

THE VOICE OF CONFESSION

PSALM 51

A. The Story: 2 Sam 11-12

It began “*In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war... But David remained in Jerusalem.*” (2 Sam 11:1 NIV) One night alone on his rooftop, David’s eye caught sight of a beautiful woman bathing. It was Bathsheba, the wife of a loyal friend, Uriah the Hittite. Overcome by lust he took her and lay with her. Weeks later Bathsheba sent David a message of just two words, “I’m pregnant.” But rather than facing the guilt of his sin, David tried to cover it up by summoning Uriah home from the battle. After a quick battle report he encourages Uriah to relax and go home to sleep with his wife. But this soldier will not be distracted from his sacred charge and sleeps outside David’s palace with all the servants. When David asks him why he did not enjoy the comforts of home, Uriah replied,

The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord’s men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!” (2 Sam 11:11)

Uriah could not possibly bring himself to do “*this thing!*” Uriah’s passionate concern about the ark is an echo David’s earlier concern in 2 Sam. 7:2, a painful mirror of David at his faithful best. But rather than making a full confession, David hardens his heart and delays his friend one more night. This time he applies a little alcohol to the situation, hoping a drunk Uriah will lose his resolve. But Uriah drunk is a better man than David is sober. He again refuses to sleep with his wife.

Still determined, David then sends Uriah back to the battle with a sealed message to Joab, his general, to place him in the midst of the fiercest fighting and withdraw leaving Uriah exposed. The plan succeeds, but gets a little messy when other innocent lives are lost as well. But when David gets the news, he replies glibly to his general, “*Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes, for the sword devours one as well as another*” (2 Sam 11:25). Now “*this thing*” is the murder of innocent lives. The cover-up was successful except for one loose end, “*The thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord*” (2 Sam 11:27). The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront David, and through the guise of a ruling on a court case of a stolen lamb, David proclaims his own guilt.

“As the LORD lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.” (2 Sam 12:5,6).

Nathan answers with that penetrating, “*You are the man!*” What will David say now? Are there **words**? We have seen that David was master poet when it came to grief, and was able to shape metaphors to draw out his deepest sorrow when his best friend was brutally killed. But how will he give grief a voice when he is the one responsible for the death? What can he possibly say to come back home to a heavenly Father he has spurned? This psalm pushes the envelope of grace to heights that never before existed. It is a poetic masterpiece of creative genius that is designed to bring the worst of sinners safely home. It begins with the superscription: For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. The superscription became a permanent public reminder that God sent the prophet Nathan to enter David’s soul, just when David entered into Bathsheba. Each time this psalm was sung it became a public reminder of the king’s sin and the prophet’s word. In our culture the media makes our sins public; in David’s day, the guilty king humbly displayed his own sins for all to see. This is the first step to healing.

B. The Poem: Psalm 51

When the prophet Nathan came to him,
after David had committed adultery Bathsheba.

- 1 Be gracious to me, God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Thoroughly wash me from my iniquity,
and pronounce me clean from my sin.
- 3 For my transgressions I know,
and my sin is always before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned,
and what is evil in your sight I did;
so you are just when you speak,
and blameless when you judge.
- 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin my mother conceived me.
- 6 Behold, truth you desired in the covered place;
and in the bottled-up place you were teaching me wisdom.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop that I may be clean;
wash me that I may be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,
and all my iniquities blot out.
- 10 A clean heart, O God, create for me,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
- 11 Do not cast me from your presence,
and take not your spirit of holiness from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and let a willing spirit sustain me.

- 13 Let me teach transgressors your ways,
that sinners may turn back to you.
- 14 Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me,
and my tongue will shout out loud your righteousness.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 Surely, you would not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer it;
a burnt offering you would not favor.
- 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, God, you will not despise.
- 18 Prosper, in your favor, Zion;
let the walls of Jerusalem be built.
- 19 Then you delight in the sacrifices of righteousness,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

52:1 For the director of music.

Psalm 51 (Bruce Waltke translation⁶⁹)

⁶⁹ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 462-463.

Psalm 51 Outline⁷⁰

I. Superscript	
II. Invocation and Prefatory Petitions (2 verses):	vv. 1-2
A. For forgiveness	v.1
B. For cleansing	v. 2
III. Confession (4 verses)	vv. 3-6
A. Of sins (2 verses)	vv. 3-4
1. Consciousness of sin	v. 3
2. Confession of sin	v. 4
B. Of moral impotence (2 verses)	vv. 5-6
1. Of sinful nature	v. 5
2. Of moral nature	v. 6
IV. Petitions (6 verses)	vv. 7-12
A. For forgiveness of sins (3 verses)	vv. 7-9
1. For ablution	v. 7
2. For word of absolution	v. 8
3. For forgiveness	v. 9
B. For spiritual renewal (3 verses)	vv. 10-12
1. For steadfast spirit	v. 10
2. For retaining God's spirit of holiness	v. 11
3. For willing spirit	v. 12
V. Vow of Praise (7 verses)	vv. 13-19
A. Personal Praise (5 verses)	vv. 13-17
1. Word of praise	vv. 13-15
2. Sacrifice of praise	vv. 16-17
B. National Praise (2 verses)	vv. 18-19
1. Condition: prosperity of Zion	v. 18
2. Consequence: Zion's praise	v. 19
VI. Subscript	Ps. 52 superscript A

⁷⁰ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 465-466.

EXERCISE #4: DISCOVERING NEW METAPHORS OF GRACE

<p>I. For Forgiveness and cleansing</p> <p>7 Purge me with hyssop that I may be clean; wash me that I may be whiter than snow.</p> <p>8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.</p> <p>9 Hide your face from my sins, and all my iniquities blot out.</p>	<p>II. For Spiritual Renewal</p> <p>10 A clean heart, God, create for me, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.</p> <p>11 Do not cast me from your presence, nor take your spirit of holiness from me.</p> <p>12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and let a willing spirit sustain me.</p>
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At the heart of David's poem (vv. 7-12) are his petitions for forgiveness and restoration. In these verses the poet reaches the pinnacle of greatness and gets a doctoral degree for new developments in the theology of grace. While using three terms for sin, he uses twenty images for forgiveness or cleansing in this psalm. With astonishing freedom he pushes the envelope of grace to new heights, throwing himself headlong upon the mercy of God. David, the Einstein of grace, anticipates the New Covenant in all its majestic beauty. His prayer is profoundly simple, like Einstein's $E=mc^2$, yet it is a work of absolute genius.

God desires truth "in the innermost being" but, as David probed the depths of his heart, he saw that sin had taken root, metastasized and spread like leprosy. The image, "purify me with hyssop," was used for the purification rights of a leper (Lev 14:6-7; Mark 1:40-45). David confesses that he needs to be opened up, to be washed and scrubbed clean by God. Then, he says, "I shall be whiter than snow." This is a new metaphor of cleansing, a David original. Isaiah would later adopt it and turn it into a prophetic hope, saying to the nation: "Though your sins are as scarlet they will be as white as snow" (Isa 1:18). In Mark 1:40-45 Jesus cleanses a leper, and following the Lord's resurrection, an angel sat on the stone which had sealed the tomb, and his appearance was like lightning, his clothes were "as white as snow" (Matt 28:3).

David's sins have made him deaf to joy and psychologically crushed so that he has no delight in his step. He longs for God's tender voice of absolution to restore him back to health. Hearing it, he knows, will ignite his heart in enthusiastic joy.

In asking to hear the word "forgiveness" he makes a bold request, "Hide your face from my sins, and blot out my iniquities." Until now, the verb "blot out" had been used to describe what God does to sinners.⁷¹ In Genesis 6:7, God said he would "blot out" all mankind in the flood; and in Exodus, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot him out of my book" (Exod 32:33). David even used this verb in his prayers: "May [the wicked] be blotted out of the book of life" (Ps 69:28). But what do you do now when you are the "wicked"?

Notice the change: he asks God in effect, "Instead of blotting out my name from the book of life, will you avert your gaze at my sins and redirect your energy to blot out my iniquities?" Daring stuff! David is the first to use the term this way. Later, the prophet Isaiah uses it in similar fashion to anticipate the New Covenant in Christ: "the Lord GOD will wipe ("blot out") tears away from all faces" (Isa 25:8).

When our conscience has been deeply stained by sin, forgiveness alone is insufficient for us to press boldly on as servants of our King. As Waltke says, "He [David] needs from God an inward spiritual grace to accept his forgiveness and to build on it. And so he petitions God to give him that spirit."⁷¹

⁷¹ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 446.

My Confession with New Metaphors of Grace