

# PSALM 51:2–3

October 3, 2021

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We're now in our fourth week of studying this psalm, but so far we've been focused mostly on background details. We've seen from the inspired title of this psalm that it was written by David around the time when he committed adultery with Bathsheba. We've also looked at the structure of this psalm, which I believe is best viewed as a three-point outline. 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.

Then last week we finally got this plane in the air and looked at verse 1. Here David wrote, “Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion.” We have two requests here that David made to God. The first one is more general: he asked God to be gracious to him or treat him favorably. Then he made a more specific request: he asked God to blot out or wipe away his rebellion. When David sinned with Bathsheba, he purposely revolted against God and defied his will. He knew that it was wrong to commit adultery, and yet he did it anyway. He didn't deserve to have his sins removed from God's sight. But he knew that Yahweh was a gracious and forgiving God. That's what God said about himself in Exodus 34:6–7. He proclaimed, “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.”

So in this passage God stressed that he is gracious and forgiving, but he also said that he is compassionate and abounding in faithful love. And we see both of those qualities mentioned in Psalm 51:1. David wanted God's grace and forgiveness to be in accordance with his faithful love and abundant compassion. And David stressed these qualities by putting them in the emphatic center of the verse. The phrase “faithful love” comes from the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is one of the most profound words in the Hebrew language. It includes the concepts of love, kindness, loyalty, and faithfulness. Some translations have the word “lovingkindness” here, but I like the phrase “faithful love.” It stresses that God's love is loyal and that it endures.

The Hebrew word for compassion comes from a root that literally refers to a mother's womb. David was talking about a compassion that we feel for someone who is helpless, just like a pregnant mother normally has compassion on her baby. And David said that God has this kind of compassion in abundance. If God had a bank account for his compassion, we would say that he doesn't just have a few hundred dol-

lars. He has trillions and trillions of dollars! David was emphasizing the great quantity of compassion that God has. So 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. When we confess our sins to him, he will blot them out and forgive us.

Now let's move on to verse 2 and cover some new material. Look at what David wrote here: "Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin." In this verse David made two more requests to God, and they are very similar to his previous request at the end of verse 1. His first request in verse 2 was for God to completely wash away his guilt. The Hebrew verb for wash here is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to washing clothes. In Exodus 19 when the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, God told Moses that he was going to speak to the entire nation. But first the people had to prepare themselves. In verses 10-11 "the LORD told Moses, 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. They must wash their clothes and be prepared by the third day, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.'" Then verse 14 says that "they washed their clothes" as God commanded.

So David was imagining his guilt as dirt that needed to be washed from his clothes. Now these days it's pretty simple to get our clothes cleaned. All we need to do is throw them in the washing machine, add some soap, and press start. But back in those days they didn't have washing machines. Instead they had to wash their clothes by hand. If you've ever done that before, you know that it's a lot of work! But for David to wash away his guilt wasn't just hard; it was impossible! There was nothing he could do to get rid of it. He knew that God was the only one who could help him. And he didn't just ask God for a basic wash. He wanted God to wash away his guilt completely. The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible have the word "thoroughly" here. He wanted all traces of his guilt to be gone.

The Hebrew word for guilt comes from a root that means "to bend" or "to twist." If you take something that's straight and bend it, then it becomes crooked. The image here is a straight path of righteousness, but David didn't stay on that path. Instead he veered to the side and went astray. He departed from the standard of behavior that was set by God. So a more literal translation here would be crookedness, but most translations use the word "iniquity." That's what we see here in the English Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version. But this word has the idea of injustice, and so it's not really on the right track.

Now the Christian Standard Bible has the word "guilt" here, which points to a legal status of being blamed for wrongdoing. And sometimes the Hebrew word can have this nuance. For example, in 1 Samuel 25 David and his men protected Nabal along with his household and possessions. But Nabal refused to show kindness to David in return. David was about to attack Nabal and his men, but his wife Abigail intervened. Verse 24 says that "she knelt at his feet and said, 'The guilt is mine, my lord.'" So Abigail accepted the blame for Nabal's wrongdoing. She didn't act in a crooked way or go astray from God's will. Nabal was the one who did that, and as a result he had the status of being guilty. But Abigail wanted to take that status for herself. She acted as a substitute for Nabal.

But I can't think of a good reason to see this nuance of a guilty status in Psalm 51:2. Certainly it's true that when people sin, they are guilty before God and deserve to be punished. But the immediate context here is focused on the act of disobeying God. We just saw the word "rebellion" in verse 1, and later in verse 2 we have the word "sin." All three of these words are talking about unrighteous behavior. And the point here is that God is willing to forgive people's crooked actions. When they confess their iniquity and turn away from it, he will wash it away. And David knew this truth very well. In Psalm 103:2 he said, "My soul, bless the LORD, and do not forget all his benefits." Then he listed a variety of these benefits, and here's the first one in verse 3: "He forgives all your iniquity." The Hebrew word for iniquity there is the same one that David used in Psalm 51:2. It doesn't matter how far we go astray from the straight path of righteousness. God will forgive us if we ask him with a repentant heart.

Now let's look at David's second request to God in verse 2. And it's very much like the first one. David wrote, "Cleanse me from my sin." The Hebrew word for cleanse is similar to the word for wash that we just saw at the beginning of the verse. But this one is most commonly used in the Old Testament to refer to ceremonial cleansing. It's used 30 times in Leviticus 13-14 with regard to the cleansing of skin diseases and contaminated garments. And the idea with ceremonial cleansing is that something defiled would become something pure. As long as something was unclean, it could not be used in the holy place of the tabernacle because it was incompatible with God's holiness. But once it became clean, it could be used for worshiping God.

Now this doesn't mean that there was something inherently evil about being ceremonially unclean. Otherwise it would have been a sin for a woman to have her period! Leviticus 15 shows that women were considered unclean during that time. The point is that God was using mundane things to teach the Israelites how to make distinctions. They were like training wheels that help us learn how to ride a bike. The two big tires are what really matter; the training wheels are just temporary. In the same way, knowing the difference between something clean and something unclean helped the Israelites understand the difference between right and wrong. And that's of course what David was focused on here in Psalm 51:2. He wasn't saying that he was ceremonially unclean; he knew that he was morally unclean because of his adultery. And there wasn't anything that he could do to make himself clean. He needed God to cleanse him of that sin.

The Hebrew word for sin is the most general term in the Old Testament that refers to disobeying God. It comes from a root that means "to miss a mark or a goal." The verb with this root is used in Judges 20:16, which mentions that some troops from the tribe of Benjamin "could sling a stone at a hair and not miss." That's some pretty fantastic aiming right there! But in a spiritual sense our aim is far from being that good. We all miss the mark of God's perfect standard. We all fail to live according to his expectations. In Romans 3:23 Paul used this kind of language when he said that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And of course David is included in that statement. When he committed adultery with Bathsheba, he missed the goal of sexual purity.

But David knew that God was willing to cleanse him of this sin. By now we know without a doubt that he was familiar with what God said about himself in Exodus 34:6-7. I read those verses earlier, but let's hear

them again. 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.” The Hebrew words there for iniquity, rebellion, and sin are the same three terms that David used in Psalm 51:1-2. No matter how badly we disobey God, he will forgive us if we confess our sin to him. And this truth is taught in the New Testament as well. In 1 John 1:9 we’re told that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” We have the same cleansing terminology here that David used. And John stressed the need for us to confess our sins if we want to be cleansed.

But we haven’t really seen much of a confession from David yet in Psalm 51. He did use the first person pronoun “my” three times in verses 1-2, and he put one of them with each of the three terms that refers to his disobedience. He said “my rebellion,” “my guilt” or crookedness, and “my sin.” But in the next few verses, David gave some stronger statements of confession. Look at what he wrote in verse 3: “For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.” David started this verse with the word “for,” which introduces an explanation for what he wrote in verses 1-2. We saw that he made four requests to God there. He started by asking God more generally to be gracious to him, and then in the other three requests he was more specific. He basically asked God in three different ways to forgive him.

But how could David expect to be forgiven? What was his basis for thinking that God would blot out his rebellion, wash away his crookedness, and cleanse his sin? Well, we’ve already seen that he was drawing on God’s statement about himself in Exodus 34. In the beginning of verse 7 God said that he forgives iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But then he went on to say there that “he will not leave the guilty unpunished.” So how does God decide whom to forgive and whom to punish? After all, everyone is guilty of sin. The implied answer, as we saw clearly in 1 John 1:9, is that we must confess our sins to be forgiven. So in Psalm 51:3 David used the word “for” to introduce his confession. He was showing why he needed forgiveness and how he could expect to be forgiven by God.

So let’s take a closer look at the first statement in verse 3. David said, “I am conscious of my rebellion.” The Hebrew word for conscious is a verb that literally means “know.” That’s what we see in the English Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version. David wasn’t just giving a simple acknowledgement of his sin. He was saying that he had a personal and intimate awareness of his sin. And David emphasized this by using the Hebrew first person singular pronoun here as the subject of the verb. Now on the surface this doesn’t sound very significant. After all, in English we pretty much always have a subject to go with our verbs. But quite often in Hebrew a subject wasn’t needed, because verbs were marked for person and number. And with first and second person verbs, there’s only one word that could be the subject. For a first person singular verb like we have here, the subject has to be the first person singular pronoun.

So whenever we have a separate word as the subject of a first or second person verb in Hebrew, that word is emphatic because it’s not necessary. We don’t need the pronoun because we already know that the verb is first person singular. Yet David included the pronoun anyway, and he did so to stress that he had a personal and intimate awareness of his sin. And this awareness wasn’t something that he had just once or

twice in passing. It was an ongoing awareness. We can deduce this from the Hebrew imperfect tense that David used here. The Hebrew verbal system actually has only two tenses: perfect and imperfect. And unlike English verb tenses, the Hebrew tenses do not focus on the time frame but on the viewpoint of the action.

Let me give you an illustration of how this works. Imagine that it's Thanksgiving, which will be here before we know it. And let's say that you decide to turn on the TV and watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade. Now I went to many parades when I was younger, because the town where I grew up had the oldest Independence Day parade in the state. It always passed within two blocks of our house. But I always had the same viewpoint at those parades. I watched them from the sidewalk. But if you watch a parade on TV, you get two different perspectives. Normally you're watching from the side of the road, but sometimes you get the view from the blimp high in the sky.

And these two viewpoints correspond nicely to the two Hebrew tenses. The perfect tense views the parade from the blimp, while the imperfect tense views the parade from the sidewalk. The perfect tense looks at the parade as a whole without focusing on the details. But the imperfect tense looks at the details of the parade as it progresses. The perfect tense basically gives a summary of the action, while the imperfect tense focuses on the development of the action. To use another illustration, the perfect tense is like looking at a picture, while the imperfect tense is similar to watching a video. So when David used the imperfect tense in verse 3, he was viewing his awareness of sin from the sidewalk. And this is the tense that writers would normally use if they wanted to stress an ongoing action. I think David chose this tense to indicate that he was continually aware of his sin. And this view is confirmed by the word "always" later in this verse.

So David knew continually that he had sinned against God, and he described his disobedience with the word "rebellion." The Hebrew word for rebellion is that same one that David already used back in verse 1. It's a very strong term that refers to willful defiance. David wasn't talking about something he did by accident. He purposely revolted against God and defied his will. And David emphasized his rebellion by putting this word near the front of the sentence. In English we don't have a lot of flexibility with word order in our sentences. We usually have to start with the subject of the verb before we present the verb. Then we can give the direct object and any prepositional phrases. Unless you're Yoda from Star Wars, it's hard to get away with using a different word order on a regular basis. That's why pretty much every Bible translation has the word "rebellion" or its equivalent in the middle of the verse.

But in Hebrew there was more flexibility with the word order. And normally if a writer wanted to emphasize a word, he put it at the front of the sentence. Now the Hebrew word for rebellion isn't actually the first word in the verse. That place is reserved for the conjunction translated with the word "for" because it's introducing a new sentence. Sometimes it's difficult to know for sure where a new sentence or clause begins if the conjunction doesn't come first. But the word for rebellion is the very next term in the sentence. David put it in that prominent position because he was stressing how terrible his rebellion was.

But David gave a second statement about his disobedience in verse 3. He said, "My sin is always before

me.” The Hebrew word for sin is the same one that we just saw in verse 2. It stresses that David missed the mark of God’s perfect standard. When he committed adultery with Bathsheba, he failed to live according to God’s will. But David made an interesting observation about his sin. He said that it was always before him. The Hebrew word for always could also be translated “continually.” It’s used in Leviticus 6:13, where God gave Moses a rule about the altar where sacrifices were offered to him. He said that “fire must be kept burning on the altar continually; it must not go out.” So just like the fire was never supposed to burn out on the altar, David’s sin was never out of his sight. It was constantly before him.

The Hebrew phrase translated “before me” literally means “in front of me.” It’s used in Joshua 5:13, which tells us about an interesting experience that Joshua had. This verse says, “When Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand.” So this event took place before the Israelites captured the city of Jericho. The people had just crossed the Jordan River, and Joshua was probably on a scouting trip. But then he saw this man who was in a military stance! So Joshua proceeded to ask him whose team he was on. Was he on their side or the side of their enemies? But the man gave a surprising answer. He said that he was on neither side! Instead he was on a third team; he said that he was the “commander of the LORD’s army.” He was probably talking about an army of angels. But why didn’t he say that he was on Israel’s side? I think the answer is that the Israelites hadn’t always been loyal to God. The important issue wasn’t whether this man was on their team but whether they were on his team! They needed to make sure that they were obeying Yahweh if they wanted his help.

So this man, whom I believe was the preincarnate Son of God, was standing in front of Joshua. And David used the same language in Psalm 51:3 to talk about his sin. He said that his sin was always before him or in front of him. Now when you drive a car, you always have several things right in front of you. There’s a steering wheel there and a speedometer. You also have gauges that give your fuel status and your engine temperature. And these things are very helpful; you wouldn’t want to be without them when you’re driving. Now of course David’s sin wasn’t literally and physically right in front of him. He wasn’t forced to watch a video of his sinful deeds on continuous playback. I think what he meant was that they were always on his mind. He couldn’t get them out of his head; he was thinking about them constantly.

We all know that feeling is like, don’t we? And it makes us terribly uncomfortable, doesn’t it? But that’s not a bad thing! When the temperature gauge on the dashboard of our car tells us that the engine is overheating, we should be uncomfortable! It’s warning us that we need to turn off our car and let it cool down. Then we need to get it checked by a mechanic to make sure that any problems get fixed. And the same thing is true with our sin gauge. When it warns us that we’ve committed sin, we need to fix the problem! We need to confess our sin to God and ask him to forgive us, just like David did. Until we do that, our sin is going to stay in front of us. It’s going to be on our minds continually.

This happens because we have a wonderful gift from God called the conscience. God has given every human being a conscience that helps them to understand right from wrong. Listen to what Paul said in Romans 2:14-15: “So, when Gentiles, who do not by nature have the law, do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Their consciences confirm this. Their competing thoughts either accuse or even ex-

cuse them.” Now this doesn’t mean that every person’s conscience is calibrated correctly. Scripture says that some people have a weak conscience, a defiled conscience, a seared conscience, or an evil conscience. These people don’t have a conscience that’s functioning properly. And so they’re not always being warned by their conscience when they sin. But everyone has at least a basic sense of right and wrong. And when they go against their conscience, their thoughts are going to accuse them constantly.

But that’s not the only way that people’s sin stays in front of them. God builds on the work of the conscience to convict people of their sin. In John 16:8 Jesus said that the Holy Spirit “convict[s] the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment.” The Holy Spirit is active in the world right now to work in people’s hearts and help them to see their sin. He convinces them of their wrongdoing whenever they disobey God. And if that’s true for unbelievers, then it’s even more true for believers, because the Holy Spirit lives in us continually. In 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul said that our “body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.” And when we sin, Ephesians 4:30 tells us that we grieve the Spirit. He’s sad that we’ve disobeyed God.

So the next time you have a nagging thought about a sin you’ve committed, thank God for giving you a conscience and the Holy Spirit to help you see your sin. David didn’t complain about his sin being in front of him continually, and we shouldn’t either. We should be glad that the sin gauge on our dashboard is working properly. And we should respond by getting the problem fixed right away! Thankfully dealing with our sin is much easier than taking our car to a mechanic and paying him a lot of money. All we need to do is confess our sin to God. We need to admit what we’ve done and acknowledge that it’s wrong. Then we should ask God to cleanse us and wash away our sin. And when we do that, he will be faithful and righteous to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Let’s close in prayer and thank God for the wonderful gift of forgiveness.