

CITY LIFE CHURCH  
Psalm 51  
Peter Craig

## INTRODUCTION

A few months ago, our three daughters hosted a lemonade stand in our neighborhood and, because of that, one of our girls fell madly in love strawberry lemonade. For the next few days, it was all she wanted. Lemonade for lunch. Lemonade for dinner. Lemonade for snack. Finally, when we cut her off, she snuck into the pantry when nobody was looking and took matters into her own hands. Later, after she had her fill, she was caught red-handed...or in her case, pink. Strawberry lemonade powder covered her shirt, her hands, and her face. What she did in secret and had now come into the light and she was literally stained in her disobedience.

Similarly, but much more seriously, this is where we find ourselves in Psalm 51, which was written by King David right off the heels of being caught in his own sinful disobedience. After years of battle and success at the hand of God, King David chose not to lead his people on the battlefield in order to enjoy the comforts of Jerusalem. This led him to committing adultery with a married woman named Bathsheba and having her husband, Uriah, murdered to hide her pregnancy. Talk about a tragic fall. Up to this moment, David is like a Biblical rock star. He was a songwriter, a poet, a warrior, a noble and valiant king, and, most stunning of all, a person who God Himself described as “a man after His own heart”. How could this happen and what could be done to save him now?

Like my daughter and King David, what do we do when we are stained in sin before a holy and just God? Sure, we toss around the word “repentance” (the act of turning from our sin back to God), but what does it really look like? My hope and prayer is that the Holy Spirit will show us as we walk through Psalm 51 together. You see, David’s God is our God, and this psalm, like all the psalms, is meant for us. So let’s ask God to bend our ears and open our hearts to hear what He wants to say as we examine three things: Our Guilt, God’s Power, and God’s Delight.

## INTRO PRAYER

### OUR GUILT

#### Confess Your Guilt

Lately my wife and I have enjoyed watching crime documentaries on Netflix. The producers of these stories often draw out every minute detail of a case in order to sift through the facts to determine the guilt or innocence of a suspect.

As we watch these documentaries, it’s easy to become absorbed by the details, debate motives, and theorize over the evidence. But when it comes to our own lives and the motivations behind our own actions, we can often be quite lax, can’t we? We spend great effort on analyzing the hearts and motives of people in documentaries, yet disregard the reality of our own souls.

This isn’t so in David’s case. In 2 Samuel, we see what David did displeased the Lord and God sent the prophet Nathan to confront him in his sin. In response, David rushes to God in prayer with full knowledge of his heart’s motivation and, in turn, his guilt...

Verse 1: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

David, the beloved and mighty king of Israel, is humbled before the Lord. There is no hint of pride or self-justification. There is only complete desperation like a man rushing to the feet of a judge to beg for mercy during his sentencing. “Have mercy on me, O God.”

What a deeply personal moment between a humbled man and his Heavenly Father. You can almost feel the weight of David’s guilt and shame in these first few words.

Now, many of us naturally reject feelings of guilt and shame because of their negative connotations. But, truthfully, we all do shameful things by not loving God and others the way we should. So is feeling shame always bad? It depends where it leads you...away from God or to Him.

David's shame doesn't distance him from God. It brings him to His Father's feet. He owns his sin yet enters God's presence with great boldness and this opening verse is compelling us to do the same.

You see, David knows his guilt, but he also knows the character of His Heavenly Father. He doesn't have a leg to stand on to plead for mercy, so he bases his requests on God and His character alone. He pleads...

"...according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."

David's only hope for his record of sin to be wiped clean lies, not in his past accomplishments or a promise of a more faithful future. David's hope for mercy relies on God Himself...His steadfast love and abundant mercy.

What David is doing in these words teaches us something. He is recalling what he knows to be true about God from His Word. God's "Steadfast love" and "Mercy" is covenantal language given to the people of Israel by God Himself. We see this in Exodus 34, when Moses receives the Ten Commandments.

Exodus 34:6-7: "The Lord passed before (Moses) and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...."

These are the promises David is standing on. So let me ask...what do you stand on when you turn to God in response to your sin? Is it your past accomplishments or moral track record? Is it a promise of a more faithful future? Or do you find yourself indifferent, occasionally asking for forgiveness transactionally rather than seeking a genuine, face-to-face encounter with your loving Heavenly Father?

ILLUSTRATION: Stuningly, in my daughter's case, in her fear of discipline, she didn't ask for mercy at all. She defiantly pled her innocence for hours even though she was covered in the evidence of her sin. She dug in her heels!

But she's not the only one who goes into defense mode. Often, when we are covered in our sin, our first instinct is to make excuses or point fingers in order to escape judgment.

Consider when you lose your temper with your kids. Or when you judge a friend or a spouse. It's easy to think...well if they would just...fill in the reason...I wouldn't have to...fill in the sin.

Has the defense of, "I'm just tired," ever escaped your lips to justify your impatience, anger, or judgement of others?

Or again, maybe you don't really even think of your sin much at all. You may throw up an "I'm sorry" to God once in a while and move on. You get much more personal and detailed in resolving conflict with a friend or spouse, but with God, it's not that big of deal. I mean, you didn't really hurt anyone for real, right?

Both of these responses make little of your sin while making little of God. "Small Sin. Small God."

Or maybe you tend to go the other direction. You know you're guilty and it undoes you. You can't begin to put together the words to build a defense at all, so you simply run and hide.

Your shame leads to condemnation. You distance yourself from your church family, from God's Word, and even from God Himself. You don't want to rush to God in prayer, because you've forgotten who He is...steadfast in love and abundant in mercy. A loving God with a loving, kind gaze.

You make much of your sin while making little of God. "Big Sin. Small God."

David, in contrast, knows his sin has weight, but holds it in right proportion to the power and love of his Heavenly Father. "Big Sin. Infinitely Bigger God." And, in this moment, He puts all his chips on the table believing that God is who He says He is and that, as a merciful and loving God, He would not only blot out his transgressions, but would "Wash him thoroughly from his iniquity, and cleanse him from his sin!"

This intimate plea for cleansing is at the heart of David's prayer and would have especially resonated with the people of Israel, because it relates to the Law and the ceremonial rites of purifying an unclean person so they can safely enter back into God's presence and the assembly of Israel.

This request for cleansing gives us a glimpse of David's greatest motivation in this prayer. But before we go into that, David doesn't let himself off the hook and takes the next 4 verses to humbly dive deeper into his own guilt...

Know Your Sin

Verse 3: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me."

We can see here that David is familiar with his sins as if he has processed them and knows them intimately. However, he isn't just speaking about adultery and murder. No. It's much bigger...

Verse 5: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."

David isn't just taking responsibility for adultery and murder, he is confessing a lifelong track record of offenses against God that are an ever-present and accusing reality in life.

This isn't an indictment of the act of conception. It's a poetic and quite profound acknowledgment of the reality that we have never been without sin. It's in our very nature! To some of you, this might seem hard to believe. But consider, who taught you impatience, jealousy, anger, unforgiveness? If you're honest, you might find that it's always been there.

As one author puts it, "We aren't sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners."

In these verses, the King of Israel is laying himself bare like a child before his Heavenly Father. He knows his sin both intimately and expansively.

Which raises the question. Like David, do you know your sins? It's easy to admit to being guilty to the general idea of sin, but it's something quite different to slow down, know your sins personally, name them, understand their weight, and to confess them intimately with God and others.

You might even ask, "How can we even begin to turn to God in repentance without taking the time to intimately know how we have failed to love God and others as we should?"

One response might be, "Well, I'm not like David. I've never committed adultery or murder." To that I would say, "That's fantastic!" But what does Scripture have to say about it?

In Matthew 5, Jesus raises the bar in the Sermon of the Mount by teaching that anger against a brother is tantamount to murder and that a person who lusts commits adultery. He goes on to teach against judging others, not loving your enemies, and seeking retaliation against people who've wronged you...

You think you're not like David? If you prayerfully take the time slow down, know your sins and, consider your long standing record of guilt, you might be surprised.

Besides, it's not our standard of sin that matters. It's God's. This is why David desperately cries out to his Heavenly Father...

Verse 4: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."

This declaration of sinning against God alone is David's impassioned way of getting to the heart of his greatest problem. Not just David's, but our greatest problem.

Yes, he's sinned against Bathsheba (in his adultery), Uriah (in his murder), and the people of Israel (in his abuse of his power and authority) and Scripture speaks plainly against these types of sins against others.

However, David's greatest sin is that he has committed treason against God Himself by breaking his covenant relationship with Him in his disobedience of His loving commands.

When we sin against others, we ultimately sin against the One who, with great love, created them in His own image and has shown us those actions are wrong in His Word.

David is aware of this and, in turn, honestly confesses his guilt while upholding the Lord's reputation as a God who is "justified in His words and blameless in His judgment."

The reality is, there is no such thing as a victimless sin. When David sinned, God's loving and kind gaze saw it and He was displeased and dishonored. Ultimately, God has set the standard and when we sin, we sin against Him by breaking His Law designed for our good.

Only God is justified in His words and blameless in His judgement. And in His sight, sin is destructive, harmful, and therefore evil.

Now, evil isn't a term we like to throw around these days. I mean, when is the last time you admitted that you did what is evil in God's sight when you got angry in traffic, impatient with your kids, gossiped about a coworker, watched something you shouldn't have, or judged someone in your church family for not meeting your expectations?

We might gently repackage it and even generalize it, but the truth is, church family, sin is destructive, harmful, and ultimately evil. And, whether we want to admit it or not, we all stand guilty.

Right about now, a collective "cartoon gulp" would be appropriate...

Because David's story is our story. Just like my daughter, we are all stained by sin. It stands before us, plaguing our insides and out. But this isn't strawberry lemonade. We can't oxyclean it out. So what can be done to save us?

As much as David knows the character of God as a righteous and holy judge, He knows the power of God for salvation as well. Remember... "Big sin. Infinitely Bigger God."

## GOD'S POWER

### God's Power to Cleanse our Sin

Verse 7: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."

Instead of continuing to languish in his confessional state, in the next 6 verses, David lifts his eyes to his loving Heavenly Father and, with great boldness asks God to do what only He can do... "uphold me, renew my spirit, restore my joy, blot out my iniquities...", and he begins it all by lifting up another plea to be washed clean.

This request, once again, is a direct reference to ceremonial cleansing in the Jewish law. In this case, it's done by using a hyssop branch dipped in water and often the blood of an animal, and sprinkled on a person to purify them so they can enter safely into God's presence and the assembly of Israel.

But, David is thinking much bigger than ceremonial cleansing. Look at his language, "wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." What does this mean? Thoroughly clean. Pure and without fault. What an ask!

Maybe there some sins in your life that you don't think God can wash away. Maybe you feel distant from him, unworthy, and unable to come into his presence to even to ask for forgiveness.

You need to hear that there are no half-measures with God. He loves you with an unimaginable love. And He, and He alone can completely wipe out your record of wrong, cleanse you thoroughly of your sin, and, even more profoundly, make you brand new inside and out! And this is what David boldly asks in verse 10...

### God's Power to Change Our Hearts

Verse 10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

In all these requests, David is asking for nothing less than a miracle for himself and for us! A miracle that answers our greatest problem: Our sinful treason against a Holy and Loving God. The reality is, we all stand guilty just like David. Our long track record of sin stains us thoroughly. We need to be cleansed, yes, but how can remain clean when we are so prone to fall back into sin in our old nature? We need a new nature...a clean heart and right spirit...And God's answer to this request is "Yes" in Christ!

When speaking about His plan for salvation through Jesus, God declares in Ezekiel 36: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

Listen to that love, that tenderness, that kindness. Again, David's God is our God. And His prayer of repentance is meant to be our prayer of repentance. And it all finds its answer in God

Himself...His steadfast love and abundant mercy revealed in His unblemished Son, a man without sin, Jesus Christ!

Scripture says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ..."

Only through faith in Jesus will we be washed clean from our sin once and for all, not by the blood of animals, but by the precious blood of Christ.

Hebrews 9:13-14: "For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

And what does this cleansing and purification offer us? It's what Israel's ceremonial rites pointed forward to...full access to God's Holy presence. In other words, a restored relationship with our loving Heavenly Father!

And this is David's greatest motivation: God Himself!

Verse 11: "Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me."

You see, God's presence is David's treasure! This is why he has stormed into His courts in the first place. His pleas for mercy aren't centered on relief from pain or the physical consequences of his adultery and murder. And they were quite grave...

In his rebuke of David, the prophet Nathan revealed that David would never see the end of war, his own son would attempt to dethrone him, and the son that was conceived with Bathsheba would die.

David understands the weight of these dreadful consequences. We see this in verse 8 when he cries out, "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice."

When we sin, there are consequences to our actions and there is also discipline. And God's loving discipline can be overwhelming, like the breaking of our bones. But there is hope. We can cry out alongside David to God, "Bring me joy in my pain" and "Cast me not away from your presence..."

The good news is if we confess our sins and place our faith in God's steadfast love and abundant mercy revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have full assurance that our plea will be answered with Holy Spirit Himself placed securely in our hearts as the guarantee.

He will never leave you. He will never forsake you.

God's Power to Restore Joy

Now, if you are a follower of Jesus, you've probably heard these truths before and, at times, I'm sure they have brought you great joy. However, when troubles and temptations come, they can easily lose their grip on your hearts, can't they?

So what happens when we lose our joy of the Lord? We go looking for it in other places. This is what happened to David, which led him into sin in the first place, and this is why he now pleads...

Verse 12: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."

This is a prayer that a follower of Christ should never cease to lift up.

This isn't a request for a fleeting emotional response to God's grace. It's a plea for a deep-rooted, Spirit-filled understanding of how little we deserve, yet how much we have been given in Christ.

Without the joy of the Lord and His salvation offered in Christ, like David, we will seek it in other places...work, social media likes, entertainment, and, if kept unchecked, untamed and destructive desires.

But with a restored joy of the Lord and an eager and enthusiastic spirit, David, in the next 5 verses, declares what will happen...all to God's delight!

## GOD'S DELIGHT

Restored Mission

Verse 13: "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you."

True repentance doesn't leave you in your guilt and shame, it leads you back to the cross to receive forgiveness and joy, then sends you into the world to share it with others!

In many ways, we're all evangelists! We naturally share what brings us joy.

ILLUSTRATION: Last year, I was given a one-year subscription to MoviePass for my birthday, which allows me to see 1 movie a day for an entire year. I found myself sharing it with everyone. "You have to get moviepass. You have to get moviepass." Yeah, it's okay, but let me tell you about the best gift I have ever received...

I was once a self-centered man who was obsessed with my work as a screenwriter and the affirmation it provided me from others. It, in many ways, consumed my life at the expense of my wife, family, and friends. My world revolved around my ideas, my needs, and my success. I was impatient, judgmental, and generally pretty prideful. Sounds like a fun guy, right? But God sent His Son to take the punishment I deserved for my self-obsession and lack of love for others. He cleansed me of my sin and gave me a new heart, a new spirit, and a new life rooted in the eternal affirmation He provided me as His adopted Son! Now that's a gift worth sharing with others!

If you are follower of Christ, your story might have different details, but it has the same narrative arc. You were once dead in your sins, but you were made alive in Christ! You need to know your story in order to share it with others.

What has Christ done in your life that you can teach transgressors His ways? Narrow it down to a word or a theme. For me, it was God delivering me from the love of affirmation. But when I turned to Christ, I experienced not just forgiveness, but a source of affirmation that frees me from making work my ultimate source of meaning. Take a minute to think about that. What has Christ delivered you from? Thank Him, and tell fellow sinners about it.

The truth is, if you are in Christ, you have been given the greatest gift that can ever be given...salvation by the precious, cleansing blood of Jesus! Rejoice in the Lord and let that joy burst forth, like David vividly describes...

Verses 14-15: "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise."

Knowing and mourning sin leads to true repentance, true repentance leads to Christ, and in Christ there is true joy! Joy for you and joy for others...so they can learn of God's ways and return to Him.

How else can we even begin to minister to others except out of our joy of the Lord's salvation?  
Restored Humility

So where does this all lead us as a church? One could say, "It should send us to our feet in praise!" (a sacrifice of worship) Another could argue, "It should send us into the streets to share." (a sacrifice of mission) But what does the Holy Spirit, working through David, say?

Verses 16-17: "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

In David's time, animal sacrifices and burnt offerings were an external act to temporarily appease God's judgement of their sin and restore their relationship with Him.

But in these words, God isn't looking for an external act. He's looking at the internal...He's looking for a humbled heart.

For us today, Psalm 51 isn't first commanding us to our feet to worship, nor is it immediately sending us to the streets to share. Those are good and appropriate, but this prayer is calling us first to our knees before a God who "delights in truth in the inward being." ...this is a person who is open and honest before the Lord, both inside and out. A humble person who knows his sin and his desperate need for a Savior.

ILLUSTRATION: After hours of pleading with our daughter to tell the truth, she finally confessed in tears that she had disobeyed. There were some painful things to walk through, including discipline, but the truth came out and it was reflected in my daughter both inside and out. She was a broken little girl before her parents and her God. There were hugs, prayers, grace, and

more tears. But in the end, my wife and I were delighted and, even more importantly, I believe in faith, the Lord was delighted even more.

If we are honest, we're no different from my daughter. We've all fallen short of God's standard. We've turned from his loving gaze. We've run from Him, justified ourselves, or even shrugged off our treason all together.

King David knew this about himself and it broke his heart. Maybe this is what God saw in him and why He described him as "a man after his own heart."

The reality is, we are guilty, but God is loving, merciful, and able to save us through Christ. What else can we do, but follow David's example and, with humble hearts, throw ourselves at the feet of our unblemished Savior who takes our guilt upon Himself, blots out our record of wrong, and invites us into His loving presence for eternity.

For some of you, it might begin by taking some time to slow down...seriously slow down. Sit with the Lord, be honest, and prayerfully get to know your sins. Look the Father in the face, and learn how to say "against you and you only have I sinned." It's in that place that we rediscover the joy of our salvation, lingering in his holy presence.

For others, you may know your sins all too well, but your shame is has distanced you from God instead of drawing you nearer. You need to be reminded that God is loving and merciful. And with that in heart, you should reach out to someone in your community and begin the journey of surrendering your guilt and shame at the feet of Jesus to enjoy His loving presence.

Finally, there are some who may have lost the joy of the Lord's salvation all together. Let me encourage you to turn back to your Heavenly Father and ask Him, who knows no half-measures, to restore your joy of the costly gift given to you in Christ, so you can go and share it with the world.

In response to God's Word, we are now going to take some time to silently pray to the Lord. In this time, ask yourself what sins you need to surrender to Christ and begin that journey. Maybe you are struggling with jealousy, impatience, gossip, lust, judging others, unforgiveness, or anger. Or maybe it's not what you've done, but what you've neglected to do...give to those in need, share the Gospel with others, love your neighbor, your spouse, your children...

However the Spirit is moving in your hearts, City Life, God has given us words to cry out to Him. So let's humble ourselves together right now with broken and contrite hearts and respond.

END PRAYER

"Have mercy on us, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out our transgressions..."

SILENCE