

Psalm 51 and Confession of Sins

Prayer

Introductory Questions

- How would you explain to new Christian how to confess their sins to God?
- What interferes with your confession of sins to God?

Introduction

Psalm 51 records King David's prayer of confession after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged her husband's murder. Before studying that psalm, we outline the nature and consequences of sin, and therefore we establish our need to be forgiven by God.

1. **Sin is breaking God's laws:** "4 Everyone who commits sin practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).
2. **Sin is rebellion against God and his rightful authority:** "2 Listen, heavens, and pay attention, earth, for the LORD has spoken: "I have raised children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me"" (Isa. 1:2).
3. **Sin is false worship—valuing people and things more than God—which is idolatry:** "25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever. Amen" (Rom. 1:25).
4. **Sin is misguided pleasure (enjoying something inherently sinful or enjoying God's gifts more than God himself, such as a career or recreation):** "3 For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by various passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, detesting one another" (Titus 3:3).
5. **Sin is often rooted in ignorance (not knowing God's expectations):** "30 Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).
6. **Sin is often intentional disobedience:** "26 If we deliberately go on sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (Heb. 10:26).
7. **Sin results in alienation from God and brings his wrath—in this life and the next:** "5 Because of your hardened and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment is revealed" (Rom. 2:5; cf. 1:24,26,28).

Therefore, we need to confess our sins to God and trust in Jesus, God's only provision for the forgiveness of sins. We organize Psalm 51 into three sections: (1) A Prayer of Confession (vv. 1–12), (2) A Prayer of Praise (vv. 13–17), and (3) A Prayer for Restoration (vv. 18–19). We conclude this lesson by summarizing how to confess our sins to God (and to others).

1. A Prayer of Confession

- “1 Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion. 2 Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin.” (Ps. 51:1–2)
- “3 For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge. 5 Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me. 6 Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within.” (Ps. 51:3–6)
- “7 Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. 9 Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt. 10 God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit.” (Ps. 51:7–12)

The title/superscription of this psalm is “For the choir director. A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.” The entire story is recorded in 2 Samuel 11:1–12:23. God confronted David through the prophet Nathan, which, by God’s grace, led David to repent and compose this psalm (cf. Rom. 2:4).

In verses 1–2, David asked God for forgiveness based on God’s character. David appealed to God’s grace (or mercy), faithful (covenant) love, and compassion (v. 1); like us, he did not want what he deserved. David wanted his rebellion blotted out, his guilt washed away, and his sin cleansed—each a powerful word picture for forgiveness from God (v. 2).

In verses 3–6, David confessed his sin in light of who God is and his position in the universe. David was dreadfully aware of his rebellion, and his sin was an inescapably present reality (v. 3). David sinned against Bathsheba, her husband (Uriah), the military (by using them to arrange Uriah’s death), and the nation, yet David recognized that his sin (and all sin) is ultimately an offense against God—the Judge over all (v. 4). David acknowledged his sin nature, with which, other than Jesus, all humans are born (v. 5). God desires integrity in our inner lives, and God teaches wisdom for all who will listen—such as the wisdom to avoid sin and the wisdom to repent (v. 6).

In verses 7–12, David prayed for holistic restoration. He longed to be purified with hyssop (a plant whose leaves were dipped in water and then sprinkled over those who were ceremonially unclean) and to be washed of his sin to be whiter than snow (v. 7). The internal pain from David’s sin felt like his bones were crushed, and he wanted to rejoice again (v. 8). David prayed again for forgiveness—for God to turn his face away from his sins and to blot out his guilt (v. 9). He wanted God to cleanse his heart and to renew his weakened, compromised spirit (v. 10). He desired for God to remain present with him and to not take away the Holy Spirit (v. 11). David asked God to restore the joy of his salvation and to be strengthened to obey, both of which occur after God graciously forgives (v. 12).

- What are the most prominent themes or emphases in this part of David’s prayer?
- How could you modify the way you confess your sins in light of David’s prayer?

2. A Prayer of Praise

“13 Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you. 14 Save me from the guilt of bloodshed, God—God of my salvation—and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. 15 Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.” (Ps. 51:13–17)

Once we confess our sins to God and receive forgiveness, he renews our willingness and ability to please him. For David, this included teaching others God’s Word and how to turn to God (v. 13), committing to praise God and requesting an ability to praise him more (vv. 14–15), and acknowledging that God wants brokenness and a humble heart before him (vv. 16–17).

- How has your life changed as a result of regularly confessing your sins?
- How can we cultivate our worship and humility before God?

3. A Prayer for Restoration

“18 In your good pleasure, cause Zion to prosper; build the walls of Jerusalem. 19 Then you will delight in righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.” (Ps. 51:18–19)

David concludes by asking God to cause Zion/Jerusalem to prosper (v. 18). “Building up the walls” could be a reference to literal walls, or it could be a figure of speech for God to repair, strengthen, and protect us when our lives crumble due to sin (v. 18; cf. Ezra 9:9). This leads to more worship and obedience from the people of God, which brings God joy (v. 19).

- How do you want God to renew you?
- How do you want God to renew others (in your family, church, nation)?

Sound Doctrine: Confession of Sins

Confession is the act of agreeing with God that we have sinned against him, which includes turning away from sin and turning back to God by faith in Jesus. Much of the material below is also relevant *as we confess our sins to other Christians*. We do not confess our sins to others as a means of securing forgiveness from God, but to reconnect with other Christians, to seek insights about our lives, and to pray for one another. How do we confess our sins to God?

1. **Identify Your Sins:** As we read the Bible and listen to others explain it, we learn about God's expectations for our lives and how we fall short of his standards. **The first category** below identifies sins of commission (what God forbids us to do) and sins of omission (what God wants us to do but we don't). **The second category** below identifies common idols—people and things that we often value more than God.

Category #1

- a. Sins of Commission: selfishness, greed, vanity, pride, lust, sex outside of marriage, hatred of God & others, godless worrying, self-indulgence, ingratitude, etc.
- b. Sins of Omission: lack of faith, lack of hope, lack of love for God and others, lack of worship, lack of love for his Word, lack of gathering in Christian community, etc.

Category #2

- a. Relational Idols: self, parents, siblings, friends, dating relationships, spouse, children, grandchildren, other relatives, pastors, politicians, professors, celebrities, etc.
- b. Non-relational Idols: food, entertainment, popularity, appearance, health, seduction, sex, safety, drugs, alcohol, education, work, money, possessions, retirement, etc.

2. **Agree with God, Turn Away from Your Sins, and Turn to Him by Faith:** Simply identifying our sins is not enough. Confession also includes agreeing with God that his Word outlines what is morally right, and we are morally wrong when we depart from his will. As part of our confession, there may be significant feelings of regret, sadness, and even anger over our own sins. True confession always includes turning from our sins and turning back to God through faith in Jesus Christ.
3. **Where Necessary, Make Things Right:** As you confess your sins, don't be surprised if God wants you to do something after you confess. This is not a way of earning your way back into his presence but a way of making things right. Is there someone to whom you need to apologize? Does God want you to rid yourself of certain temptations in your life? Is God calling you to some other act of obedience? In brief, God forgives through Jesus Christ, but he always calls us to live differently moving forward.

- What comments and questions do you have about this lesson?
- What is one thing you can do in response to this lesson?

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