

Musician Of Guilt

Psalm 51 July 23, 2023

There are more than 250,000 murder cold cases in the United States. That number grows by about 6,000 every year.¹

In ancient Israel, a notable killing had gone unpunished. It wasn't exactly a cold case - rumors had spread here and there. After all, the victim was one of the greatest warriors in the nation: Uriah the Hittite. He was famous and celebrated - a hero of the kingdom.

There had been no arrests, no civil suit, seemingly no investigation. But then a scene worthy of the old *Columbo* series unfolded. *The king himself* was publicly accused. At this point two unexpected things happened. First, the king did not *deny* the charges. He confessed to adultery and murder.

In May, a New Mexico man walked out of a store, borrowed a phone, and dialed 911 to confess to killing his landlord in 2008. "He told [police] he was tired of being overwhelmed by guilt."²

It's surprising to have someone confess to murder - especially a king. But then a second surprising thing happened: The killer was not led off to be executed under the Law of Moses. Instead, he went to worship.³ Some time later, he wrote the song we just listened to. For thousands of years it has endured as one of his most famous, alongside Psalm 23 and 139.

It remains important not only because of its beauty and history - not only because it speaks to us of the overwhelming grace of God - but because we know that *this* is a prayer that God accepts.⁴ This gives a roadmap for how we untangle ourselves from the ruin of sin and experience the tenderness, the washing, the strengthening of God's forgiveness.

We begin above verse 1 in what is called the superscript.

Psalm 51:Superscript - For the choir director. A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.

When David's men went to war, he stayed behind. One day he saw Bathsheba bathing, had her brought to the palace, and slept with her. Notice, our text says, "After *he* - David - has gone to her." It was *his* doing. He reached out to take what wasn't his and began this disastrous series of events. Bathsheba got pregnant and David's efforts to cover up what he did ultimately led him to have her husband Uriah (who was David's close friend by the way), killed.

¹ <https://www.thehivelaw.com/blog/how-many-murders-go-unsolved/>

² <https://www.koat.com/article/roswell-murder-confession-tony-peralta/44042492>

³ 2 Samuel 12:20

⁴ Bruce Waltke *Psalm 51*

David is guilty of not *one* but *two* capital offenses. There was no sacrifice that could cover him, no fine he could pay. There was no jail for him to do his time. Death was what he deserved. He had no hope other than God's grace, and *he knew it*.

In verse 1, he begins to sing and pray.

Psalm 51:1-2 - ¹Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion. ²Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin.

No bartering, no bravado. David throws himself on the mercy of the court of heaven and asks for the legal expunging of the record of what he had done.⁵ This is a big ask. But David he knew the character of God. He *believed* God was a God of grace, of compassion, of mercy, and forgiveness toward the guilty. He knew about God's unfailing love - that God *wants* to cleanse and forgive.

Psalm 51:3 - ³For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.

Even though for a year it seemed like David got away with his sin, internally he was crumbling. He kept thinking about what he did over and over again.⁶

What really woke him up, though, was when the prophet Nathan came - sent by God - to confront him. He told David directly, "You have sinned. You have treated the Lord with contempt." That scene, so harsh and so unpleasant in the moment, was the best thing that could've happened to David. He *needed* to be confronted with his sin.

If you're not a Christian here today or if you're a Christian who is living in sin, or hiding some wicked thing you've done, the Holy Spirit wants to expose it. That sin is going to ruin your life and you need to turn from it and be embraced by the grace of God. We need to see sin the way David did, as a terrible, defiling thing, because it is! And the more we ignore it, the more it will destroy.

Psalm 51:4 - ⁴Against 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.

This is a shocking thing to hear. "Against you alone?" How about Uriah and Bathsheba? How about their friends and extended family? How about the nation at large?

Now, this phrase can be translated "against you above all I have sinned" But remember: *a king could do what he wanted*. What did Nixon say? "*When the president does it, that means that it is not illegal.*"

⁵ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

⁶ Waltke

When Israel demanded a king so they could be like the rest of the nations, Samuel told them, "You don't want a king. He can take your sons and your daughters and your horses and your cattle. He can take your fields and vineyards, and your grain." Kings in this era ruled with absolute authority.

But even an atheist would look at what David had done - killing a man and taking his wife - and say, "That's not right." Why? Because God *does* exist and He has a standard of morality. If there is no God, then what David did is fine because it's exactly what all the other animals in nature do.

But there *is* a God and He has a standard for right and wrong. And it's His standard, not ours. Our standards of good and evil, right and wrong, seem to fluctuate over time. They change with culture. But God's standard does not. What is normal in the world's sight may be evil in God's sight.

Someone in Israel might hear about what David did and say, "Well, he *is* the king after all, and Uriah was just a Gentile." But David recognized that, despite what anyone else thought or said, he had violated God's morality. And he recognized that God the Judge was watching and evaluating.

So why then isn't the Judge judging? It's because while God is a Judge, He is also a Savior. He is full of mercy and His desire is that people be rescued from the penalty of their sin.

Psalm 51:5 - ⁵Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.

David's problem wasn't just that he had committed murder, the problem was that he was a *sinner* through and through. In his Psalms, David loves to look into the human heart and get down to the core issues. And, at our core, we have a sin problem.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "*A man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.*"⁷ David wants forgiveness not just for one mistake, but for everything. He knows that what he did with Bathsheba and Uriah was not some one-off, freak accident. It flowed from his nature. Now, not everyone will become a murderer, but all of us are killers at heart. Jesus explained that in Matthew 5.

From our human hearts flow evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander. David understood this and came to the conclusion that what he needed was a *new* heart, a *new* nature.

Psalm 51:6 - ⁶Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within.

We learn here that not only is God a Judge, not only is He a Savior, He is also a *Teacher*. He is chair of the Wisdom Department, where we are instructed in truth and Godliness and heaven's way so that we can know how to abandon sin and walk in fullness of life.

⁷ C.S. Lewis *The Problem Of Pain*

I appreciate the focus on depth in this verse. A lot of our time is spent on surface-level problems, but we have deeper things going on that need fixing but they are things only God can fix.

Recently our kitchen sink was draining really slow. We did all the things: Hot water, then Drano, then Liquid Plumber. The the auger came out. I got that thing going and you feel it going around the turns in your pipes. I didn't hit any big clogs, so I kept going deeper. Before I knew it, all 25 feet of the snake was in the pipe. I thought, "*How deep is this clog?*" I snaked a couple more times and did more Liquid Plumber and now I'm just waiting for that deep problem to present itself again.

God wants to solve the *deep* problems of our hearts and lives. His grace is enough for it. His wisdom is effective for it.

Psalm 51:7 - ⁷Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

David for legal cleansing *and* ceremonial cleansing. David wanted to be able to go into God's presence to worship. For that to happen, he would need the purification of hyssop.

Hyssop was used to paint the doorposts during the first Passover. It was also used for the cleansing of lepers and to bring God's people into covenant. David is saying, "*I'm a leper who has broken covenant, I need a new Passover.*"

While Jesus hung dying on the cross, some standing below dipped a branch of hyssop into sour wine and offered it to Him, mingling it with the blood pouring from His wounds.

We sinners need the cleansing supplied by the blood of an innocent substitute Who can wash us whiter than snow. *Is there anything whiter than snow?* There's one thing: a human heart washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. It is made perfectly pure, free from any tarnish or defilement.

Psalm 51:8 - ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

It had been 9 months or a year since David's scandalous behavior. He had involved multiple people bringing Bathsheba and in the plot to kill Uriah. Those palace walls were talking. Can you imagine the whispers in the corridors between the servants? No longer were the halls filled with praise and music - David wasn't writing any new songs. Instead, there was shame and rumors.

David himself was aching within. Many scholars believe Psalm 32 is a companion to this one. In it, David describes the pain he was in, the weakness he felt, and how he was groaning all day long.

It's interesting: David had "flexed" his kingly muscles - he saw a woman he wanted and took her. When his plan to cover up his adultery failed, he flexed again and had the husband killed. From the human perspective, it was a show of strength. "I can do whatever I want and no one can stop me."

In actuality, this was the weakest David had ever been. With his relationship with God blockaded by sin, all his vitality drained away. He was crushed by his guilt.

Psalm 51:9-10 - ⁹Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt. ¹⁰God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Not just a repair, not just a remodel. David wants a *new* heart. One crafted with heavenly materials. His prayer is that God would bring order into the chaos of David's heart, meaning his mind, his will, even his intellect.⁸

When God saves us He does not simply reroute us from hell to heaven. He begins a total transformation of who we are. His intention is to give us a new mind, a new heart, new desires, new perspectives, new attitudes, new words, new priorities, new reactions, all in line with *His* character.

Psalm 51:11 - ¹¹Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Christians feel weird about this verse. Is David suggesting that we can *lose* the Holy Spirit? The answer is no. Jesus was very clear on this point in John 6:37, where He said, "the one who comes to me I will never cast out." Remember, we are members of a *new* covenant with the Lord.

David lived in a time where the Spirit's anointing did seem to come and go, particularly when a believer fell into sin. David saw firsthand how this happened to King Saul before him.

While the Spirit will not be taken from Christians, we are told that we can grieve Him.⁹ We can stifle Him.¹⁰ And Paul indicated that we can become disqualified from God's service when we fail to walk in self-control.¹¹ So, like David, we should be concerned about our relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 51:12 - ¹²Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit.

The term "willing" can also mean a "free" spirit.¹² This is one of the great surprises of God's plan. His desire is to free you, to give you *total* liberty, ultimately bringing you to heaven with a perfectly freed will but one that has no desire to sin. A will like Jesus' own. So David is, in a sense, praying "on earth as it is in heaven. Make my heart now the way you want to make it in the end. Reprogram my desires to be totally in line with what You desire."

David also asks that the joy he once felt. Do we have joy? It doesn't mean our circumstances always make us happy. But *joy* is a supernatural power that can flow in any situation and it's exceedingly important. Nehemiah 8 says that the joy of the Lord is our strength. Psalm 16 says that in God's

⁸ *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic And Greek Dictionaries* | *A Concise Dictionary Of The Words In The Greek Testament And The Hebrew Bible*

⁹ Ephesians 4:30

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:19

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

¹² J.J. Stewart Perowne *Psalms*

presence is abundant joy. A lack of joy is an indication that something is laying siege to our relationship with the Lord.

Psalm 51:13 - ¹³Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you.

God's heart is always others oriented. So, if we have a heart that is after God's heart, like David did, we will also be others oriented. David's desire was to rescue *others* out of their guilt and shame.

Psalm 51:14 - ¹⁴Save me from the guilt of bloodshed, God—God of my salvation—and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

God is *righteous*. He would *never* do the kinds of things we do - stealing and lying and killing and cheating and all the rest. Meanwhile, we are totally unrighteous. But the Lord is willing to take away our guilt and wrap us up in His perfect righteousness no matter what we've done.

Psalm 51:15 - ¹⁵Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

There was a 36 year gap between William Shatner's debut album *The Transformed Man* and his follow up *Has Been*.¹³ I'm not sure anyone was too upset about having to wait. But, then again, Shatner is no one's favorite musical artist.

David, the sweet Psalmist of Israel, one of the most important songwriters of all time, wasn't writing songs. He didn't have writer's block, he had *sinner's* block. But now, as part of this saving work, the Lord would give him songs again. And we are all the richer for it.

Psalm 51:16 - ¹⁶You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering.

This is another eyebrow-raising verse. Isn't there like a bunch of books about the importance of animal sacrifice in the Old Testament? Yes, but remember, David is speaking on a deeper level. He has a wider view and he knows that God doesn't just want a religious transaction. This isn't just, "I broke a window, so here's some money and we'll call it good." There was no sacrifice for murder.

So what *did* God want?

Psalm 51:17 - ¹⁷The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.

God wants *you* on the altar. He's pleased when we surrender to Him in faith and obedience.

It's interesting - the words for broken and humbled speak of smashing and crushing. David mentioned crushing before, up in verse 8. It seems we get to choose between crushed hearts or

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shatner

crushed bones. One dictionary says this about the humbled heart: "to be in a crushed state, or possibly actively to press on someone, implying destruction."¹⁴ So we have the bones crushed under the destructive disease of sin or a heart pressed into the Lord, its stoniness destroyed and fused with the heart of God, in oneness with Him.

God will not despise a heart like that. To drive home that truth, you can read the incredible account of Ahab in 1 Kings 21. Ahab was the *worst* king of Israel. There was no one who devoted himself *more* to evil. But when the Lord brought a message of judgment, Ahab humbled himself. And the Lord said to Elijah: "*Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? I will not bring the disaster during his lifetime, because he has humbled himself before Me.*" That's how much God will not despise a humbled heart.

Psalm 51:18 - ¹⁸In your good pleasure, cause Zion to prosper; build the walls of Jerusalem.

When David was walking with God he always thought bigger than himself. He thought of the rest of God's people, the ongoing work of God, the coming generations.

When he was captive to sin, David didn't go out with his soldiers to fight. He didn't care about Uriah or anyone else, only his own impulses and pleasures. But now we see how the fruit of repentance makes a person more like God.

How would Zion prosper?

Psalm 51:19 - ¹⁹Then you will delight in righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

They would prosper in *worship*. David specifically highlights bulls, which draws our attention to the Feast Of Shelters, during which dozens of bulls were offered day-by-day. Shelters, which revealed how God's desire is to tabernacle, to dwell with His people and that our Messiah is coming to tabernacle with us in His forever Kingdom.

God's people prosper in His presence and with His presence in them, when they acknowledge their sin, turn from it, and allow the Lord tenderly transform them with His righteousness and grace. We are strongest when our hearts are crushed into His and our spirits made new, when we're washed by His Word and walking in the newness of that life headed toward our final glory, totally new, totally free, totally surrendered and in harmony with God our Savior.

¹⁴ *The Dictionary Of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*