



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 51

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Introduction

- This Psalm is titled *To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David when Nathan the Prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba*
- This is a repentant Psalm and one of seven penitent Psalms (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143)
- According to the title, the Psalm was composed by David as an expression of his penitence in view of his sin
- The phrase *when Nathan the Prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba*, refers to the fact recorded in 2 Samuel 12:1-13



Introduction

- The Psalm was the result of the visit of Nathan to him
- Nathan the prophet was sent to him to awaken him to a sense of his sin which he immediately acknowledged, and showed true repentance for it
- It is obvious that David recorded his feelings immediately without delay, for the Psalm bears all the marks of having been composed under the deepest feeling, and not of being the result of calm reflection
- Some commentators deny David's authorship to this Psalm
- However, their objections are without any foundation



Introduction

- David's style is easily distinguished, and the Psalm is clearly his
- This Psalm has always been held, and always will be held, in the Church, as the most magnificent expression of repentance
- According to the Coptic Orthodox rite, most of prayers begin with the recitation of this Psalm right after the Lord's prayer and the prayer of thanksgiving
- St. Augustine comments on David's humility and says, "There was sent to that man Nathan the prophet, observe the king's humility. He rejected not the words of him giving admonition, he said not, Dare you speak to me, a king? An exalted king heard a prophet, let His humble people hear Christ."



Introduction

Psalm Outline:

- Prayers for Remission of Sins, 51:1-4
- David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14
- Offering a Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving 51:15-17
- Acceptable Worship 51:18-19

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- The prophet begins with a prayer and appeals at once to the mercy of God, even before he mentions his sin
- It is a cry of a heart crushed and broken by the realization of his sin
- The psalmist had been made to see his great guilt; and his first act is to cry out for mercy and there is no attempt to excuse his sin
- And there is no effort to vindicate his behavior
- It was "guilt" that was before his mind; guilt only; deep and dreadful guilt

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- The only hope of a sinner when crushed with the awareness of sin is the mercy of God; and the plea for that mercy ought to be asked in the most ardent passionate emotional language that the mind can use
- The ground of David's hope was the compassion of God
- St. Augustine says, "He that implores great mercy, confesses great misery."
- David had sinned in murder, in adultery, in covering his sin, and in hardness against repentance
- It took the confrontation of Nathan the Prophet to shake him from this (2 Samuel 12); yet once shaken, David came in great honesty and brokenness before God

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- David's first prayer is for mercy
- His prayer for forgiveness is based upon God's character who is full of compassion and abundant in lovingkindness and truth
- His second is, to have his offences "*blotted out*," or "wiped out" - entirely removed from God's Book (Exodus 32:32; Isaiah 43:25,44:22)
- Sin is described in verses 1 & 2 in three different aspects, as *transgression, iniquity, sin*
- The Hebrew word for transgression is rebellion against God
- And the Hebrew word for iniquity is immorality or evil of conduct

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- Lastly the Hebrew word for sin is error, drifting from the right way, missing the mark in life
- Sin is regarded as a debt recorded in God's Book which needs to be erased from God's Book, Exodus 32:32; Numbers 5:23
- David knew that he had not only earned the punishment of everlasting death by his sin, but that it also left a stain on his soul that made it dark and the expression, "*Blot out,*" refers to both
- When a debt is forgiven, the deeds are said to be cancelled, or blotted out; and stains are said to be washed and purified

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- The washing must be thorough, it must be repeated, therefore he cries, *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity*
- David, then, begs God to deal with him with the mercy of a Father, to forgive the sin, and wash away the stain left by it
- St. John Chrysostom says, “In the Holy Book I see that Judas said before the Jewish chief priests and elders: ‘I have sinned’ (Matthew 27:3). It was also said by king Saul before Samuel the prophet (1 Samuel 15:24-34). And it was said, as well, by king David before Nathan the prophet. Yet, only one out of those three heard a clear answer of forgiveness, David (2 Samuel 12:13). That was because David said it truly from the heart (Psalm 51:1), as obvious from his prayers in the book of psalms.”

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- David's sins have all along been known to God
- They are before His eyes, *"You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your countenance."* (Psalm 90:8)
- But now he has come to know them himself; they are unceasingly present to his conscience
- Such awareness of sin is the first step towards the repentance and confession which are necessary conditions of forgiveness
- He bears it and does not hide it from himself but keeps it always before him
- This is characteristic of true penitence

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- Fake or pretend repentant confess their sins, and straightway forget them
- According to verse 3 real genuine ones find it impossible to forget
- We should be able truly to say, *my sin is always before me*
- This will help us to be constantly reminded of our great ungratefulness to so great Merciful Forgiver Lord
- David's confession to Nathan was expressed in the simple words "*I have sinned against the Lord.*" (2 Samuel 12:13)
- All sins are in their ultimate nature, sins against God, as a disobedience of His holy law; just as man's duty to his fellow-man is based upon his duty to God and is regarded as part of it

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- Though no sins could be more directly against man than adultery and murder, yet David feels that nothing is more grievous than that he has sinned against God
- Sins against men are insignificant when they are viewed in their true and real character, they are offences against the majesty of God
- On the importance of confessions St. Augustine says, "If you excuse yourself in confession, you shut up sin within your soul, and shut out pardon."
- He also said, "In failing to confess, Lord, I would only hide You from myself, not myself from You."

Prayers for Remission of Sins

51:1-4



- St. John Climacus says, "Confession is like a bridle that keeps the soul which reflects on it from committing sin, but anything left unconfessed we continue to do without fear as if in the dark."
- *That You may be found just when You speak*, David could not present any argument against divine justice, if it proceeded at once to condemn him and punish him for his crime
- He is saying that God is totally justified as Nathan confronted him and condemned him and he is in no position to complain

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- Additional confession is made in verses 5&6
- Verse 5 is, both by Jewish and Christian, by ancient and modern interpreters generally, and most justly, understood of what we call original sin
- Origen says, “The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants [Matthew 19:14; Luke 18:15-16; Acts 2:38-39]. For the apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of divine mysteries, knew that there is in everyone the innate stain of sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit” [Titus 3:5] (Commentaries on Romans 5:9)

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- So, David not only has committed acts of sin (verses 1-4), but sin is thoroughly ingrained into his nature
- It does not appear, as some have thought, that the Psalmist pleads the sinfulness of his nature as an excuse for his actual sins
- Rather, he feels compelled to confess not only his actual sins, but the deep infection of his whole nature, *“who can bring a clean thing out of unclean? No one!”* (Job 14:4)
- And as St. Paul said, *“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.”* (Romans 7:18)

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- God requires true inward purity of thought and heart
- *truth in the inward parts*, In the most secret springs of thought and will, unseen by man but known to God
- God desires perfect sincerity, whole-hearted devotion, incapable of deceiving self, as David had done, or deceiving man, as he had endeavored to do by his attempts to cover his sin and its consequences
- David was deeply conscious of his own corruption
- He contrasted strongly with the nature of God, and with what God must require, and be pleased with

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- David felt that God could not approve of or love such a heart as his, so vile, so corrupt; and he felt that it was necessary that he should have a pure heart in order to meet with the favor of a God so holy
- The cleansing was to begin in that which was hidden from the eye of man; in the soul itself
- Wisdom, heavenly, saving wisdom, was to have its seat there; the cleansing needed was the purification of the soul itself
- Only God can enable him to understand what is truly wise

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- St. Augustine explains, “This uncertainty had God disclosed to His servant David. For when he had said, before the Prophet standing and convicting him, “I have sinned:” straightway he heard from the Prophet, that is, from the Spirit of God which was in the Prophet, “Thy sin is put away from thee.” “Uncertain and hidden things” of His wisdom He manifested to him.”

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- According to St. Cyril, [The “Truth” beloved by the Father is the “Son”, by whose salvation work He gives purification of the body and soul. By that, the wisdom of God revealed to David that purification is realized, not through the cleansings of the Mosaic law, but through the blood of Christ; And that the Father’s pleasure in us is in Christ “the Truth”. And once the psalmist discovered the work of Christ “the Truth”, he daringly said: *“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”*]

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- David is using figurative language that is borrowed from the ceremonial of the law
- A bunch of *hyssop*, some common herb was used as a sprinkler, especially in the rites for cleansing the leper and purifying the unclean (Exodus 12:22; Leviticus 14:4; Numbers 19:6,18; Hebrews 9:19)
- Washing of the person and clothes regularly formed part of the rites of purification
- The psalmist is of course thinking of the inward and spiritual cleansing of which those outward rites were the symbol

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- He appeals to God Himself to do a work of spiritual and moral cleansing
- David knew that God's cleansing was *effective*
- His sin was a deep stain, but purity could be restored
- David spoke with the voice of faith; it can be difficult for the sinner to believe in such complete cleansing
- Psalmist has faith that God can and will cleanse and restore him
- It takes faith to believe God despite the doubt and difficulty
- David felt the *brokenness* fitting for the sinner under the conviction of the Holy Spirit

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- It was so severe he felt as if his *bones* were broken
- Confident that this was the work of the Holy Spirit, David could pray that it would lead to *joy and gladness*, that out of his brokenness David would *rejoice*
- It is a terrible thing to be so directly confronted with the darkness of our sin, yet God means even this to lead up to *joy and gladness*
- David longed to hear the sweet voice of forgiveness, by which he might have peace, and by which his soul might be made to rejoice
- Repeatedly, David asked for forgiveness and restoration as in verse 9

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- He is asking God to not look upon his sins with an eye of anger and wrath, but forgive and forget them
- *And blot out all my iniquities*, It is repeated, to show his deep sense of them, and his great petition for the forgiveness of his sins
- He adds the word *all*, to include all his other sins, with those he had lately committed
- David was ashamed to look on his sin, and nothing could remove it from his memory; but he prays the Lord to do with his sin what he himself cannot

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- Then David in verse 10 does not desire the restoration of what was there before that, but a radical change of heart and spirit
- He is asking God to do more than purify him
- He is asking God to do more than cleanse him by an act of creation and of creative power to *Create in me a clean heart*
- In this David anticipated one of the great promises to all who believe under the New Covenant: *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh”* (Ezekiel 36:26)

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- Along with a new and clean heart, David needed a *steadfast spirit* to continue in the way of godliness
- This expressed a humble reliance upon the Lord
- He is asking God for a constant, steady, determined spirit that cheerfully giving up itself to God; no longer bound by the sinfulness of sin

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- For David, the whole point of cleansing and restoration was to renew his relationship with God
- Mindful of his weakness, he now asks for the grace of perseverance
- He is asking God to not allow him to fall again into sin, for fear that God should deprive him of His grace forever
- The soul that is truly repentant, fears nothing but the thought of being rejected from the presence of God
- Perhaps David feared that he might share the fate of Saul, when the spirit of God came upon David, as it departed from Saul (1 Samuel 16:13-14)

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- After having asked for remission of his sins, and the stability of grace with the gift of perseverance, David now asks for the sign and effect of such justification
- He asks God to give him back that "joy" which was his when he was conscious of God's favor, and felt that He was his Strength and his Salvation (Psalm 18:1,62:2)
- He had formerly known what was the happiness of being a friend of God, and of having a hope of salvation
- That joy had been taken from him by his sin
- The path of sin is a dark path, and in that path neither hope nor comfort can be found

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- The only way to secure the favor of God is to obey His commands
- The only way in which we can have comforting evidence that we are His children is by doing that which is pleasing to Him: 1 John 2:29,3:7,10
- None but God can give back this joy which follows forgiveness and purity
- *uphold me by Your generous Spirit*, Sustain and support him; keep him from falling
- This expresses again David's confidence in God for his future
- In the dark days before this confession of sin, David was not able to *teach* those who were far from God

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- The psalmist now turns from prayer to promise
- If God will grant his petitions, restore him to favor, and renew his spiritual life, then he will, first, teach transgressors God's ways
- The truly grateful heart cannot be satisfied without making some repay to God for His goodness
- The most satisfactory pay back is by deeds, not words
- David's determination is to do his best to promote the glory of God by bringing others to salvation, turning them from their own evil ways to the "ways" that God would have them walk in
- St. Jerome says, "David became a teacher of repentance."

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- Father Onesimus of Jerusalem says, “Everyone who repents his sin, and returns to what is better, will become a role model for transgressors to follow, to return to God, to seek His mercy.”
- He asks God to deliver him *from the guilt of bloodshed* because he had been the cause of the death, not only of Uriah, but of others of the Lord’s people with him, 2 Samuel 11:17
- David knew that with his guilt dealt with before God, he would again be able to *sing aloud*; that *my mouth shall show forth Your praise*
- Perhaps the months he spent before confessing his sin were silent from a spirit of true praise

David's Confession and Deep Lamentation, 51:5-14



- *O God, The God of my salvation*, For to deliver from imminent danger is the province of a Savior
- The Psalmist knew, that being God He could forgive his sin, remove his guilt, and free him from punishment, which none else could
- And being the *God of my salvation*, he had reason to hope and believe He would
- David asks God to remember His gracious promises, and accomplish them, regardless of his unworthiness
- *Your righteousness*, His faithfulness, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9)

Offering a Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving 51:15-17



- The consequence of the perfect justification and salvation of the sinner is, that his lips, which were used to praise God, but were closed by sin, through his absolution and forgiveness should be opened again to praise and thank his Redeemer
- *O Lord, open my lips*, By forgiving and pardoning his sins, and restoring his joy and confidence; God will open his lips
- Then *my mouth shall show forth Your praise*, by proclaiming His mercy and justice, not only to the present but to all future ages
- The power to praise correctly is the gift of God

Offering a Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving 51:15-17



- David expressed the principle brought forth in Psalm 50
- God is in no need for sacrifices
- He understood that though animal sacrifice had its place, what God really desired was in the heart of man
- David is offering the sacrifice of praise, because sacrifices of animal are not pleasing to God
- Sacrifices are of no value when they are offered by sinners, as in Isaias 1:11,16, obedience being more pleasing to God than the offering of sacrifices
- Sacrifices are of no value as relates the recompense of sin

Offering a Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving 51:15-17



- As the Apostle says, *“It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.”* (Hebrews 10:4) and it is in such sense that David says here, *You do not desire sacrifice* for the remission of sins, *or else I would give it*
- His satisfaction could only arise from the spirit in which sacrifices were offered - the spirit of gratitude, of devotion, of self-denial, of obedience
- David had a great love for the House of the LORD and had sponsored great sacrifices unto God (2 Samuel 6:13,17-18)
- Yet he understood that one could sacrifice an animal or many animals to God without a *broken and contrite heart*

Offering a Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving 51:15-17



- He recognized the emptiness of all that, and the value of his present *broken spirit* and *broken and contrite heart*
- He explains more fully how acceptable to God is the sacrifice of praise; that sacrifice that springs from a *broken and a contrite heart*, when man, acknowledging his own misery and God's mercy, humbles himself before His power, attributing all honor and glory to Him, and humiliation and disgrace to himself
- *A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise*, for God despises the proud, and resists them; but to the humble (who willingly submit to Him) He always gives His grace, James 4

Acceptable Worship 51:18-19



- It is characteristic of David to pass from prayer for himself to prayer for the people committed to him, and especially to do so at or near the end of a Psalm (Psalm 5:11,12,25:22,28:9,40:16)
- David was sensible of the wrong he had done to Judah and Jerusalem by his sin
- And he closely connects and identifies the people with their capital city (Psalm 46:4,48:11,69:35)
- He prays, that God would do His *good pleasure*, with particular favor He bore to that place which He had chosen to put His name there



Acceptable Worship 51:18-19

- *Build the walls of Jerusalem*, It may mean himself, who, like a wall, guarded and defended the entire people
- Some scholars regard these verses as being added after the Exile, when Jews returned to a ruined Jerusalem where they found it necessary to rebuild the walls
- They ask God to restore Jerusalem so the people can offer sacrifices in which God can find delight
- However, David may have had a more spiritual meaning, and prayed for the prosperity of the Lord's people



Acceptable Worship 51:18-19

- It is a prayer that God would favor and bless His people as if the city was to be protected by walls, and thus rendered safe from an attack by the enemy
- *Then*, When the walls are completed - God shall receive the public sacrifices which will naturally be offered on the accomplishment of such a work
- If God would show Himself reconciled to him and his people, as he had prayed, then they should go on with the public services of His house
- The sense of God's goodness to them would make their hearts full of expressions of thankfulness and obedience



Acceptable Worship 51:18-19

- They will then come to His tabernacle with *burnt offerings*, with *whole burnt offering*, which were intended purely for the glory of God, and they shall offer, not lambs but *bulls* sacrifices, upon His altar
- And these sacrifices, offered willingly by grateful hearts, will be pleasing and acceptable unto God
- *burnt offering*, Denotes the sacrifice as ‘ascending’ in smoke and flame
- *and whole burnt offering*, Denotes the sacrifice as entirely consumed



Acceptable Worship 51:18-19

- It was the rule that the burnt offering should be wholly consumed, to symbolize the entire self-dedication of the worshipper; and the second designation is added in order to emphasize this idea of the sacrifice, Deuteronomy 33:10; 1 Samuel 7:9
- Self sacrifices, not half offerings, but *whole burnt offerings*
- The psalmist offered strong cries seeking the great mercies of God, confessing his iniquity, and trusting in His salvation work
- Psalm 51 is the way God's people think and feel about the horrors of their own sin



Acceptable Worship 51:18-19

- This Psalm is often called the sinner's guide and often helps the returning sinner
- St. Athanasius recommends to some Christians, to whom he was writing, to repeat it when they awake at night
- St. Augustine points to David as example to those who have fallen into temptation, "Listen to him crying out, and cry out with him; listen to him groaning, and groan too; listen to him weeping, and add your tears to his; listen to him corrected, and share his joy. If sin could not be denied access to you, let the hope of forgiveness not be debarred."



Discussion

- To what attributes of God does David claim his request for forgiveness? How had David experienced these characteristics of God before?
- What does David do when confronted with his sin? How should we, as believers, react to our sin?
- What does David mean in stating that it was only against God he had sinned, when others were clearly hurt?



Discussion

- What does this Psalm teach us about how we should practice repentance and confession in the church?
- What consequence of sin is David most concerned about? What does this reveal about his heart towards God and his priorities?
- In light of this Psalm, what worship does God ultimately want from us, His people?



Discussion

- David wants more than forgiveness, he wants to be transformed. Why do you think the desire to change is important in a prayer for forgiveness?
- Are children born perfect?
- What does God desire more than burnt offering?
- For what does David pray as he conclude this Psalm?