

Background Text: Psalm 51:1-17

Focal Passage: Psalm 51:1-5, 9-12, 17

Key Verse: “Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!” (Psalm 51:10)

Purpose Statement: To see why prayers of confession are important to a life of faith.

Several years ago, I wrote the lyrics for a musical for children titled *Holy Conversation*. The purpose of the musical is to teach children about prayer. The opening song defines *prayer* as “Holy Conversation.” Scripture affirms the truth that God is holy, and people and places associated with God are also holy. The time we spend with God in prayer is holy time.

Being holy does not mean we are perfect, as God is perfect. We are holy by association, not merit. We are holy because we place our faith in Christ and desire to live as God calls us to live. We are not always successful in following the example of Christ, however. We are guilty of sin, and sin causes us to feel separated from our Creator. Prayers of confession offer a way for us to reconnect with God and find healing for our broken hearts and broken relationships.

But how do we pray? How do we offer our confession before God? As we will see, even an “ill-fitting prayer” can be a “good fit.” In other words, even a prayer of confession that does not seem to “fit” or address our specific acts of wrongdoing can draw us into God’s presence. We can trust God to open our eyes and help us face our sin and accept God’s life-giving forgiveness. The ancient psalmist declared, “You won’t despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed” (Psalm 51:17). Psalm 51 invites us to draw close to and lay before God all that may be broken and crushed in our lives.

King David's Confession

Like many psalms in the Psalter, Psalm 51 is attributed to King David. People of faith throughout the centuries remember David as a great man of God as well as a musician, so it follows that he would have composed songs of praise and prayer to the Lord. The title we find with this psalm in many Bibles suggests that David wrote it following his affair with Bathsheba and after the prophet Nathan confronted him.

Second Samuel 11:1–12:14 records the story of David and Bathsheba. In short, David slept with Bathsheba, who was Uriah's wife, and then directed that Uriah be killed. As one commentator put it, in this story, "David broke at least half of the Ten Commandments."¹

God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David with his sin. Nathan began by telling David a story, similar in nature to David's story. At first David did not recognize himself as the sinner in the story. He became angry with the sinful man Nathan was describing and announced that he should make amends for the evil he had done. Imagine how Nathan's words must have cut into David's heart, "You are that man!" (2 Samuel 12:7).

Ancient Jewish tradition attributed the psalms to King David, and the early Christian church later embraced this tradition as part of its heritage. The New Testament assumes David's authorship of the psalms. Modern biblical scholars have questioned the tradition that David wrote all of the psalms, citing evidence that some of the psalms reflect a later time period.

Psalm 51, for example, contains elements that lead scholars to date the psalm sometime after the Exile, long after King David ruled over Israel. Yet David's response to his wrongdoing was lament and confession, so even if the psalm was written by someone other than David at a later time, David's story still offers a suitable context for hearing it.

After Nathan told David he was the guilty party in the story, the prophet delivered a three-part message from God.

First, God reminded David of God's faithfulness and blessings toward him (2 Samuel 12:7-8). Second, God asked, "Why have you despised the LORD's word by doing what is evil in his eyes?" (verse 9). This question was followed by a description of the evil that was done. Third, God pronounced punishment on David saying, "You did what you did secretly, but I will do what I am doing before all Israel in the light of day" (verse 12).

This reference about secrecy may remind us of a less-prominent Old Testament character, Achan (Joshua 7). Achan and David thought they had successfully concealed their sins. We cannot hide our sin from God, however. The author of Psalm 51 said to God, "You want truth in the most hidden places" (Psalm 51:6).

David did not deny or excuse his behavior. He confessed, "I've sinned against the LORD!" (2 Samuel 12:13). God forgave David. Nathan said, "The LORD has removed your sin" (2 Samuel 12:13). God did not remove the punishment, however. Nathan said, "The son born to you will definitely die" (2 Samuel 12:14).

Has God ever opened your eyes to your sin by speaking through another person? If so, how did you respond?

"I Know My Wrongdoings"

In Psalm 51, the psalmist cried out for God's help. Like other prayers for help, this psalm includes complaint, petition, trust, and praise.

The psalmist voiced his complaint in Psalm 51:3-5. He confessed his sin three times: "I know my wrongdoings. . . . I've sinned against you—you alone. I've committed evil in your sight" (verses 3-4). He did not elaborate on exactly what he had done, but he did state that his sin was against God alone. This phrase is one reason some scholars doubt David's authorship of Psalm 51, since David's sin was also against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah.

The psalmist may have been guilty of willfully disobeying God's Law, for the Hebrew word translated here as "wrongdoings suggests purposeful rebellion."² He accepted full

responsibility for his disobedience and agreed that God was “justified” and “completely correct” (verse 4) to judge and punish him. At the same time, the psalmist offered a reason for his sin: “I was born in guilt, in sin, from the moment my mother conceived me” (verse 5). He showed with this statement that he recognized that people are morally weak and are capable of righteous and of sinful behavior.

It takes courage to confess our wrongdoings and to admit that we have sinned against God and other people. We may be tempted, as Achan and David were, to try to hide our sin, thinking perhaps that “out of sight” does mean “out of mind.” We may be hesitant to admit to other people and even to ourselves that we are guilty of wrongful actions.

It also takes courage to acknowledge our moral weakness, because with knowledge comes responsibility. God gives us free will to make our own choices. When we acknowledge our moral weakness and our propensity to sin, we know we must take responsibility for our actions and intentionally turn away from sin.

A hymn by Charles Wesley, brother of Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, comes to mind. In his hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” Charles Wesley openly appeals to God to “take away our bent to sinning.”³ Wesley acknowledged that even when our intentions are good, we may still give in to temptation and resist God’s will for our lives. King David, favored and chosen by God, gave in to his moral weakness in order to satisfy his personal desire.

The good news is that God forgives us. Nathan assured David, “The LORD has removed your sin” (2 Samuel 12:13). The apostle Paul wrote, “Salvation is God’s gift. It’s not something you possessed. . . . We are God’s accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives” (Ephesians 2:8, 10).

We are created in God’s image. This means we are capable of making good choices that reflect God’s presence

and influence in our lives. As Paul proclaimed, God’s forgiveness is a gift. Forgiveness releases us from the burden of our wrongdoing and frees us to once again “do good things.” God removed David’s sin, which freed David to fulfill his call to be king for God’s people. Through Christ, God frees us from the burden of our sin so that we may “do good things.”

What wrongdoings do you need to confess before God? How have you experienced forgiveness and freedom from the burden of sin?

“Create a Clean Heart for Me”

I like spring cleaning. I like washing the dirt off of window sills and dusting behind the bookcases. I like clearing unwanted items from closets and ironing freshly laundered curtains. I admit the work is tiring, but for me the reward of a clean house is well worth the effort.

The psalmist wanted a restored relationship with God, and he knew this required a “spring cleaning” in his heart. Notice the verbs he used:

“Wipe away my wrongdoings” (Psalm 51:1; also verse 9).

“Wash me completely clean of my guilt” (verse 2; also verse 7).

“Purify me (verse 2) . . . and I will be clean” (verse 7).

Verse 10 sums up his greatest desire: “Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!”

When we spring-clean our homes, we can be in charge by doing the work ourselves or overseeing the work of others we recruit to help us. We cannot however, “spring-clean” our own hearts. Only God can do this. Only God can wipe away our wrongdoings and wash away our guilt. Only God can purify us and create for us a clean heart.

The psalmist knew that his sin was standing between him and God. He was fearful that his disobedience would result in permanent separation from his Creator. So he cried out, “Have mercy on me” (verse 1). He appealed to God’s “faithful love” and “great compassion” (verse 1).

He made his plea, “Please don’t throw me out of your presence; please don’t take your holy spirit away from me” (verse 11).

We sense that the psalmist had known a close relationship with God in the past, for he pleaded, “Return the joy of your salvation to me” (verse 12). He wanted assurance that salvation was still available to him.

As Christians, we have the assurance of salvation through Jesus Christ. Beloved hymn-writer Fanny Crosby wrote,

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine! Perfect submission, all is at rest; I in my Savior am happy and blest.”⁴

The psalmist understood the importance of submission to God’s will. He prayed, “Put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!” (verse 10). He wanted to turn away from “wrongdoings,” but he knew from experience that he would need God’s help to remain faithful. He prayed for God to “sustain me with a willing spirit” (verse 12).

What hymns and songs of faith help you express your needs and desires before God?

Holy Time

The author of 1 John wrote, “If we claim, ‘We don’t have any sin,’ we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we’ve done wrong” (1 John 1:8-9).

When we make our confession to God, we do not need to search prayer books or spend hours composing a prayer that we think perfectly describes our situation. As the title for this lesson suggests, a prayer that draws us into God’s presence is a “good fit.”

Jesus gave us the words we need and taught us to pray simply, “Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us” (Matthew

6:12). God sees into our hearts and knows the sin we struggle to confess. God accepts our “broken spirit” and our “heart . . . that is broken and crushed” (Psalm 51:17).

This week, as you engage in the spiritual practice of confession, find a quiet place where you can be mindful of God’s presence. Remember that this is holy time. Remember God’s “faithful love” and “great compassion” (verse 1). Then, with or without words, release your sin to God. Trust and accept God’s gifts of forgiveness and sustaining presence.

Forgiving and sustaining God, we struggle sometimes to voice our sin before you. We thank you that you listen to our confession. With the psalmist, we pray for your mercy and a clean heart. We pray for a faithful spirit, the joy of your salvation, and your sustaining presence. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

¹From *The CEB Study Bible*, Old Testament; page 896.

²From *The CEB Study Bible*, Old Testament; page 896.

³*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 384.

⁴*Hymnal*, 369.