

Psalm 51 – Study Guide¹

If ever I have seen the gospel in the Psalms, I have seen it here.

If ever I have come to see the heart of the Son of David through King David, I have seen it here.

May God have mercy on our souls that we might be so broken when we have our own eyes open to the occasion(s) in which it terrifyingly might be said for lesser or greater offenses... “you are the man.”

General Notes

Both John MacArthur², Willem VanGemeeren³, and the ESV Study Bible⁴ concur that Psalm 51 is one of seven penitential psalms. However, their respective list varies slightly. MacArthur and VanGemeeren includes Psalm 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143. The ESV Study Bible includes Psalm 25 but not 102.

It is stated that while Psalm 51's origin was intensely personal, “...the psalm in its current form is well-suited to be a hymn by which the members of the worshipping congregation confess their own sins.”⁵

Structure

David Crowe

51:1-2	Open Plead/Thesis
51:3-6	Repentant Confession (Densest Section Addressing Sin Directly)
51:7-12	Plead for Restoration (Densest Section Making Direct Request)
51:13-15	The Restored Disposition/A Clear Focus on The LORD
51:16-17	Sacrifice That Pleases God
51:18-19	Restored National Leadership

John MacArthur⁶

- I. Plea for Forgiveness (51:1,2)
- II. Proffer of Confession (51:3-6)
- III. Prayer for Moral Cleanness (51:7-12)
- IV. Promise of Renewed Service (51:13-17)
- V. Petition for National Restoration (51:18,19)

English Standard Version Study Bible⁷

51:1-2	Have Mercy on Me
51:3-5	I Own Up to My Sin
51:6-13	I Seek Restoration and Renewal
51:14-17	Then I Will Worship Truly
51:18-19	Do Good to Zion

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray's Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School

ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

² The MacArthur Study Bible, NKJV. Word Bibles, 1997. (Hereafter: MacArthur), Pg.788

³ The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition: Psalms, Volume 5. Willem A. VanGemeeren. Zondervan, 2008 (Hereafter: VanGemeeren), Pg.433

⁴ English Standard Version Study Bible. Crossway Bibles, 2008. (Hereafter: ESV SB) Pg.999

⁵ ESV SB Pg.999

⁶ MacArthur Pg.788

⁷ ESV SB Pgs.999-1001

Arnold Rhodes⁸

51:1-2	A Plea for Mercy
51:3-5	Confession of Sin
51:6-12	Petition for Forgiveness and Renewal
51:13-17	Commitment to Witness
51:18-19	<i>An Editorial Addition</i>

Note: Some other conservative commentators also take a like position that these last two verses were added at a later time. They appear to argue this on the basis of context and continuity. I wholly disagree and think that there is both sufficient context and continuity to see the psalm as an original whole. This will be addressed in the proper section below.

James Boice⁹

Part One: David's Need of Forgiveness

51:1-2	The psalmist's approach to God, which is a cry for forgiveness
51:3-6	The confession of his sin
51:7-9	An appeal for cleansing

Part Two: David's Need of Inward Renewal

51:10-12	A desire for inward renewal or the creating of a pure heart
51:13-17	A promise to teach others the lessons about forgiveness he has learned
51:18-19	A concluding prayer for the prosperity of Zion

Keil and Delitzsch¹⁰

51:1-9	The prayer for the remission of sin
51:10-13	The prayer for renewal
51:14-17	The vow of spiritual sacrifices
51:18-19	The intercession for all Jerusalem

Willem VanGemen¹¹

- A Prayer for Individual Restoration (vv.1-2)
 - B Confession and Contrition (vv.3-6)
 - C Prayer and Restoration (vv.7-12)
 - B' Thanksgiving (vv.13-17)
- A' Prayer for National Restoration

Derek Kidner¹²

51:1-2	Appeal
51:3-5	Confession
51:6-9	Restoration
51:10-13	Inward Renewal
51:14-17	Humble Worship
51:18-19	A People's Prayer

⁸ The Layman's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Volume 9. Arnold B. Rhodes. John Knox Press, 1966 (Hereafter: Rhodes), Pgs. 85-88

⁹ An Expositional Commentary: Psalms, Volume 2. James Montgomery Boice. Baker Books, 1994 (Hereafter: Boice), Pgs.424, 431

¹⁰ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Keil & Delitzsch: Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 5 – Psalms. Hendrickson Publishers, 2001. (Hereafter: Keil & Delitzsch), Pg.365

¹¹ VanGemen Pg.433

¹² Derek Kidner; Kidner Classic Commentaries: Psalms 1-72. IVP Academic (Digital Copy), 1973. (Hereafter: Kidner), Pgs.207-212

Background

We have extensive insight into the background of the offense. Psalm 51 all but requires that you take the time to first read its historical backdrop of 2 Samuel 11-12. If I had the capacity to require your reading it before giving any attention to this Study Guide I would. I have even given consideration to copying them in their entirety here, but that would be superfluous as you, in the Lord's kindness, have immediate access to them. So please do not regard my following summary as a replacement, but as a supplement.

2 Samuel 11:1-5

David takes Uriah's wife for himself – he observes Bathsheba bathing (purifying her uncleanness) and he brings her to himself and commits adultery with her. Bathsheba becomes pregnant with David's child.

2 Samuel 11:6-25

David attempts to provide a cover for his adulterous affair by summoning Uriah home in hopes that he will go home and be intimate with his wife (thereby appearing to having impregnated her himself). When the plan fails another plan is initiated to have Uriah murdered in battle so that there will be no need for a cover story. Uriah proves to have more the heart of David in these engagements than David himself.

- 11:9-11 Uriah would not go home and when asked why he stated, "The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing." (11:11) If you heard these words with no context you would swear you were hearing David. Tragically you are hearing the man that David would set up to provide cover for his vile offense....
- 11:14-15 David set Uriah up to initially be killed in battle, mimicking the very sort of scheme that Saul did in attempts on David's life.
- 11:16-17 Joab complied with David's orders sacrificing the lives of Israeli soldiers to guarantee that Uriah also would die in combat – a successful conspiracy to end Uriah's life.
- 11:25 David reveals the full callousness of his heart when his offense has been finalized. He is not broken over what he has done – he appears to be rather content. "David said to the messenger, 'Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter displease you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it.' And encourage him.'"

2 Samuel 11:26-27

After Bathsheba's mourning was over David took her as his wife and she had their son. "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD." (11:27)

2 Samuel 12:1-15

Nathan the prophet is sent to confront David about this sin, and when David saw his offense for what it was he was devastated. David hears that the immediate demands of the Law will not be required of him, he will live. However, his house will suffer the weight of the sword and his child with Bathsheba will die.

- Upon hearing of the intimate story and its grave offense over the wrongful taking of a precious little sheep by someone, he is enraged at the offender. He then finds out; he is the offender.
"Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, 'As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'" (12:5-6)
"Nathan said to David, '**You are the man!**'" (12:7)
"You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house...." (12:9-10)

"David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.' And Nathan said to David, 'The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.'" (12:13)

2 Samuel 12:16-23

As stated by Nathan, David and Bathsheba's child died, but until the moment The LORD took the child David plead to secure mercy for it.

"David therefore sough God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground." (12:16)

"He said, 'While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?'" (12:22)

Introduction/Header

To The Choirmaster

It is striking that David's offense, which was so public in its consequence and apparently to some extent or another in its being made known (when such was made known is unclear), that this psalm of repentance would be strikingly public to have been included in the Psalter, but even further to have apparently been provided for the choirmaster. Israel's King gravely fell and was graciously restored, and the heart demonstrated here was a heart to be learned from, and The LORD's dealing were worthy of both quiet reflection and joyful praise.

When Nathan The Prophet Came To Him

I cannot begin to imagine the weight on Nathan: knowing the offense of David, confronting him with the case, and then delivering the direct rebuke "you are the man." The severity of Psalm 51's context is grave and heavy, but the mourning makes way for joy.

John Calvin made a most valuable observation when he drew out that while David was pleading for mercy in the beginning verses of the psalm that he had to a great degree already received mercy when Nathan was sent to him.¹³ It was an additional mercy that David's heart was postured to respond and be broken so immediately, too. A tragedy that we all too often perpetuate is a failure to speak restorative truth to a brother or sister in sin. It is a grace that God breaks us and brings us to repentance and it is a kind mercy that we have one another as his tools to this end.

Themes and Terms

David's Sin/Offenses Identified

51:1,3 Transgressions

51:2,5,9 Iniquity

51:2,3 Sin

51:4 Sinned

51:4 Evil

51:5,9 Sin(s)

51:14 Bloodguiltiness

¹³ John Calvin; Calvin's Commentaries, Volume 4 – Joshua-Psalms 1-35. Baker Books, 2003. (Hereafter: Calvin), Pg.282

Unpacking Terms

Regarding the interchanging references to David's sin and his requested forgiveness and restoration Rhodes provides the following information.¹⁴

Transgressions:	Rebellion or willful disobedience.
Iniquity:	A combination of crookedness, guilt, and punishment.
Sin:	Missing the mark that God has set.
Blot Out:	Removal from a record.
Wash:	Washing, specifically clothes, by treading.
Cleanse:	Removing dross from metals and of ceremonial purification.

Boice provides his insights on the unpacking of the terms David uses too.¹⁵

Mercy:	God's loving assistance to the pitiful
Unfailing Love: ¹⁶	God's continuing operation of his mercy
Compassion: ¹⁷	God feels for our infirmities
Transgression:	Crossing a forbidden boundary
Iniquity:	Perversion
Sin:	Falling short or missing the mark
Cleanse:	Purge or to "de-sin"
Wash:	Reference to the purifying procedures of the law
Blot Out:	Removing from a book

51:1-2 Open Plead/Thesis

51:1

"The opening plea, have mercy, is the language of one who has no claim to the favour he begs."¹⁸

The opening statement is a request, specifically for mercy - personal mercy "on me." David the adulterer, David the murderer, David the broken, is pleading to secure mercy.

How would mercy look in this situation? David has been absolved from the death penalty per Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:13, though he committed two heinous offenses that individually carried this most severe of punishments.

Mercy here looks like the restoration of David to again be in fellowship with The LORD, to again enthusiastically worship in his presence, and to again fulfill the high duties of anointed king of the witness bearing nation of Israel.

David has found himself in frightening company. He wanted and he took. What he received he never wanted and now what he needs is mercy.

¹⁴ Rhodes, Pgs.85-86

¹⁵ Boice, Pgs.426, 428 (much of the wording is effectively quoted in whole here)

¹⁶ used in place of "steadfast love"

¹⁷ used in place of the second term for "mercy"

¹⁸ Kidner, Pg. 207

David's Two-Fold Petition

- 1) On account of your steadfast love, be gracious to me.
- 2) On account of your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.

The second informs the full scope of the first. Ultimately steadfast love and mercy is requested in the form of erasing his offense before The LORD for good, to blot it out.

On account of your kindness or your steadfast, dependable, faithful love, have mercy, be gracious to me.

On account of your abundant/plentiful mercy or compassionate care/favor and/or overlooking of an offense.

Steadfast love marked the character of God and his relationship with his covenant people. It is this love that David entreated to receive in mercy.

Mercy (51:1a) And The Character of The LORD

When Moses requests to see The LORD's glory he is told that he will be afforded to see the "afterglow" as it were... and in this The LORD states, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be *gracious/merciful* to whom I will be *gracious/merciful*, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." Exodus 33:19¹⁹

It is noteworthy that David is making a request rooted in the very personally revealed glory character of The LORD. He was not making some ignorant wail out to a God he had no knowledge or relationship with, but with The LORD who identifies himself as gracious and merciful. O that he might find help here.

David and Mercy

David is broken. The LORD delights in fixing the broken. Not all cries for *mercy* will be granted, but they do not go unheard... "Who knows whether the LORD will be *gracious* to me...." 2 Samuel 12:22

David consistently was pleading to The LORD that he might be gracious... that he might be merciful. There are times when he is overtly addressing his sin and this was clearly his heart to plead and to deal with his offenses before God. Here it is one of the core elements of the psalm, he is need of mercy if he is to have any hope of forgiveness and restoration.

David knew that offending the holy righteousness of God required consequences and that the safest and best place to be in the receiving of one's consequences was in the mercy of God. Be it for the overlooking of an offense (that would be wholly accounted for on the cross) or the tempering of the full blows of righteous judgment (that would be wholly accounted for on the cross).

The LORD's Steadfast Love

Arnold Rhodes states that the use of "steadfast love" is usually a reference to God's covenantal love.²⁰

Continuing in the context of Moses entreating The LORD to see his glory. We observe that when The LORD does pass by he declares of himself that he is "abounding in *steadfast love*" Exodus 34:6 and that he keeps *steadfast love* for thousands. Exodus 34:7

John MacArthur states that the appeal to God's lovingkindness was rooted in the understanding that though his offense was horrible that forgiveness was available because of God's covenant love.²¹

It was on this covenant love, this steadfast love, that David is basing his petition.

¹⁹ Not to be confusing, but the term "mercy" from Psalm 51:1a is here translated "gracious" and the use of mercy is another word frequently translated for both mercy and compassion.

²⁰ Rhodes, Pg.88

²¹ MacArthur, Pg.788

A Request Rooted In Mercy (51b)

David is hoping to avail himself of The LORD's compassionate overlooking of an offense, that this abundant mercy would be the means for the absolute clearing of his grave transgressions.

When addressing the request out of God's abundant mercy Calvin states, "There is an implied antithesis between the greatness of the mercies sought for, and the greatness of the transgression which required them."²²

Blotting Out Offenses

David is requesting that the record of his offense be wiped and that it be recorded afresh with no account of these offenses. David knows that so long as this record stands he cannot.

Among the available images of "blotting out" one that is available in the Scriptures is the account of the worldwide flood from which righteous Noah and his family alone were preserved. This account provides an extraordinary picture of blotting out.

"He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens." Genesis 7:23

This was a complete clearing of everything alive. A blotting out of all life save Noah and the occupants of the ark.

David is requesting that in The LORD's abundant mercy that the account of his transgressions be completely cleared.

51:2

Cleansing Language

51:2 Wash me
51:2 Cleanse me
51:7 Purge me with hyssop
51:7 Wash me
51:10 Clean heart

Wash Me... Cleanse Me...

Note that the historical context for the offense began when David was watching Bathsheba bathing and that this was not an elective bathing, but a cleansing – from a ceremonially unclean to clean status (2 Samuel 11:4). David knew that he needed to be washed and cleansed from his iniquity and sin and there was not a natural means by which this could be accomplished, certainly not within himself.

So it is that we see that David is using external pictures of internal workings... which was clearly understood as articulated in the psalm as a whole (51:10, 16, 17). He is expressing what is necessary to be effectuated from the inside out (a concept the first century Pharisees failed to grasp as they were externally washed and internally putrid – see Matthew 23).

David recognized that the work of restoration, the work of justification, is outside himself - he must be washed and cleansed and this is a work he cannot provide for himself (no efforts, no special works, no internal/personal hope) - this is why justification by faith alone is at the very heart of the integrity of the gospel.

Note David's superlative language: was me thoroughly.... This is a severe matter and deserves or even requires like language. David was reflecting the heart of the man that Jesus identifies as forgiven.

"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee,

²² Calvin, Pg.283

standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.'" Luke 18:9-14

This opening plead is establishing the foundation of David's densely packed repentant request and longing to be restored so as to again enjoy The LORD's presence, worship, and joy. He is using ceremonial cleansing language to address what they were intentionally pointing toward - clean hearts. David is demonstrating what the Greater David would proclaim and offer - clean hearts to restore right relationship with God.

Here David is pointing more to the Second Adam than the First Adam who when confronted with his sin redirected and blamed rather than crumple under the weight of a broken heart of lost relationship. This may well have been because the First Adam had not fully experienced the magnitude of his offense as David, who was brought forth in iniquity and conceived in sin, had experienced.

To which Adam do you point?

51:3-6 Repentant Confession

51:3

An Awareness Of Offense

The request to receive mercy, to have his offenses blotted out, to be washed, and to be cleansed is out of an awareness of his transgressions/sins. It is clear that whereas before David was not giving proper consideration to his sin; he now has an intimate awareness of them. His conscience is not deaf or unclear to his offense.

Calvin states that David's sin was a consuming presence that wounded his conscience and left him restless and thereby fueled his urgency to be reconciled with God.²³ Calvin then goes on to address the example provided by David's disposition regarding his sin. I am quoting this section in whole as I am persuaded that a contributing factor in false conversions and confusion over salvation are frequently because so many have not been "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37).

"From his example we may learn who they are that can alone be said to seek reconciliation with God in a proper manner. They are such as have had their consciences wounded with a sense of sin, and who can find no rest until they have obtained assurance of his mercy. We will never seriously apply to God for pardon, until we have obtained such a view of our sins as inspires us with fear."²⁴

Perhaps what is more terrifying than our seemingly insatiable appetite for our sin is the propensity to fail to see our voracious consumption of it and in turn its consumption of us. What an exceptional mercy to have our eyes open, our consciences aware, and to engage in a most heart wrenching of struggles as we engage our sin in assurance that it will be put to death and that our good Lord has washed us clean.

"True penitence is not a dead knowledge of sin committed, but a living sensitive consciousness of it (Isa. 59:12), to which it is ever present as a matter and ground of unrest and pain. This penitential sorrow, which pervades the whole man, is, it is true, no merit that wins mercy or favour, but it is the condition, without which it is impossible for any manifestation of favour to take place."²⁵

Do you experience the kind mercy of knowing your offense that you might seek its mortification? Romans 7 is hard but in passing through it we arrive to Romans 8. One must see that we are wretched men to be able to give thanks to God for his freeing work, for his cleansing work.

²³ Calvin, Pg.284

²⁴ Calvin, Pgs.284-285

²⁵ Keil & Delitzsch, Pg. 366

51:4

The Offended Party: The LORD Of Glory

“David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’” 2 Samuel 12:13

Going beyond his initial confessional statement to Nathan, David states that it was against The LORD and The LORD alone that he has sinned and done what is evil in his sight. However, did he not sin against multiple individuals and groups? What of all the offended persons: Uriah (directly), Bathsheba (directly), Joab (directly), The Israeli Army (directly/indirectly), the Nation (indirectly). So how was this a singular offense against The LORD?

In the context of repenting David is also providing a theology of sin making it clear that all sin is an offense against God and ultimately God is the singularly offended party and that he is righteous and blameless in his judgment.

David is affirming that just as faithful as The LORD is to care and rescue his own, he is also faithful to uphold his justice and to answer an offense.

This can be difficult to grasp, but we must secure a right view of God first and foremost and then submit everything lesser to this proper and high view of The LORD. In view of this I think that Arnold Rhodes really captured the essence of this verse quite well when he stated, “His sin is against God, but this does not necessarily mean that he has not wronged his fellow man, for sin is sin because God is God.”²⁶

James Boice both affirms and clarifies that while we have the capacity to wrong others, even with great severity, it is against God that we can ultimately sin as the very nature and definition of sin is a wrong against God.²⁷ Boice continues that understanding this demands both a right view of God (as absolute Sovereign, Holy, and Creator) and a right view of man (as subordinate and created in the image of God) stating, “...it is only because God is in the picture that even a wrong done to our neighbor is a wrong. It is because our neighbor is made in God’s image and is endowed with rights by God that it is wrong to harm him or her.”²⁸ This would extend also to sins against oneself (1 Corinthians 6:18) as they are again ultimately sins against God first and foremost. It is for this reason that while we seek and hope to secure the forgiveness of others we must seek and secure the forgiveness of the Lord and it is to him that our repentance is centered.

In terms of true offense we are the collaterally damaged: David murdered a man made in God’s image and violated a woman in God’s image and it is to God to whom he will give an account.

“It matters little to obtain our acquittal at the bar of human judgment, or to escape punishment through the connivance of others, provided we suffer from an accusing conscience and an offended God. And there is, perhaps, no better remedy against deception in the matter of our sins than to turn our thoughts inward upon ourselves, to concentrate them upon God, and lose every self-complacent imagination in a sharp sense of his displeasure.”²⁹

51:5-6

From The Start: A Sinner

In this section of repentant confession David transitions from speaking of his overt offense and the justice in it being answered to making declarations regarding his inherent disposition toward sin (having been conceived as a sinner). From his original heartbeat David, like all man, was a fallen man.

²⁶ Rhodes, Pg. 86

²⁷ Boice, Pg.427

²⁸ Boice, Pg.427

²⁹ Calvin, Pg. 286

David is not transferring blame to his parents. This would negate the entire context of genuine repentance. But rather, that he has acted within the nature that he has had from the moment of his conception and from which he is in need of deliverance – see 51:2.

David is not making excuses, but is providing full disclosure of the comprehensive nature of this sin. It is to this inherent nature that he has yielded. He is stating that this is what he has brought to the table and therefore, again, the cleansing must come from without as it is certainly not within his natural capacity.

The LORD And The Inner Man

David has declared his identity in 51:5 (sinner from conception) and here he declares The LORD's identity (a delighter of truth and provider of wisdom). He has effectively stated, "behold me" and now he states "behold you."

David has declared his offense and here he declares The LORD's working with restored man. While explicitly understood in the preceding verses here it is explicitly stated that it is the inner man, the secret man, that The LORD works his work and expects truth.

Note also that because all sin on some level is fundamentally unbelief (be it in the Lord's goodness, sufficiency, satisfaction, or otherwise) truth in the inner man and wisdom in the secret heart are effectively insulators from offense. Therefore, it is here that The LORD delights in truth and teaches wisdom. It is also from the inner man that proper worship is birthed – not because of external influence, but inward truth.

51:7-12 Plead for Restoration

Pleads for Restoration

51:7 Purge me
51:7 Wash me
51:8 Let me hear
51:8 Let the bones... rejoice
51:9 Hide your face
51:9 Blot out my iniquities
51:10 Create... a clean heart
51:10 Renew a right spirit
51:11 Cast me not away
51:11 Take not your Holy Spirit
51:12 Restore to me
51:12 Uphold me

51:7

A Deep And Effectual Cleansing

The LORD is the offended 51:4 and the cleanser 51:7.

Just like in 51:5 David appears to be referencing back to 51:2 - it is his heart and its having been so fully corrupted/stained by sin that he is requesting cleansing. David knows that restoration and cleansing is beyond his capacity and he is directly in 51:2 and poetically (with a view to ceremonial cleansing) here in 51:7 looking to The LORD to purify and restore him. David knows that all he can bring to repentance and restoration is brokenness and pleads - no penance and no personal restoration - there is no naturally fixing this, the resolution must come from beyond him. So LORD... please work your purifying work and cleanse me.

With both the cleaning and washing language David is poetically stating that the cleansing of the offense from sin by The LORD is an absolute cleansing, it is an absolute whiteness. It is pictured with the imagery of frozen crystals of water bursting into small flakes and blanketing the earth with an unstained and undiminished whiteness. He has blood on his hands and on his soul and he knows that he can be made clean, pure, and white.

Hyssop was a plant sometimes used in the ceremonial cleansing process and on account of its texture among its functions was to sprinkle blood or water. Likely its most notable use was in the Exodus Passover when it was used to apply the blood of the Passover Lamb to the doorpost of the Israelites residences (Exodus 12). However, while the Passover was its most prominent use in Redemptive History, it is the language of its use of cleansing as established in the Law that David was likely referencing here and this is drawn out by Derek Kidner, who reminds us that the conclusion of the cleansing process with hyssop for the leper or the unclean through conduct with the dead was the statement "...and he shall be clean" (Leviticus 14:8, Numbers 19:19). Here Kidner draws our attention to David's ownership of that statement, "...and I shall be clean." Kidner also reminds us that continuing with these same cleansing prescriptions in the Law was the washing of the person and clothes too, but David goes beyond just mimicking these cleansing prescriptions, but states that when such is done by The LORD he is not just clean, but he is whiter than snow.³⁰

James Boice also concludes that David was making the direct connection between the use of hyssop and the cleansing found in the shedding of innocent blood.³¹ How comprehensively David understood a connection with this and the atoning death of Messiah would be difficult to say as revelation was progressively provided, but we can speak with authoritative clarity that the innocent blood that would satisfy this necessary request was that of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

51:8

Joy And Gladness

Among the deceptions of sin is its counterfeit efforts at joy, gladness, and satisfaction. David would not have pursued Bathsheba had there not been the inward enticement that such a choice would prove to be beneficial, satisfying, or enjoyable. Yet these are the very things that he was robbed of and would seek to have anew. It was The LORD's presence and fellowship that David found such exuberant joy and gladness in days past. In a disposition of genuine repentance his appetite has been recalibrated to the truly satisfying.

Further, it appears that David is alluding here to what he will build up/develop in 51:14-15 in the "Restored" section. From 51:8 a request to hearing joy and gladness and rejoicing to 51:14-15 tongue singing aloud and opened mouth and lips declaring praise. This is because restoration births songs of praise.

Broken Bones

While David did not suffer direct physical harm for his offenses the picture of his whole person suffering is clear. It would also appear that he is juxtaposing himself with the righteous man such as we see in Psalm 34:20 who in his faithfulness is kept. David recognizes he has been absolutely unfaithful and it has worked its work on him and he craves an equally comprehensive restoration.

³⁰ Kidner, Pg.209

³¹ Boice, Pg.429

51:9

A Hidden Face Requested

David is requesting that The LORD hide his face from his sins... that The LORD would not have regard or recollection of his offenses, that they be treated as not present or as absolved. "Hiding one's face" was a euphemism for turning one's attention away, disregarding - usually in judgment, but here as a grace (to have no regard for his offense).

Blotting Out

David is repeating his request from 51:1 to have his offenses, transgressions, sins blotted out. He is effectively asking that his offense have no record.

With the reference again to blotting out offenses (51:1 transgressions and 51:9 iniquities) Kidner, like Boice, sees that the first half of the psalm has come to completion and transitions from guilt and cleansing to salvation (Boice's word choice was 1-9: need for forgiveness, and 10-19: need for renewal).³² I came to a different structural conclusion, but believe that their observation is worth noting.

51:10

The Creative Work Of God In Restoration

Among the request to be cleaned and forgiven - things outside of himself and beyond his ability, is the request that The LORD would create, make anew, a clean heart within him. David knew that this was God's work and he pleads that God would do this work within him. From purging and cleaning to making new, David needs more than just cleansing, he needs the creative work of God. This is not just another way of saying clean my heart. This is the language of God speaking his creation into existence.

David also comprehensively ask that The LORD would renew a right spirit within him.

"He does not merely assert that his heart and spirit were weak, requiring divine assistance, but that they must remain destitute of all purity and rectitude till these be communicated from above."³³

Again, while I differ on the structural conclusion there is still significant merit to the observations that Boice made based off of his structural conclusions. He makes an astute observation when addressing the transition from what he regards as the first half of the psalm to the second. Boice states that the overt repentance that is laid out beginning in 51:10 is a clear indicator of the sincerity of the forgiveness sought in 51:1-9 as David is here seeking that as a man forgiven that he might have the necessary work accomplished in him so as to not again return to such offense. He recognizes that this will require a change of appetite that comes from a change of heart.³⁴

"...his sinful acts sprang from a sinful heart that would certainly cause him to sin repeatedly unless God dealt with it."³⁵

51:11

Incompatibility Of Presence

David is not addressing a salvific matter, but more of a breaking of fellowship, and this is of no small consequence as throughout the Psalms of David he prolifically writes of how much he longs for and loves The LORD's presence.

³² Kidner, Pg.109

³³ Calvin, Pg. 299

³⁴ Boice, Pg.432

³⁵ Boice, Pg.432

Note also that “face” (51:9) and “presence” (51:11) are the same term. If sin is cast aside David does not have to be. If David's sin can be addressed, then relationship can be restored and service can be maintained.

Holy Spirit – Anointing Not Salvation

David is not espousing a potential loss of his soul before The LORD, but that he understood that there was a risk of him losing his special commissioning/anointing just as Saul did. Further, as Saul's soothing harpist David would have had first-hand recollection of the Spirit of God being removed from Saul and being replaced by a tormentor.

I do not believe that the promise to the House of David would have insulated him here either as his house could continue to be built and one of his sons could readily sit on the throne in the absence of his presence or ability. This effectively did happen with Absalom with the difference being that David retained the anointed status and Holy Spirit empowered authority to rule the nation.

Note though that the quintessential difference between Saul and David was not the severity or nature of their sin, but how they dealt with it. This as we will soon see (especially in 51:17) makes all the difference before The LORD.

Finally, by way of helpful clarification, the role of the Holy Spirit was unique in the Old Testament, particularly as he empowered Israel's leadership. There are clear references to the special anointing on theocratic mediators as is observed with Moses, the 70 elders who assisted Moses, Joshua, the judges, King Saul, and the Davidic line of kings.³⁶

51:12

Restoration Of Joy

Here again, David is using clear restoration language - this is not salvation, but restoration of a child who fell/failed. He is requesting what has been forfeited, the joy of The LORD's salvation, which tragically he knew better when fleeing for his life and facing struggle more than he does when at the chief of his comforts when in a context of sin.

This appears to be reinforcing 51:8 (requesting to hear joy and gladness and for his broken bones to rejoice).

Boice draws out that in not dealing with his sin David had forfeited his joy that is naturally present in the life of one walking in obedience, one enjoying genuine fellowship with God.³⁷

Willem VanGemeren concurs, stating that this is not an emotional joy, but one that reflects the satisfaction of resting with God with whom you are at peace.³⁸

A Continued Dependence

David also requested to be upheld with a willing spirit. He continually recognizes his absolute and utter dependence on The LORD, a disposition that made him great and that kept him true, and its absence led to his demise.

³⁶ MacArthur, Pgs.788-789

³⁷ Boice, Pg. 434

³⁸ VanGemeren, Pg.437

51:13-15 The Restored Disposition/A Clear Focus on The LORD

51:13

Focus On The Restorer

This is the beginning of a small section that gives particular emphasis on redirecting the attention to The LORD and not as much on David directly. It is not that a heavy emphasis on David was improper as it was wholly framed in his entreating The LORD, but here we have a pause that places particular emphasis on the fruit of that restoration, which by its nature narrows its focus, not on the beneficiary, but on the Giver/Restorer. Such is a healthy balance of proper worship and thanksgiving.

Teaching And Repentance

David states as one restored before The LORD he will direct a people to The LORD himself. Having been forgiven he has a testimony by which he can further instruct others in the things of The LORD and beckon them to see their own sin that they might also see their own restoration.

When you teach transgressors The LORD's ways you teach them to cry out for mercy to the covenant keeping God, who in abundance of compassion might just be pleased to blot out the offenses you have compiled against him. You teach transgressors that they are in need of being cleansed of their iniquities and sins and that such cleansing is beyond their capacity, so you look to The LORD who alone can wash away your offenses. You teach them to have an honest evaluation of their sin and that in such they will be consumed by it, robbed of rest and peace, until it is answered for in ways that cannot give a proper account. You teach them that the offense that has stained them and consumed them is wholly against The LORD, that there may be innumerable victims at their hands, but the offense is absolutely against The LORD of glory and he is just and righteous in his answering their offense. You teach them that this sin that has so consumed them, stripped them, and brought righteous condemnation upon them has been birthed out of their person from before their own natural births. You teach them what The LORD expects and will accomplish in the inner man – truth and wisdom. You teach them of the absolute purification that The LORD will effectually accomplish in his own whom he has restored. You teach them that though sorrows prevail that there is joy and gladness. You teach them to seek that it would be their sin that The LORD disregards and does away with and not them. You teach them that this work of restoration and cleansing, as wonderful as it is, as attractive as it might be, as much as they want it, that it is wholly God's work, his creative work that no other can duplicate or effectuate: he alone makes new hearts. You teach them that The LORD restores joy and will keep them. ***You teach them Psalm 51.***

There is the expectation that so teaching will produce a context of repentance. Sinners seeing themselves, their offense, the offended, and the restorative work provokes a context to cry out for mercy and turn from the love of sin to the joy of purity and restoration.

Have you so learned and do you so teach?

Psalm 32 and 51

James Boice identifies several similarities between Psalm 51 and Psalm 32 and states that while Psalm 51 is more intense and personal Psalm 32 is more reflective. He goes on to suggest that it is possible that Psalm 32 could be a working out of David's stating that he will teach transgressors The LORD's ways.³⁹

Keil and Delitzsch's commentary on the Psalms comes to this same conclusion.⁴⁰

³⁹ Boice, Pg. 426

⁴⁰ Keil & Delitzsch, Pg.365

To this I think it is reasonable to add Psalm 51 not only as a historically sister psalm, I would argue that it is also an overt teacher, like Psalm 32, albeit more personal and direct. David is not simply stating what he will do here, but in effect has and is doing it too. Providing this very intense and personal repentant prayer and song to the nation was a testimony of instruction to all and a model to be embraced.

51:14

Sing Aloud Of Your Righteousness

Having focused his and others' attention on The LORD through instructing sinners David now focuses his and others' attention on The LORD through song – a natural expression of truth having taken hold of the heart.

However, if one will stumble in this psalm it would be here. How can David proclaim the righteousness or justice of God when he has been absolved from bloodguiltiness? Have two heinous offenses secured in the forbidden elements of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments), whose violation require death, simply been disregarded by The LORD? Is leadership above both the natural law and the Law of God? How does the theocratic witness bearing nation understand its anointed king not being made to suffer the consequences of these offenses?

“David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ And Nathan said to David, ‘The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die.’” 2 Samuel 12:13-14

Does the death of David's son absolve his guilt? Was the death of the son of David an atoning death? Must not the king of Israel pay the sin debt with the shedding of his blood?

No, the offenses have not been overlooked or disregarded and yes, the son must die.

The Son of David, The King of Israel, died for the pardoned offenses of David and every last offense of his beloved. Propitiation has been made. Jesus Christ, Son of David, King of Israel shed his blood that the righteousness and justice of God would be satisfied. David's bloodguiltiness did not get a pass, it was atoned for by the same means that his heart was recreated – wholly by the work of God.

Israel your king should have paid for his offense with his life... and Israel your King has paid for your offense with his life... Jesus, Son of David... King of the Jews.

Joy mingled with tears makes a magnificent song regarding The LORD's righteousness and it is one that all of the redeemed can, should, must, and will sing.

In terms of the progressive unfolding of truth in Redemptive History we know that David understood that The LORD delivered him from more than his enemies, but also from his sin.

David responds to his salvation with song that The LORD was righteous to deliver, but he could not be unless this sin was atoned for outside of himself. David clearly recognizes that their sacrifices were insufficient... and though he would not despise brokenness (51:17), brokenness does not atone, it only puts one in a place to be a beneficiary of the one who did what you could not, namely atone for your sins... and having atoned also forgive because there is a restitution and that has led to reconciliation.

You absolutely must connect deliverance to righteousness... and herein lies the heart of the gospel and I believe the psalm. David is declaring the righteousness of God.

51:15

David is continuing his disposition of worship as one who has been forgiven, whose lips and mouth are being applied to their chief end: being opened to praise God. However, even in this he asks that he might secure The LORD's help... you open my lips.

David has transitioned from the pleader to the praiser as he has been heard and The LORD has been pleased to answer.

51:16-17 Sacrifice That Pleases God

51:16

Sacrifices Do Please God

One must be careful that when pursuing the “heart of worship” that they do not irresponsibly disregard the “body of worship.” It is clear from 51:18-19 that The LORD does not disregard the sacrificial system that **he established** or that **he has found delight in** before, *but* that the physical sacrifice is of no consequence if it is not accompanied or birthed out of a proper heart (be it brokenness as is the case here, or proper thanksgiving, or true sacrifice).

Effectively if the act of worship is detached from the heart of worship then you have only performed a meaningless activity, a duty, but a duty unfulfilled. It is a waste of time, effort, and resources... and David won't have it.... Not unlike when he refused to offer a sacrifice that cost him nothing in 2 Samuel 24.

David had a heart after The LORD and his sin was shocking and grievous, but he does exactly what he states in 51:13 because through this grave time and wonderful restoration he is teaching *us* The LORD's ways and sinners will return to our great and merciful God. Beloved worship, but worship properly.

51:17

Worship Works Best When Broken

The sacrifices that God welcomes are those from the hearts and hands of the broken.

Recall from our study in Psalm 34 that the tender affection that The LORD has for the brokenhearted and crushed in spirit was demonstrated not only in his saving them, but his proximity to them. He is near them. "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." Psalm 34:18

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Psalm 147:3

"For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the heart of the contrite.'" Isaiah 57:15

But... do not lose sight that brokenness in repentance leads to restoration and joy and gladness.

We see Jesus here with the woman anointing his feet with tears... utter brokenness and a brokenness that is gladly embraced by The LORD.

Service Works Best When Broken

Give consideration to the Apostle Peter in this context too. Recall Peter's restoration and the charge given him in John 21. I would **never** have wished Peter's failure upon him, but what an amazing kindness that the Lord let him be absolutely broken and then restored in one of the most heart wrenching of ways so that he would be prepared to heed his beloved Lord's charge to him.

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' He said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'" John 21:15-17

"Feed my lambs," "tend my sheep," and "feed my sheep" - I am confident that Peter was extraordinarily useful, but when broken he was **truly useful**.

May in The LORD's mercy we too benefit from the kind grace of being broken enough times to become better worshipers and useful servants.

51:18-19 Restored National Leadership

Worshipping In The City Of God

The attention here appears to be redirected to the welfare of the nation. David was their anointed king and the nation's welfare was bound up in unison with the House of David. Now, on account of his sin the sword that would not depart from his house radically affected not only him, but the whole of the nation. Further, recall that while his offense was in secret the consequences brought in response by The LORD would be in public. Note also that the account as recorded in Samuel and this penitent psalm were all public to the nation too.

This like all sin was not a wholly private affair and this is amplified because of David's role as the anointed king of the nation and the severity of the offenses and their consequences.

VanGemeeren rightfully concludes that David's concern is not only for his own welfare, but the welfare of the community as a whole.⁴¹ David recognized that as the anointed king of a theocratic witness bearing nation his actions were with substantial consequence not only to himself, but the people of God as a whole. It is with this understanding that VanGemeeren further states, "The psalmist hopes that through the process of confession, contrition, and prayer for restoration, the Lord will deal kindly with him and with the community of Zion."⁴²

Consider also that reducing the application of 51:1-17 down to our own context does not provide a reprieve for us to not give consideration of the personal application of these verses too. It is strikingly telling that "libertarian" philosophies have become so abundantly embraced amongst even the "conservative" culture as they espouse that what someone does, so long as it does not affect/hurt someone else, is their business. This *can* be true until you introduce sin into the equation, as sin refuses to be confined to a solitary victim. David understood this on a micro and macro level and we would do well to understand this too.

Further, do not fail to recall 51:13 where the scope of David's attention has already broadened to his serving others in the truth that he has known and experienced regarding sin, confession, repentance, and restoration.

But returning to the original context it is fair to ask what is the connection here with the right sacrifices? What is the city of Jerusalem's connection to proper worship/sacrifice and how is it tied to brokenness as prescribed above?

⁴¹ VanGemeeren, Pg.433

⁴² VanGemeeren, Pg.433

It is clear, as I referenced with 51:16 that The LORD has established this sacrificial system - in view of a proper heart one is not at liberty to disregard proper worship. Jerusalem is God's special city where he chose to dwell amongst his covenant nation. It is where his special presence was not only within Israel, but on the earth itself and it was the sole location where one could engage The LORD in proper worship. The welfare of Jerusalem and its worship system was of preeminent consequence to a true worshiper of The LORD – you cannot simply set up another altar, offer sacrifices, and expect that you are pleasing God. The New Covenant Church cannot reach back and rewrite Redemptive History – Israel was a witness bearing nation and this was the prescribed place of worship. David cared about this beloved city and the integrity of its worship not solely as its natural king, but as its God anointed king and as a worshiper himself.

Contextual Timing – Original Or Ammended

Note, the contextual struggle with many persons regarding these last two verses is how they fit. I believe that this has been addressed as this was not a matter isolated to David, but the whole nation (as referenced above) and it provides a more complete understanding of the sacrifices (as referenced above). The other struggle is that David mentions building the walls of Jerusalem when they were already built – therefore, it is concluded that these verses must be an addition after the exile. However, there is no need for this conclusion and if support is necessary regarding this it can be found in that the walls were continuing to be built up even by Solomon (well after David's death) and the city was not complete as there was also the anticipated Temple to be built.

Psalm 51 Provides A Theology Of Sin And Salvation

- 51:1 Salvation is wholly dependent on God's mercy and it is to him that one must cry out.
- 51:1 Sin must be removed/dealt with - absolutely annihilated to have relationship with a righteous/holy God
- 51:2 Sinners (everyone) is need of the purifying work of God
- 51:3 Sinners (everyone) must recognize and take ownership of their sin.
- 51:4 Sin must be recognized for what it is - offending/disobeying a Holy and Righteous God (by its nature an infinite offense because of the offended party). Wronging, offending, disobeying, hurting, or failing others is not the issue as all such matters are directly and wholly offenses against God who is righteous/just in his dealing with sin.
- 51:5 Sinners constitute the entire birthed race of man. All are from birth and by natural nature sinners.
- 51:6 The LORD desires and delivers truth to the inner man - outward manifestations that are not reflections of inward change are exercises in hypocritical and insufficient vanity.
- 51:7 The work of purifying the inner man, of washing away the offense and presence of sin, of cleansing is wholly the work of The LORD.
- 51:8 Sin breaks, but there is joy in The LORD's restorative work.
- 51:9 Sin must be dealt with as it is an infinite offense against The LORD and he alone is the one who can address its offense.
- 51:10 Salvation is not an improvement or general restoration it is restoration by reinvention. It is the work of new creation. It is a new heart and a renewed spirit.
- 51:11 Salvation is the only means of restoring relationship with God.
- 51:12 Salvation brings joy and one is both restored and kept by God.
- 51:13 There is good news to be shared and repentance to be experienced.
- 51:14 Deliverance from the offense of sin is exclusively God's work. Atonement can only be made by the sacrificial work of the Son (that guilt must be answered for by punitive means).
- 51:14,15 Salvation inevitable produces praise.
- 51:16,17 Sacrifices that please God are products of utter brokenness before him not external obedience and worship alone.
- 51:18,19 Sacrifices rooted in brokenness do not negate the value and expectation of external obedience and worship alone - rooted properly they can now be expressed properly.