

# PSALMS

## Chapter 51

Have mercy on me,<sup>1</sup> O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.<sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!<sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.<sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.<sup>5</sup> Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.<sup>6</sup> Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.<sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.<sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.<sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.<sup>11</sup> Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.<sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.<sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.<sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.<sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.<sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.<sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.<sup>18</sup> Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem;<sup>19</sup> then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

**Ps 51** David's humble prayer for forgiveness and cleansing. As the prayer of a contrite sinner, it represents a proper response to the Lord's confrontation of his people in Ps 50 (compare v. 16 with 50:8–15). This psalm has many points of contact with Ps 25. In traditional Christian usage it is one of seven penitential psalms. The psalm is constructed symmetrically: A two-verse introduction balances a two-verse conclusion, and the enclosed four stanzas in Hebrew consist of five lines, three lines, three lines and five lines respectively. The whole is framed by David's prayer for himself (vv. 1–2) and for Zion (vv. 18–19). The well-being of the king and the city stand and fall together. (CSB)

Fourth of seven penitential psalms (cf 6; 32; 38; 102; 130; 143). David confesses his sin with Bathsheba in this intensely personal lament that has become significant for the Church's liturgy (vv 10–12 in the Offertory, v 15 in the opening sentences of Matins and Vespers and as the Introit for Ash Wednesday). David not only explains sin and its deadly consequences as powerfully present in all people, but he also unfolds God's re-creative mercy as He works repentance and forgiveness. *To the choirmaster ... gone in to Bathsheba*. David's confession (cf 2Sm 11:1–12:25) is intended for public worship, for the whole nation to pray (cf vv 18–19). (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–2, opening appeal for mercy; vv 3–6, confession of sin; vv 7–12, prayers for cleansing; vv 13–17, willing service of a contrite heart; vv 18–19, prayer for Zion. (TLSB)

Psalm 51 is the best known of the penitential psalms. This doctrinal psalm is one of the richest and most important of all psalms. It has had an important influence on our liturgy. The historical circumstances which occasioned this psalm are recorded in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. This psalm expresses David's true repentance after his sin with Bathsheba. It displays both the extreme depths of sin and the perfect cleansing of forgiveness. Although this psalm was written for a specific occasion, it expresses general truths which are universal and timeless in their application.

It contains petitions and thoughts that we will want to use frequently, both in our public services and in our private devotions. May God grant to each of us the repentant spirit and renewed heart such as David displays in this psalm. (PBC)

**51:1–2** In mercy grant pardon (see Lk 18:13). Note the piling up of synonyms: mercy, unfailing love, great compassion; blot out, wash, cleanse; transgressions, iniquity, sin (for this last triad. (CSB)

By heaping up repetitions David expresses the intensity of his plea. (PBC)

This implies a true knowledge of God that is aware of the fact that he can pardon sin no matter how black it is. The two phrases used indicate with remarkable clarity that pardon has its base, not in the merit or worthiness of man, but in the fact that God is so good. (Leupold)

David here addresses God in the name of every penitent sinner. A penitent sinner turns in prayer to God. This presupposes that he has returned to God and is again standing in a right relation to his God. Only such a man can pray to God, who believes in God. Faith always presupposes repentance. (Stroeckhardt)

**51:1** *have mercy* – David appeals not to God’s justice but to His loving-kindness. (TLSB)

David’s plea is based on God’s mercy, his unfailing love and great compassion. (PBC)

The word “mercy” stresses the compassionate feeling one has for someone who is helpless and dependent. The prayer is based on God’s nature. It is an appeal to God’s love and compassion that he has shown to his people again and again. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

There is no appeal to his own personal merit or worthiness, as if he had satisfied God at least to some degree. (Stroeckhardt)

*steadfast love* – The Hebrew for this phrase denotes befriending. Appeal to God’s “(unfailing) love, kindness, mercy” is frequent in the OT since it summarizes all that the Lord covenanted to show to Israel as well as to David and his dynasty. (CSB)

*blot out* – See v. 9. The image is that of a papyrus scroll on which God had recorded David’s deeds. The “blotting out” of sins pictures forgiveness (Jer 18:23; see Isa 43:25). For the imagery of God’s keeping records of the events in his realm in the way that earthly kings do, see 56:8; 87:6; 130:3; 139:16; Ne 13:14; Da 7:10; see also Ex 32:32–33. (CSB)

*transgressions* – The word “transgressions” means “rebellious acts.” It is used in military contexts to describe open and intentional rebellions. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Sin is rebellion against God, it is hatred for God, it is violation of his Law, it is failing to live up to the standards he has set. Sin is a perverse rejection of God and his will. Sin produces an ugly distortion of God’s good creation. Although the disastrous effects of sin are great, the cleansing from sin is thorough and complete. Sin is blotted out, it is washed away, we are cleansed from it. “Thee blood of Jesus, his Son purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7). These verses are one of the clearest and most beautiful statements of the doctrine of forgiveness in the OT. (PBC)

Sins appear as a debt in God's book, chargeable against the sinner, which the sinner cannot pay. He is absolutely bankrupt. In faith, penitence he turns to God in his anxiety and implores him to blot out, eradicate, cancel his debt in his book. (Stroeckhardt)

**51:2** *Wash* – As a filthy garment. (CSB)

Filthy with evil deeds, David petitions God as the only one who can cleanse him (cf v 7). (TLSB)

This verb is used more for washing clothes, it too is a figure of speech comparing laundering with forgives. Washing clothes usually meant beating the dirt out of them near the source of the water. The prayer is that God would thoroughly clean the sinner. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*Iniquity* – pasha – rebellion. It connotes perversion and twisting of moral standards; and as “sin” it implies that the divinely appointed goal that has been set for us has been completely missed. (Leupold)

*cleanse me* – Make me clean in your sight (see Lev 11:32). (CSB)

When a man had been leprous and then had reason to believe that he had overcome his leprosy, he had to show himself to the priest, who would declare him clean. The same picture is employed here in connection with the cleansing of the sinner from his sin. In this case God is the high official who is to declare the penitent sinner clean. God can cleanse the sinner from the leprosy which has infected his soul. He does that by means of a declaration, the forgiveness of sin. (Stroeckhardt)

**51:3–6** Confession of sin (cf. Pr 28:13; 1Jn 1:9). (CSB)

There are two parts to this confession: in verses 3 and 4 the psalmist acknowledges that he is a sinner. But his is not saying he is a sinner because he sinned; rather, he is saying he sinned because he is a sinner. And complete forgiveness will have to remove this sin and renovate the sinful nature as well if there is to be lasting change. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**51:3** *I know my transgressions* – “My rebellion – I know how grievously I have sinned, and the thought of it clings to me night and day. Or I am aware of the enormity of my deed” True penitence does not make sin appear light but freely admits that it is grievous. (Leupold)

*before me* – On my mind. (CSB)

The verb also has the independent personal pronoun before it; “I know” (or, as for me, I know), to emphasize the subject of the verb – he, the sinner, is the one who knows he has sinned. That is critical to confession, for often when the sinner is found out, the remorse is primarily over being caught. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

David first confesses his actual sins, which in this case were murder and adultery. He recognizes that his sins were not merely sins against Bathsheba, with whom he had committed adultery, against Uriah, whom he had treacherously murdered, and against the people who were offended or misled by his sin. (PBC)

Luther explains this remark as follows: “My sins plague me night and day and let me have no rest or peace. Whether I eat or drink, sleep or lie awake, I live in fear of God’s wrath and judgment. I am troubled in my heart in whatever I undertake. (Stroeckhardt)

**51:4** *Against you ... only* – David acknowledges that his sin was preeminently against God (see 2Sa 12:13; cf. Ge 20:6; 39:9; Lk 15:18). He had violated specific covenant stipulations (Ex 20:13–14, 17). (CSB)

Sin against our neighbors is ultimately against God, who created neighbors and put them there for us to love. (TLSB)

His sin was above all an offense against the holy God. His sin was gross ingratitude for the many blessings and privileges God has given him. The offense of his sin was compounded by the hypocrisy with which he had tried to cover up his sin. (PBC)

This is so because ultimately we are responsible to God alone. This does not mean that he need to apologize to the people he had offended. (Stroeckhardt)

*in your judgment* – As the Lord did through Nathan the prophet (2Sa 12:7–12). For a NT application see Ro 3:4. (CSB)

God (e.g. in condemning David through Nathan, 2Sm 12:7) always declares the right judgment: evil must be called evil. Like the thief on the cross (Lk 23:41), David accepts God’s verdict. Cited in Rm 3:4 as Paul describes God alone as “true” and everyone else a “liar.” See Ap XIIB 11. (TLSB)

**51:5** *I was brought forth in iniquity* – The verb “brought forth” basically means “to write, twist” as with birth pangs. This was not the time for him to say that when he was born he was a gift from God, even though that was true. His birth was with pain (as all are), and his conception a very physical act. Neither do his statements mean that he was illegitimate. The prepositions used in the verse indicate the sphere in which he was born; “in sin” and “in iniquity” mean in the state or condition of sin. He was affirming that from the very beginning of his existence there had never been a time that he had not be in a sinful state – he was human after all. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

He cannot plead that this sin was a rare aberration in his life; it sprang from what he is and has been (in his “inner parts,” v. 6) from birth (see 58:3; Ge 8:21; cf. Jn 9:34; Eph 2:3). The apparently similar statements in Job 14:4; 15:14; 25:4–6 rise from a different motivation. (CSB)

Sexual union of husband and wife, which initiates life, is not itself sinful but commanded by God (Gn 1:28). David knows that it is not only what he occasionally does wrong that he must confess. His evil act brought to the surface the depth of his sinfulness (Gn 8:21; Ps 58:3). “This hereditary sin is such a deep corruption of nature that no reason can understand it. Rather, it must be believed from the revelation of Scripture. (See Romans 6:12–13; Exodus 33:3; Genesis 3:7–19)” (SA III I 3). Melancthon: “He does not deplore the sin of [his] mother, but his own.... There was born with me an aversion away from God and a corrupted tendency. Therefore he testifies that there is sin in human beings which they bring with them when they are born” (Chem, *LTh* 1:272). (TLSB)

In this confession David also acknowledges original sin. Corrupt actions flow from a corrupt nature. Although David had been freed from the rule of his sinful nature, he had allowed it to regain control over him, and he had fallen into terrible sin. Though it was an extreme example, David's sin was no fluke, no accident, no surprise. It was expression of the corrupt nature which lurks within, even when it is covered with a veneer of decency. (PBC)

This means that even little infants in the crib are already chargeable to God because of their inherited sinfulness. (Stroeckhardt)

**51:6** The great contrast: He has acted absolutely contrary to what God desires and to what God has been teaching him “in the inmost place.” But it is just this “desire” of God and this “teaching” of God that are his hope—what he pleads for in vv. 7, 10. (CSB)

*truth* – Moral integrity. (CSB)

“Truth” has the ideas of being firm and faithful. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*inward being* – See 139:13–16; Job 38:36. (CSB)

God wants men to be upright down to the very core of their being. (Leupold)

*wisdom* – Whoever gives himself over to sin is a fool; he who has God's law in his heart is wise (see 37:30–31). (CSB)

The word “wisdom” describes living skillfully and successfully according to God's moral precepts. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*in thee secret heart* – The most secret place within. (CSB)

More than just the soul (139:13–16; Jb 38:36). (TLSB)

God prepared the human spirit (also in the womb) with the capacity for truth and wisdom, which is what makes sin so painful to God. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

David realized that dealing with sins requires more than cleaning up your act and behaving a little better than before. God wants more than improved outward performance. He wants a change of heart. But this change of heart David could never produce. Nor can we. This change of heart and renewal must come from God. David prays for such renewal. So do we. (PBC)

**51:7–9** Renewed prayer for pardon. (CSB)

**51:7** *purge me* – Lit. “Un-sin me.” (CSB)

By God's hand alone, the stain of sin is removed. Chemnitz: “He indicates that this is the proper use of these ceremonies, namely, that through them the merits of the Messiah are applied, and faith confirmed and sealed, as happens with us in the case of the sacraments” (LTh 2:649). (TLSB)

*hyssop* – Used in ritual cleansing. Here probably refers to an aromatic plant (*Origanum maru*) of the mint family with a straight stalk (see Jn 19:29) and white flowers. The hairy surface of its leaves and branches held liquids well and made it suitable as a sprinkling device for use in purification rituals (see Lev 14:4, 6, 49, 51–52; Nu 19:6, 18; Heb 9:19). (CSB)

Plant with hairy branches, used to apply blood on doorposts at Passover, to sprinkle water for purification on those who had touched a corpse, and to cleanse leprosy. (TLSB)

The cleansing with hyssop was part of the cleansings required by the OT ceremonial law. Hyssop was a plant the priest used as a sort of sponge or sprinkler to apply the cleansing blood or water of OT ceremonies to the worshiper (Numbers 19:18, Leviticus 14:6). The application of blood with hyssop symbolized the cleansing David received in the reality by the application of the blood of Christ to him before the throne of God. (PBC)

A technical term in the Law of the OT. Thus when a person had become unclean by the touch of a dead body, he had to go to the priest to be cleansed by a certain cleansing prescribed by the Law. The cleansing water was then sprinkled upon the person to be cleansed by means of a hyssop (an aromatic plant). The cleansing with hyssop would suggest a thorough and complete cleansing from the uncleanness, for which one had presented himself to the priest. (Stoekhardt)

*be clean* – The Hebrew root for this phrase is the same as that for “cleanse” in v. 2. (CSB)

*wash me* – The verb for wash is very vigorous and includes pounding, stamping, and vigorous rubbing in order to loosen the dirt. If God were to undertake such cleansing, it would, indeed, be effective. (Leupold)

*whiter than snow* – Like a filthy garment, he needs washing; but if God washes him, he will be so pure that there is no figurative word that can describe him (see Isa 1:18; Da 7:9; Rev 7:14; 19:14). (CSB)

“Snow” would be a simile, comparing the whiteness to snow to yield the connotations of freshness, brilliance and purity. The expression uses a comparative construction, whiter than the snow; and the point of the simile is that snow may be pure, clean, and bright – but the forgiven sinner purer, cleaner, and brighter. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Before men, in spite of God’s forgiveness, the old sin will be remembered and come to view again. When God forgives the sin is taken away before so that not a vestige of it is left. He forgives entirely and leaves not a speck of uncleanness on the pardoned sinner. Thus a troubled sinner should remember for his comfort, when old sins rise up in his remembrance and would condemn him. (Stoekhardt)

**51:8** *Let me hear joy* – Let me be surrounded by joy (see 35:27), or let me hear a prophetic oracle of forgiveness that will result in joy—from the assurance of sins forgiven (see 2Sa 12:13). (CSB)

A useful paraphrase would be: “Tell me I am forgiven so that I may enter the sanctuary again where I can hear the joy and gladness.” (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

The joy is more than an emotional expression – it is a contented resting in God. The security of having been reconciled with the Lord and of having peace with him (cf. Rom. 5:1) is of the

greatest import. This joy is hence known as “the joy of your salvation” (v. 12; cf. 9:14; 13:5; 35:9). (Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

So it is now he who can bring about the further result of not letting the sinner be overwhelmed by the sense of deep guilt. (Leupold)

David indeed once had heard this voice, when Nathan had said to him: “The Lord hath taken away they sins.” David had believed that word and received comfort and joy. Nevertheless he desires to hear and receive that reassurance again and again. Thus the pardoned sinner, rather than tiring of hearing the Gospel, is anxious to hear that comforting Word. Whoever really knows and feels the weight of his sin, never tires of the Word, but rather increases in peace and joy with every new assurance of the Gospel. (Stroeckhardt)

*bone* – As the inner skeleton, they here represent the whole body. (CSB)

Even the body felt the crush of spiritual anguish (which can include physical illness) and relief by the joy of God’s absolution. (TLSB)

This means that his spirit, his whole person has been depressed by his sin and guilt. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

He has been utterly crushed by Nathan’s indictment. This was a result that God sought to bring about for his own good. Only God can make him find a sense of gladness over the pardon bestowed. (Leupold)

**51:9** *Hide your face* – From what is “always before me” (v. 3). (CSB)

He does not want God to look on his sins, but forgive. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*blot out* – That God may do away with his sins so that they are as completely disposed of as is the writing on a slate that has been gone over with a wet sponge. (Leupold)

His sins appear to him as debts entered into God’s register as charges against him. This whole debt record, this guilt in its totality, God should cancel or blot out so that David the debtor, shall never be charged by them. (Stoeckhardt)

*Psalm 103:12* “as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”

**51:10–12** Prayer for purity—for a pure heart, a steadfast spirit of faithfulness and a willing spirit of service. These can be his only if God does not reject him and take his Holy Spirit from him. If granted, the joy of God’s salvation will return to gladden his troubled soul. (CSB)

Although these verses are translated as a prayer, several of the verses could be translated as statements of what God will do in the future rather than as wishes or pleas. In any case, we should see in these verses not only a plea, but also an expression of confidence that God will answer David’s prayer, because the prayer is followed immediately by a promise of what David will do when his prayers is answered. (PBC)

**51:10** *Create* – As something new, which cannot emerge from what now is (see v. 5), and which only God can fashion (see Ge 1:1; Isa 65:17; Jer 31:22). (CSB)

As God called “the heavens and the earth” into existence (Gn 1:1), so the coming into being of a clean heart requires the Word of the Creator. Chemnitz: “[He means] a heart which rightly believes that it has been purified by God through faith” (*LTh* 2:572). Gregory of Nazianzus: “The first wisdom is a life worthy of praise, and kept pure for God, or [rather] being purified for Him Who is all-pure and all-luminous, Who demands of us, as His only sacrifice, purification—that is, a contrite heart and the sacrifice of praise, and a new creation in Christ, and the new man.... By this a crew of fishermen have taken the whole world in the meshes of the Gospel-net” (*NPNF* 2 7:247). In the liturgy, vv 10–12 are the Offertory sung in response to God’s Word and preaching. See FC SD II 26. (TLSB)

The verb “create” is always a work of God; it describes God’s creating or renovating to produce something fresh and new. Here it means “to renovate.” This is supported by the parallel verb “renew.” The prayer is for spiritual renewal, a change of heart attitude or way of thinking. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*heart* – In Biblical language the center of the human spirit, from which spring emotions, thought, motivations, courage and action—“the wellspring of life” (Pr 4:23). (CSB)

“Heart” does not mean the organ, but the mind, the seat of the will within the human spirit. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*renew* – This is not so much in the area of bringing one back into a state that was formerly enjoyed as it is in the direction of letting a new state take the place of an undesired old one. (Leupold)

*steadfast spirit* – Spirit here embraces the intellect with which we think, and the will with which we choose to do or not do a certain thing. What David here then desires is that his thoughts may again be directed towards the will of God. (Stroeckhardt)

He wanted to be reliable and steadfast in the choices that he made. It would take time for this renewal to make a difference, but if that was his prayer, then he would avail himself of the help he needed to do it. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**51:11** The two requests are essentially one (see 139:7; Eze 39:29). David’s prayer recalls the rejection of Saul (see 1Sa 16:1, 14; 2Sa 7:15) and pleads for God not to take away his Spirit, by which he had equipped and qualified him for his royal office (see 1Sa 16:13; cf. 2Sa 23:1–2). (CSB)

Comparing now the case of David with that of Saul, we note that both had grievously sinned completely fallen from grace, and so were under God’s wrath. It is also certain that the Spirit of God had departed from within their heart. However, God had not entirely withdrawn his hand from them, and the Spirit outwardly approached them to bring about their return. In the case of Saul the Spirit of God used Samuel. Time and again he admonished the wayward king to lead him to repentance. Instead he became indignant. He tried to squelch the voice of his conscience with acts of violence. He kept on stubbornly resisting every effort of the Spirit’s to return. God finally gave him up and withdrew his hand from him entirely. Saul himself had hardened his heart in impenitence. Because of this, God rejected him utterly. In the case of David the Spirit of



God also approached through the ministry of Nathan. In this case God succeeded in winning back a lost sinner. David heeded the call to repentance, confessing his sin and seeking God's mercy. David thus was not utterly rejected, but reentered the state of grace, and the Holy Spirit also reentered his heart again. (Stoeckhardt)

*Do not cast me from your presence* – To be denied access to the earthly tabernacle of God's mercy is the worst of all possibilities to David. (TLSB)

*Take not* – The tragic example of Saul's rejection (1Sm 16:14) might have motivated this urgent request as David contemplated the ultimate end of a hardened heart: separation from God. "When holy people—still having and feeling original sin and daily repenting and striving against it—happen to fall into manifest sins (as David did into adultery, murder, and blasphemy [2 Samuel 11]), then faith and the Holy Spirit have left them. The Holy Spirit does not permit sin to have dominion, to gain the upper hand so it can be carried out, but represses and restrains it from doing what it wants [Romans 6:14]. If sin does what it wants, the Holy Spirit and faith are not present" (SA III III 43–44). (TLSB)

*Holy Spirit* – The phrase is found elsewhere in the OT only in Isa 63:10–11. By his Spirit, God effected his purposes in creation (see 104:30; Ge 1:2; Job 33:4) and redemption (see Isa 32:15; 44:3; 63:11, 14; Hag 2:5), equipped his servants for their appointed tasks (see Ex 31:3; Nu 11:29; Jdg 3:10; 1Sa 10:6; 16:13; Isa 11:2; 42:1), inspired his prophets (see Nu 24:2–3; 2Sa 23:2; Ne 9:30; Isa 59:21; 61:1; Eze 11:5; Mic 3:8; Zec 7:12) and directed their ministries (see 1Ki 18:12; 2Ki 2:16; Isa 48:16; Eze 2:2; 3:14). And it is by his Spirit that God gives his people a "new heart and ... a new spirit" to live by his will (see Eze 36:26–27; see also Jer 24:7; 32:39; Eze 11:19; 18:31). (CSB)

In the mind of the writer the loss of the Spirit means the total loss of God's grace. (Leupold)

The reader must remember that in the OT (before Pentecost in Acts 2) the Spirit "came upon" theocratic leaders and administrators to enable them to do their work, but it was usually a temporary presence or indwelling. For Christians the NT teaches that the Spirit enters the lives of believers and permanently indwells them as a seal from God. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**5:12** *restore to me the joy* – The result of such forgiveness will be joy and gladness in place of the fear and grief caused by unforgiven sin. Another result will be love which produces an eagerness to serve God out of gratitude for sin forgiven. (PBC)

Through the period of his guilt and depression (bones being crushed) he did not have the joy he once had. Being forgiven and set free from the guilt would be the first step. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*Of your salvation* – The word "salvation" explains the joy – the salvation produces or brings the joy. He was asking for the joy that salvation brings to be restored, just as earlier he wanted to hear the joy and gladness. And here the word "salvation" is being used in its religious sense of his proper relationship with the Lord (s.v. Ps. 3:2) (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*A willing spirit to sustain me* – Basil the Great "It is called 'Spirit of God,' 'Spirit of truth which proceeds from the Father,' 'right Spirit,' 'a leading Spirit.' ... Names are borne by the

Spirit in common with the Father and the Son, and He gets these titles from His natural and close relationship” (NPNF 2 8:15, 30). (TLSB)

The word “willing” is a technical religious word used in the cultic laws for freewill offering (Lev. 7); anyone who wanted to worship the Lord spontaneously could bring a peace offering that was called a freewill offering. The psalmist wanted an attitude sustained in him that would be like freewill offering. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**51:13-19** The last section is the vow, recording the psalmist’s commitment to worship and serve God if and when the prayer is answered: he vows to teach, praise, and make appropriate sacrifices in his worship. But since this is also a meditation on the need for forgiveness, these are the very things he cannot do until he is forgiven. Oh, he probably have done them with unconfessed sin, as the hypocrites do, but not this penitent, and certainly not after being confronted by the prophet. The point of the vow is that after God answered his prayer he had to “pay his vows” by doing these things. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**51:13** *teach transgressors* – His praise for God’s forgiveness and purification will be accompanied by instruction for sinners. (CSB)

God’s forgiveness transforms the sinner as it does this king. A fruit of repentance is leading others to mercy as this psalm has done for generations. Cf Lk 22:32, Jesus’ command to Peter. (TLSB)

*your ways* – Genuine repentance produces an intention to avoid sin and to serve God more faithfully. (PBC)

The writer realizes that such experiences are not to be kept selfishly to oneself. (Leupold)

Luther: “Here the Psalmist begins to speak of his good works, after he has been justified by faith and been born anew by the Holy Ghost.” (Stroeckhardt)

The ways of the Lord in this psalm must have to do with forgiveness, for if he was to teach them about God’s punishment for sin or about God’s holiness he did not need forgiveness to do that. In this context, the “ways” must refer to the divine attributes of God’s grace, loyal love, and abundant mercy, which brings forgiveness and renewal. So once forgiven, the psalmist vows to teach other sinners how to find forgiveness – and in writing of this psalm he has done that for centuries. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*Return to you* – They will repent, which is one the main meanings of the word “repent” (s.v. Ps. 126:1). (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**51:14** If God will only forgive, praise will follow. (CSB)

*save me from bloodguilt* – Lit, “bloods”; Hbr expression for guilt. David’s plot to cover up his adultery led to the bloody death of Uriah and others (cf 2Sm 11:17; 12:9), adding also this guilt to David. (TLSB)

Again overwhelmed for a moment by the thought of his own deep-dyed guilt, he beseeches God to remove him from the danger that threatened to engulf him. (Leupold)

It means murder or homicide. This word is used to designate the gravest violation of the law, insomuch as this act burdens the conscience with the sense of the most serious guilt. (Stroeckhardt)

“bloodguilt” could signify either the judgment resulting from a grave sin requiring the death penalty (cf. Eze. 18:13) or the sin that led to the death of an innocent person (cf. 2 Sam. 12:5, 13). (Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

*Tongue will sing aloud* – The verb is very dramatic; it can be translated “praise,” but it means “to give a ringing cry” (s.v. Ps. 33:1). He will shout for joy in praising God if he is forgiven and allowed to live. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*Righteousness* – Among its many uses in the Bible “righteousness” can refer to God’s true nature, and how that nature manifests itself in his acts – here in his compassion. He will praise God for what his righteousness has meant to him. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

God’s righteousness manifests itself not only in judgment (v. 4), but also in forgiveness and fidelity to his covenant (cf. 1 Jn. 14). (Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

**51:15** *open my lips* – † By granting the forgiveness and cleansing I seek. In Lutheran liturgy these words are used to refer to God’s absolution, which alone can enable sincere worship. (CSB)

David asks to now joyfully declare God’s praise. Prayed in the liturgy, this verse is a profound part of the Christian’s sacrifice of prayer and praise. “Such promises certainly ought to encourage and kindle our hearts to pray with pleasure and delight. For He testifies with His own Word that our prayer is heartily pleasing to Him. Furthermore, it shall certainly be heard and granted, in order that we may not despise it or think lightly of it and pray based on chance” (LC III 20). (TLSB)

God is not pleased with sacrifices which as a mere going through the motions, but only with worship that flows from a repentant heart. (PBC)

This flows from a willing heart, but it is God who works such willingness in the heart. (Stoeckhardt)

*Declare your praise* – He will praise God for forgiveness. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**51:16** *do not delight in sacrifice* – God commanded ritual sacrifice for sins but not for empty formalism. The sincere heart trusts in the blood and sacrifice of the Lamb, who “takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29). Cf v 19, which does not contradict but interprets this verse. (TLSB)

This is not a general repudiation of sacrifices, only an affirmation of the inappropriateness of hypocritical worship. The point is painfully clear – if people have unconfessed sin in their lives, God has no delight in their worship. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**51:17** *sacrifices* – These are the fundamental “sacrifices of God.” This means they are “sacrifices fitting for or worthy of God.” (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

*broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart* – What pleases God more than sacrifices is a humble heart that looks to him when troubles crush and penitently pleads for mercy when sin has been committed. (CSB)

Even the best sacrifice is nothing if done without a contrite heart, which knows it owes everything to God, deserves nothing from Him, and has forgiveness, life, and salvation in Him alone. (TLSB)

This is the only damaged offering an Israelite was allowed to bring; every animal had to be perfect – but the heart of the sinner had to be broken and contrite (crushed). The words “broken” and “contrite/crushed” refer to the penitence and submission of the sinner – he has to be humble and contrite, broken of self-will and arrogance. True contrition, that is, a spirit broken by guilt and remorse, is what God looks for in a penitent. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

The man is ready for God’s further work upon his heart which results in the full restoration that only grace can accomplish. (Leupold)

**51:18** *Zion* – A Hbr name that could be derived from a Semitic term for “defend” (as in a fortress) or “to be bald” (as in a defensible rocky space; see *rock*). *Zion* is the defensive hill before the temple mount, between the Kidron and Tyropean valleys. It was captured by David from the Jebusites (2Sm 5:6–7). In the Psalms, *Zion* often describes the Temple Mount, where God dwelt among His people and where they sought Him; by extension, it can include Jerusalem, Israel, and God’s people here and in eternity (i.e., the Church). (TLSB p. 844)

*Build up walls* – The “walls of Jerusalem” would be used to refer to real defense of the nation and the guarantee of divine favor – the moral defense. The kings’ forgiveness and spiritual renewal to proper attitudes and decisions would be the true and moral defense of the city and nation. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**51:19** *right sacrifices* – Such as are pleasing to God; here, sacrifices accompanied by praise for God’s mercies (CSB).

Rejected burnt offerings (v 16) give place to right ones offered by sinners transformed and accepted by God’s grace. They are now offered with a contrite heart, which God creates by His Word. (TLSB)

The application of the psalm to believers today should be obvious. We, like the psalmist, can and must have complete cleansing before we can fully and freely serve God in any capacity. Our eternal destiny may not be in doubt when we sin, and neither was David’s because he appealed to that covenant relationship, but our fellowship and service will be. God will not tolerate unconfessed sin, but will discipline for it. And if we harbor unconfessed sin in our lives, we cannot come to his table, and we will not have the joy that we knew when we were walking with the Lord. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

**Ps 51** This anguished cry of confession from the depths of guilt finds God’s absolution and renewal on the certain footing of grace alone (*sola gratia*). Sin is an inheritance, born in us, ever damaging us. None of our works can ever set us free from terror, despair, or death. However, God has blotted out even the worst of our sins—adultery and murder—by Jesus’ sacrifice. • Holy

Spirit, create me new again, giving joy for sadness. Have mercy on me, O God, and cleanse me from my sin. Amen. (TLSB)