

## Psalm 51: The Wonder of Repentance When the Enemy is Me

They say confession is good for the soul, But that sure doesn't make it easy! In general, our culture is neither good at confessing or at hearing confessions. Given our fierce independent natures, and our tendencies toward perfectionism, we are slow to admit our sin, and uncomfortable when we do. We would rather have superficial relationships than expose our deep seated fears and secrets...The psalms of penitence have much to teach us—about the results of sin, the attitude of God, and the hope for change. It is when we come to God with empty hands that we understand his unfailing love. (Wilson and Nygren, *The Cries of the Faithful*, Vol. 1, p. 63)

Write a few sentences of your own in response to this quotation.

**1.** Like the other penitential psalms we've read in our January lectionary readings (Psalms 6, 32, 38), **Psalm 51** confronts us with the damage of our sin, the need for confession, the wonder of repentance, and the joy of forgiveness.

What *elements of penitence* do you see in the narrative of David's sin found in 2 Samuel 11-12? What stands out to you now as you ponder David's experience?

What are your thoughts about the way David became aware of his sin? (**Psalm 51** superscription and 2 Samuel 12:1-13a)

Notice that David's life situation is not mentioned in **Psalm 51**. **Psalm 51's** *superscription* points to David's situation to show how this psalm can be used in our real lives. (Tanner, *The Psalms for Today*, p. 71)

How has David's story added or detracted from your understanding and use of **Psalm 51**? David's sins of murder and adultery were not covered by sacrificial provision, and his sin as king threatened the fabric of public life. (*New Bible Commentary*, p. 518)

**2. Psalm 51's** structure is a lament poem in **5 parts**:

- 1—prayer for individual restoration in vv. 1-2
- 2—confession and contrition in vv. 3-6
- 3—prayer for restoration in vv. 7-12
- 4—thanksgiving in vv. 13-17
- 5—prayer for national restoration in vv. 18-19

Notice the numerous *petitions* **Psalm 51** contains: verses 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15. What seems to be the *basis* for these appeals/pleas? ( Psalm 106:7 and 45) “Wash...cleanse...purge with hyssop” reflect God’s holiness.

Which of these appeals/petitions seem to connect, directly or indirectly, with needs in your life in January 2021? (*blot out* = *annihilate* in 51:1 and 9)

What is the psalmist’s understanding of his own sin (**Psalm 51:3-6**)?

**3.** Knowing *about* our sin doesn’t always equate with a willingness to confront it.

What motivates the psalmist to deal with his own heart? (**51:6, 8, 10-12**)

Read verse 6 in several translations. Most commentators describe its Hebrew as “obscure.” However, even in its obscurity, it clearly indicates that only by receiving revelation from the outside (“you teach me”) can the inside become whole. (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 5, p. 380*)

What expressions of self-awareness, transparency, and vulnerability get your attention in **Psalm 51:1-12**?

In the continued prayer for restoration in **51:7-12**, what do you learn about a person’s part in restoration? What is he asking God for in **51:7-9**? In **51:10-12**? What do you learn about God’s part in restoration?

**4.** According to Psalm **51:13-17**, what does the psalmist anticipate as the result of confession of sin (vv. 1-3) and prayer for God’s gracious internal renewal (vv. 7-12)? What attitudes, emotional states, and actions is he starting to experience and envision?

When have you or someone you know of had a transformative experience of growth and renewal in Christ and become free to serve God wholeheartedly?

**5.** What do the last verses, **51:18-19**, add to your understanding of the impact of personal restoration on community restoration?

**6.** How have penitential *psalms of confession and repentance* helped you in your following of Jesus? How might **Psalm 51** help you now?

Consider these possibilities:

- They acknowledge the anguish of my soul.
- They encourage me to be honest with God and not to hide from him.
- They display the devastating consequences of sin and guilt.
- They show the benefits of a contrite heart—a heart broken of self-will and humbled, an open heart, free for participation in the coming of the Kingdom.