably began to resonate with right away, and some of it maybe left you wondering what in the world it was about, so we'll get to that.

I should point out that the heading of this chapter directly links this prayer of David to his sin with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah, from 2 Samuel 11. Then later in the next chapter (12), God reveals David's hidden sin to the prophet Nathan, who then confronts David. Instead of making excuses or trying to cover his behind or blame someone else, David, full of sadness, "mans up" and admits his guilt and sin. *This* prayer is a result of that remorse. So let's dive into it, starting with seeing the prayer for...

1. *Pardon* (vs 1-4)

Some passages of the Bible are really deep and profound theology, like a lot of the stuff that the Apostles Paul and John wrote. But this Psalm is really a passionate, honest cry from a deeply troubled heart.

David realizes that his sin isn't just about making a wrong decision or a sinful action; he sees that the roots of his sinful actions goes all the way to his sinful heart – he is a sinner to the very core. This is a deep and powerful and honest look at himself.

Let me try to explain the difference between sinful actions and a sinful heart: Suppose I hold this bottle of water and I shake it. Water spills out, and you ask me, "Why did water spill out?" The instinctive answer is, "Water came out because I shook it." But there is another more correct answer, which is this: "Water came out because water is what was inside the bottle. If there had not been water in the bottle in the first place, no water would have ever come out of the bottle." Sure, it *came out* because it was shaken, but water came out because water was inside.

So if we asked David, "Why did you do what you did?" He might say, "I did it because I was tempted, because of pressure. Because Bathsheba was gorgeous and naked and knew I was watching...in other words, I did it because I was "shaken." My balance was messed up by outside influences, things that happened to me. I was weary. I looked out of the window and saw this beautiful woman, and one thing led to another. I was shaken." That's what we instinctively say. "I said that because I was

stressed." "I did that because I was tired, or sick." "My upbringing has conditioned me to react that way."

But David's answer in Psalm 51, right off the top, is, "I committed adultery because there is adultery in my heart": "I covered up because there is pride in my heart"; "I murdered because love of self and hatred of others is in my heart." "The really shocking thing I have figured out," says David, "is that what I did expressed *who I am*. Evil came out of me because there is evil in me."

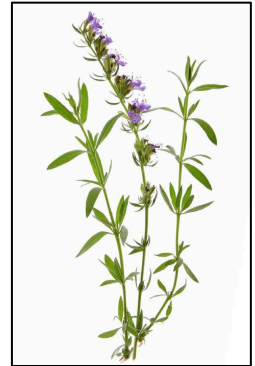
So he pleads with God for his "unfailing love" – did you recognize that word? It is "chesed." David knows that by law he is guilty, dead to rights, and he's pleading for mercy. "Chesed" is a covenant relationship word in response to a legal reality. For all his guilt and unworthiness, David knows that God still loves him. It's like in the story of the Prodigal Son (remember? Luke 15) – when the son gets back home after squandering his father's inheritance and living a life full of sin, he prays a paradoxical prayer: "Father, I'm not worthy to be your son." He realized he didn't deserve to be his son, but he still called him "father." I always told my boys, there is nothing you could do, no matter how bad it is, that will stop you from being my son, nothing you do will stop me from loving you. That's "chesed." So David calls on God's "chesed." Then David used another word: "according to your compassion." That's an *emotional* word; David is asking God to be deeply moved by his love for David and forgive his sin.

The...

2. ***Problem*** (vs 5-9)

...is, there is more to it than that. There is still the issue of sin; the deed has already been done and the deserved guilt is still there. David knows that he deserves to be judged, and the only solution is to be completely cleaned – like a filthy piece of clothing that needs to be washed and bleached white again. David acknowledges that God's holiness desires and demands that we be sinless to the very heart of our lives and nature – that there be truth "in the inward parts." David admits – this is important – *he confesses* – that there is *not* truth in the inner parts of his life; he is sinful to the core. King David knows he was born that way. But he's not blaming it on that or taking pride in how he was born; rather he recognizes that his sin is so deep in him that it will take an act of God to change it. His sin is part of his own DNA, inherited because he is part of the sinful human race. He's not saying the act of conception and birth is sinful; he's saying that his sin is inherited. So he's already asking God to wash him. There were two words that David could have used to refer to "washing" – one described cleaning your body like in a bath, or washing plates and silverware by putting it in water and then pouring water over it. The *other* word described washing clothes by beating them with a stick or pounding them on a flat rock under water. Guess which word David used? The second one, because he knew that the kind of washing he needed wasn't a gentle little soak; He knew that his sin was so entrenched that God would have to scrub hard and almost beat it out of him.

Then David uses kind of a weird example that you might not recognize: he says, “wash me with hyssop.” There is something really significant there. Hyssop is an herb in the mint family and has cleansing, medicinal, and flavoring qualities. Hyssop is also used symbolically in the Bible. It was used when someone was healed, as a ceremonial and spiritual cleansing of sin’s effects. In the Exodus Event, when the Israelites marked their doorposts with lamb’s blood in order for the angel of death to pass over them, God instructed them to use a bunch of hyssop as a “paintbrush” (Exodus 12:22). Hyssop was sturdy and strong enough for using as a brush, but it also signified that God was marking His people as “washed” and not targets of the judgment God was about to deal out to the Egyptians.



So when David said he wanted to be cleaned with Hyssop, he’s not referring to physical cleansing; he is asking God to cleanse him spiritually as he confesses his sin. By the way, hyssop also appears at Jesus’ crucifixion, when the Roman soldiers offered Jesus a drink of wine vinegar on a sponge at the end of a stalk of hyssop (John 19:28–30). That was Jesus’ last act before He declared His work on earth was finished and gave up His spirit and died. The soldiers used the hyssop stalk for purely practical reasons (i.e., it was long enough to reach to Jesus’ mouth as He hung on the cross). But God meant this as a picture of purification, to show that Jesus bought our forgiveness with His sacrifice. Just like in the Old Testament blood and hyssop purified a defiled person, so Jesus’ shed blood purifies us from the defilement of our sin.³ So there’s a direct connection between David’s prayer for forgiveness in Psalm 51 and Jesus’ death on the cross for us.

The weight of that sin was crushing David so hard it was like breaking his bones. He knew that his *only* hope was for God to forgive him. So he begs for...

3. ***Purity*** (vs 10-13)

David knows that what he needs is a heart transplant, when he says “create in me a clean heart” he uses the word “create” – the same word used to describe what God did in Genesis at the very beginning of creation. He’s not asking God to *mend* his heart; he’s asking God to *replace* his heart, to start over, to the time before sin entered creation and before sin entered the human race – David needs a heart that will be loyal and fixed on God, always obeying him.

Now let me ask you something: do you think you will *always* sin, or is it possible to walk in relationship with God, be a Christian, and *not* sin? If not, then why is David asking for it? And why does God promise it? God promised through the prophet Ezekiel:

“I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I

³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/hyssop-Bible.html>

will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” (Ezekiel 36:24-27, nlt)

That was the promise God made, and that was the promise that was fulfilled because Jesus died on the cross and then the Holy Spirit moved so powerfully on the Day of Pentecost in the Book of Acts (Acts 2), proving that God’s Spirit would now live within us, cleansing us, giving us a new heart, and moving us to obey God. That doesn’t mean we are perfect and don’t make mistakes, but it *does* mean we can stop dealing with sin in our lives and start living for Jesus and focusing on introducing people to Jesus Christ. That’s why David begs God not to take the Holy Spirit away from him. That was something that he saw happen to King Saul, because of his repeated sin and stubbornness. David knows that God’s Spirit in him will result in the joy of his salvation; he will be filled with joy because of what God has done and is doing in his life.

Some of us need the joy of our salvation. Some of us are living in the depression of our salvation; we aren’t joyful at all. Instead of being filled with joy we are just sour all the time. Come on; Christians of all people have reason to be optimistic; we’ve been forgiven clear to the core! We can be filled with the Holy Spirit and get a heart transplant!

So David knows that if God will do this in his life, he can safely...

4. *Promise* (vs 14-17)

...that he will praise God and that he will tell others about how great God is, and he’ll use his life as the example of what God can do. David knows that empty rituals mean nothing to God; making a sacrifice or a promise without a changed heart and life is a broken promise before it starts; it is empty and meaningless. You can’t come to church, shake your neighbor’s hand, sing songs, put money in the bucket, pray, act like you’re paying attention, and leave and expect that to matter one whit to God. God can’t change your heart unless you will admit how sinful you are without God’s forgiveness; without what Jesus has done for you on the cross and without the Holy Spirit. The only thing we can *ever* offer to God is a humble heart, completely given to him. If we’ll do *that*, then everything else we do at church, we do out of gratitude and a desire to be more like Christ and learn how to introduce more people to Jesus. Then our worship is meaningful to God because we’ve first given ourselves to him.

Since David knows God can and will do that for him and in him, his attention turns to other...

5. *People* (vs 18-19)

David prays for the Church. he prays for the people of God to always gather together and wholeheartedly worship God, to be people who offer their worship out of the same newly created and forgiven hearts that are filled with the Holy Spirit. This is David’s prayer for you. This is what Jesus came to do for you. This is why the

early Christians gathered together every morning, worshiped God, recited this Psalm, and then went out into their day to serve the Lord and introduce people to Jesus by their love and by their lives.

Is that what you want? Or does David's prayer not apply to you?

Let me tell you about that word, repentance. It means two things: one is a change of mind. You've got to make up your mind. God's not going to jump up from behind you and surprise you and just take over. *You* have to decide that you are headed the wrong way, turn around, and start heading toward God. It is a rational choice of the will. Repentance means a change of mind *and* a change of direction. You make that turn and God does all the rest. But if you don't make that turn, your worship here, your giving, it really won't add up to much because you don't know the pure joy of a pure heart and salvation. Life keeps shaking you and sin comes out every time, and its nobody's fault but yours; its because there is sin in you. Stop making excuses, stop blaming others. Realize it is all on you, and there is nothing you can do about it but turn to God. God's forgiveness has already been purchased for you because of what Christ has done. A new heart waits for you because of the Holy Spirit. God will not ignore a broken and contrite heart. That's what David said.

Do you see how this prayer applies to *all of us*, no matter if we are already Christians or not? We *all* need to pray this prayer all the time.

The team is going to lead us in a song, and if you need to come up and pray this prayer for the first time, or you want to reaffirm this prayer in your life, come and pray.

Prayer

Now be like David: let God fill you with his Spirit, tell other people about Jesus, and pray for the church.