

PSALM 51:1

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. This is now our third week studying this psalm, and we still haven't started verse 1 yet! Two weeks ago we looked at the background of the entire Book of Psalms, and last week we looked at the inspired title for Psalm 51. We saw that this psalm was written by David "when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba." This statement is a bit vague, but we know the details from 2 Samuel 11–12. David went on the roof of his palace one night and saw a beautiful woman bathing. He found out that she was Bathsheba and that she was married to Uriah. But that didn't stop him from summoning her and committing adultery with her. And when she became pregnant, he recalled her husband from battle and tried to get him to sleep with his wife. But that didn't work, and so David arranged for him to be killed in battle. Then David took Bathsheba to be his wife.

So at first it seems like David got away with adultery and murder, but God saw what David did, and he sent the prophet Nathan to confront David. Nathan told a story about a rich man who took a poor man's lamb away from him. And this story stirred up some good old-fashioned righteous anger in David. He knew that what the rich man had done was wrong. But David was completely blind to his own hypocrisy! So Nathan had to tell him directly that he was the rich man. And thankfully David responded by acknowledging that he had sinned against God. He confessed his wrongdoing and didn't try to hide it any longer.

So David had the right response when he disobeyed God, and Nathan provided immediate comfort for him. Nathan told him that God had taken away his sin and that he would not die. God could have killed David on the spot for his sin, but instead he showed patience. He gave David a chance to repent and then forgave him. So this is the incident that led David to write Psalm 51 a short time later. In 2 Samuel 12 we have only a brief confession from David. But in Psalm 51 he expanded on that short statement and poured out his heart to God. He showed us by example how to deal with sin in our lives.

And as a result Psalm 51 has become one of the most memorable psalms in the book. The people who put this book together certainly thought that it was an important psalm, because they chose a key spot for its location. The Book of Psalms is made up of five smaller books, and our psalm is in book two, which includes Psalms 42–72. Now some people might wonder why this psalm is in book two instead of book one if it's so important. And the answer is actually quite simple, as we discussed two weeks ago. In book one every psalm has more occurrences of the word "LORD" than the word "God." But in book two the situation is reversed. Every psalm has more occurrences of the word "God" than the word "LORD." In Psalm 51 the word "God" is used six times, and the word "LORD" doesn't appear at all.

So that explains why this psalm is in book two instead of book one. But why wasn't it put at the very beginning of book two if it's so important? That's a harder question to answer, but I think there's some logic to the arrangement in book two. We can start by observing that almost all the psalms in book one were written by David according to the titles. The remaining psalms are simply anonymous. So it makes sense that book two would begin with some psalms that were written by other people. Psalms 42–49 were written by the sons of Korah, though Psalms 43 and 46 are anonymous. However, most likely Psalm 43 was originally part of Psalm 42, and so it was also written by the sons of Korah. Together Psalms 42–43 form a very intense psalm in which the writer longed for God and trusted in him even though he was depressed. This is a great theme to stress at the beginning of book two.

Then in Psalm 44 the theme of depression continues. The writer observed that God had rejected his people for a time. They were an object of reproach and were covered with shame. But the psalmist proclaimed the people's faithfulness, and he asked God to protect them and rescue them from their enemies. Then Psalm 45 provides a confident response to the uncertainty in Psalm 44. Here the writer presented a royal psalm that describes a glorious wedding for the king. In other words, God would preserve the nation of Israel and bless the king. This psalm is quoted in Hebrews 1 and is applied to Jesus. And so it points forward to his future reign on the earth and his marriage to the church.

Then Psalm 46 continues the positive tone of the previous psalm and conveys an attitude of unwavering trust in God. It depicts God as sovereign over the whole earth; no one can stand against him. And so the psalmist told the readers to stop their fighting and recognize God's greatness. This majestic psalm stands in the center of Psalms 42–49. Psalms 42–45 are called "Maskils," and Psalms 47–49 are simply called "psalms." Psalm 47 is a royal psalm, just like Psalm 45. The focus is on the universal nature of God's rule. He is the king and reigns over the whole earth. That theme links Psalms 46–47 together. Then Psalm 48 is focused on the city of the king, which is Zion or Jerusalem. And Psalm 49 ends this group with a wisdom psalm. The point here is that people should trust in God and not their wealth.

Then in Psalm 50 we have the only psalm in book two that was written by Asaph. We have 11 of his psalms in book three, but this is the only one that's not in book three. And it's followed by 15 consecutive psalms that were written by David. So what's it doing here in book two? The answer is that it's the perfect introduction for Psalm 51. The main focus in Psalm 50 is on the importance of sacrifices and especially the thank offering. And Psalm 51 mentions sacrifices as well, but here David stressed that they must be accompanied by confession. A broken and humbled heart is what ultimately pleases God, as we're going to see in verse 17.

So Psalm 51 has a prominent place as David's first psalm in book two. It sets the tone for the rest of David's psalms in this section. But before we start looking at the text of this psalm, I want to comment briefly on its structure. There's a lot of disagreement among Bible scholars here, but I think the best way to outline this psalm is with three main sections. The first section covers verses 1–9, and it we can summarize it with the word "confession." The second section covers verses 10–17, and it can be summarized with the word "restoration." Finally we have a third and final section in verses 18–19, which we can call "intercession." This last section is very brief and brings the psalm to a swift conclusion.

Now the most common way to outline this psalm is actually with six sections. That's the approach taken by most commentators. But I think there's some very good reasoning to support the three-point outline. And it's centered on the fact that there are two major chiasms in this psalm. A chiasm is a literary device that is used regularly in Scripture, especially in Old Testament poetry. With a chiasm an author's material is repeated in reverse order. The word "chiasm" is based on the Greek letter chi, which is shaped just like the English letter X. This letter provides a visual illustration of what happens with a chiasm. Imagine that you have two lines of poetry, and you have a word at the beginning of the first line that's repeated at the end of the second line. And you also have a word at the end of the first line that's repeated at the beginning of the second line. When that happens, you can draw an X to link those repeated terms. The two lines in the X connect the matching words together.

So let me give you a handout that presents my outline of Psalm 51 along with the two major chiasms in this psalm. The first chiasm is found in the first section. You can see that the word "blot" in verse 1 is repeated in verse 9. Then the word "wash" in the first half of verse 2 is repeated in the second half of verse 7. And the word "cleanse" in the second half of verse 2 matches the word "clean" in the first half of verse 7. These two words aren't exactly the same in English, but they come from the same Hebrew word. And that's also true with the other two sets of matching words. Now notice the labels that I used for the chiasm here. I used the letters A, B, and C to indicate the repetition, and I also lined up each one with its counterpart. The apostrophe with the second occurrence of each letter is called "prime." So A goes with A prime, B goes with B prime, and C goes with C prime. This is the standard method that scholars use to present chiasms.

Then there's another chiasm in the second section of this psalm. We have the words "heart" and "spirit" in verse 10, and then they're repeated in reverse order in verse 17. So this chiasm is a bit simpler than the first one because it has only two layers. But in each case we have a chiasm, and I believe they indicate the outline for this psalm. The first chiasm shows us where the first section begins and ends, and the second chiasm shows us where the second section begins and ends. They essentially function as bookends for these sections. There's no chiasm for the third section, but we don't need one there because we already know where the second section ends.

So I believe these two chiasms were David's way of revealing his outline of the psalm to us. And now we're finally ready to start looking at the text of this psalm. Let's see how David began his confession in verse 1: "Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion." We can see right away that David addressed these words to God. As I already mentioned, this word appears six times in this psalm. In each case it comes from the Hebrew word *elohim*, which is used over two thousand times in the Old Testament. You may have heard about this word before, because it's often found in Christian books that list various names of God.

But this word is not a proper noun; instead it's simply a common noun that indicates deity. It usually refers to the true God in the Old Testament, but sometimes it's used to describe false gods. There are even verses that have both nuances side by side. Leviticus 19:4 is a good example: "Do not turn to idols or make cast images of gods for yourselves; I am the LORD your God." So first we have the word "gods" in

the plural with a lowercase G. Then we have the word “God” in the singular with a capital G. In each case the Hebrew word is *elohim*, but only the second one refers to the true God. He was basically commanding the Israelites not to worship false gods here, because they already worshiped the true God. He called himself “the LORD,” and that phrase actually represents his name.

But unfortunately the vast majority of Bible translations don’t give us a transliteration or letter-for-letter equivalent of God’s name. That’s the opposite of how names in the Bible are usually handled. But it follows a Jewish practice that began sometime after the Old Testament was completed. At some point the Israelites apparently began to believe that God’s name was too sacred to be spoken. So they started saying the Hebrew word for Lord in its place when they read Scripture. And this practice continues today in other languages like English. But there’s no indication in Scripture that we shouldn’t use God’s name. And so whenever I see the word “LORD” in all caps, I like to replace it with God’s name, which is pronounced “Yahweh.” Some people have thought that it’s pronounced “Jehovah,” but there’s no J sound in Hebrew. Most Bible scholars now agree that “Yahweh” is the best pronunciation.

So in Leviticus 19:4 we see the Hebrew word *elohim* used twice: once to refer to false gods and once to refer to Yahweh, the true God. We have another example of these two nuances in 1 Kings 11:4. This verse says, “When Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away to follow other gods. He was not wholeheartedly devoted to the LORD his God, as his father David had been.” So once again we have the word “gods” in the plural with a lowercase G, and then we have the word “God” in the singular with a capital G. And what we see here is that Solomon disobeyed Leviticus 19:4. God had told the Israelites not to turn to false gods, and that’s exactly what Solomon did.

But in Psalm 51 David was obviously not referring to false gods. He was addressing his words to the true God. But we only know this from the general context of Scripture and not the Hebrew grammar. We might think that the Hebrew term for God is singular here, but it’s not. The word *elohim* is actually plural, and it’s used only rarely in the singular. When it is plural and refers to the true God, which is quite normal, it adds intensity and stresses his majesty. Now certainly David could have used God’s name here, like he did in many other psalms. But he probably decided not to because of his sin. He knew that his relationship with God had been affected negatively. So he just used a general word for deity, and it conveys the idea of supremacy. He was emphasizing that God is superior to every other being in the universe. He’s the sovereign ruler over everything.

But in verse 1 it almost sounds like David thought he was sovereign, because apparently he was making demands from God. After all, he started with a Hebrew imperative verb, which is translated with the phrase “be gracious.” But Hebrew imperatives could be used for making a request, and that’s clearly what David was doing here. He asked God to be gracious to him. The Hebrew verb here has the idea of favorable treatment that’s undeserved. David understood that because of his sin with Bathsheba, he didn’t deserve to be treated favorably. But he knew that Yahweh was a gracious God. After all, that’s what he proclaimed to Moses in Exodus 34:6. He said, “The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth.” So David could ask God with confidence to be gracious to him. He knew that God loved to show grace to sinners.

And the same thing is still true today, because God never changes. He's always been gracious, and he always will be. So we shouldn't be surprised that the theme of God's grace is all over the New Testament. I love Ephesians 2:8–9, where Paul said, "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves—it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast." So God saved us from our sins by his grace, but he also sustains us in the Christian life by his grace. In 2 Corinthians 12:9 when Paul was going through a very difficult time, God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness." God will graciously help us to get through any hardship that we face as long as we're depending on him. All we need to do is ask, just like David did!

So in Psalm 51:1 David asked God to be gracious to him, and then he added the phrase "according to your faithful love." The Hebrew preposition translated with the phrase "according to" indicates conformity to a standard. David wanted God's grace to be in conformity to the standard of his faithful love. The phrase "faithful love" comes from the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is one of the most profound words in the Hebrew language. It's such a full and rich word that it's hard to do it justice. It includes the concepts of love, kindness, loyalty, and faithfulness. Many Bible translations try to combine some of these nuances. The New American Standard Bible and several others have the word "lovingkindness," but I like the Christian Standard Bible here the best. It stresses that God's love is marked by faithfulness.

And I think once again David was drawing on God's statement to Moses in Exodus 34:6. Here it is again: "The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth." So David knew from Scripture that God was marked by showing faithful love. And the highest expression of God's love was through the cross. In Romans 5:8 Paul said that "God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Then in Romans 8:39 Paul said that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." If we've put our faith in Jesus to save us, then God will never stop loving us. He will love us faithfully for all eternity.

So in Psalm 51:1 David asked God to be gracious to him according to his faithful love. And then he made a similar statement: "According to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion." Here David used another imperative verb in the original Hebrew to make a request. He asked God to blot out his rebellion. The Hebrew verb translated with the phrase "blot out" just means to wipe something clean. We also see this verb used in Isaiah 25:8, which says that "the LORD God will wipe away the tears from every face and remove his people's disgrace from the whole earth." This passage is referenced in Revelation 21:4. It will be fulfilled after Satan and his followers are thrown into the lake of fire.

And so when David used this Hebrew verb in Psalm 51:1, he was using a figure of speech. He was talking about his sins as though they were tears to be wiped off his face. He was asking God to remove them from his sight. We see the same Hebrew word in Isaiah 43:25, where God said, "I sweep away your transgressions for my own sake and remember your sins no more." The New American Standard is more literal here; it has the phrase "wipes out" instead of "sweep away." But what God was saying here was that when he wipes out our sins, he doesn't remember them anymore. This doesn't mean that God suffers from amnesia. God knows everything and never forgets anything. But he chooses not to think about our sins or hold them against us. That's how wonderful God's forgiveness is! And it's available to us today if

we repent and turn away from our sins. In Acts 3:19 Peter said, “Repent and turn back, so that your sins may be wiped out.”

But in Psalm 51:1 David didn’t use the word “sin.” Instead he used the word “rebellion.” The Hebrew word here is very strong; it refers to willful defiance. David wasn’t talking about something he did by accident. He purposely revolted against God and defied his will. He knew that it was wrong to commit adultery and murder someone. And yet he did those things anyway. But thankfully God is willing to forgive rebellion. Listen to Exodus 34:6 once again, and this time I’ll add the beginning of verse 7. God said to Moses, “The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin.” It doesn’t matter how bad our sins are. God will forgive us if we confess those sins to him and ask him to wipe them away.

David knew that God was willing to forgive his willful defiance, and that’s why he asked God to blot out his rebellion. And he asked God to do that “according to” his “abundant compassion.” The phrase “according to” comes from the same Hebrew preposition that we saw earlier in the verse. Once again it indicates conformity to a standard. David wanted God’s forgiveness to be in conformity to the standard of his abundant compassion. The Hebrew word for compassion comes from a root that literally refers to a mother’s womb. We see this connection in 1 Kings 3:26. In this passage Solomon was dealing with a tricky situation. There were two moms who each had a baby, but one of the babies died. And the mom whose baby died was trying to steal the other mom’s baby. So Solomon had to figure out which woman was the mom of the living baby. And what he did was threaten to cut the baby in two and give half to each mom.

But look at how the true mother responded: “The women whose son was alive spoke to the king because she felt great compassion for her son. ‘My lord, give her the living baby,’ she said, ‘but please don’t have him killed!’” At this point Solomon knew immediately that this woman was the true mom. He could see that she felt great compassion for the baby. The Hebrew word for compassion there is the same one that David used in Psalm 51:1. And so we can see that there’s a connection between compassion and the womb. This Hebrew word stresses the compassion that we feel for someone who is helpless, just like a pregnant mother normally has compassion on her unborn baby. And David knew that God has this kind of compassion. I’ll read Exodus 34:6 one more time: The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth.” The Hebrew word for compassionate there comes from the same root as the word that David used.

And we see confirmation of God’s compassion in the New Testament as well. James 5:11 says, “See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job’s endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about—the Lord is compassionate and merciful.” And since Jesus is God, we shouldn’t be surprised to see him showing compassion. Mark 6:34 says that “when he went ashore, he saw a large crowd and had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then he began to teach them many things.” Jesus showed compassion by shepherding and teaching people who were spiritually needy.

But in Psalm 51:1 David didn't just say that God has "compassion." He said that God has "abundant compassion." The Hebrew word for abundant just indicates a large quantity. It's used in Psalm 49:6, which talks about people who "trust in their wealth and boast of their abundant riches." Then it appears again in Psalm 52:7, which refers to a "man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches." So on either side of Psalm 51, the Hebrew word for abundant points to a large quantity of wealth. These references invite us to imagine trying to measure God's compassion in terms of money. If God had a bank account for his compassion, we would say that he doesn't just have a few hundred dollars. He has trillions and trillions of dollars! David was emphasizing the great quantity of compassion that God has.

And this emphasis is strengthened by a chiasm in verse 1. This verse has two parallel statements, and each one has two parts: a request made to God and a reference to one of his attributes. In the first statement the request comes at the beginning, but in the second statement it comes at the end. The Christian Standard Bible preserves the literal word order in the original Hebrew, and so do most other translations. But in a chiasm the emphasis isn't usually on the beginning and the end. Instead it's normally found in the very center. For example, we could think about a sandwich, which is sort of like a chiasm. We have two slices of bread: one on the top and one on the bottom. But the best part of a sandwich is not the bread on the outside but the meat on the inside. The bread's there mainly to hold everything together.

A chiasm is also similar to climbing a mountain. You start your climb by ascending and end it by descending. But the point is to reach the top of the mountain. Climbing purists certainly relish the journey, but if they were trying to climb Mount Everest, they would view the trip as a failure unless they reached the very top. So the chiasm in verse 1 stresses the parallel phrases in the middle, which are focused on God's faithful love and abundant compassion. When we sin against God, we can take comfort in the fact that he is characterized by a love that endures and a compassion for the needy. No matter how much we sin or how badly we sin, God will never run out of love and compassion for us. Let's close in prayer and thank God for his faithful love and abundant compassion.