

TEXTUAL ISSUES PSALM 51

Psalm 51:1-6. *I need to confess—Your mercy and my iniquity.* O God! Have mercy on me according to your all encompassing love,¹⁸ according to your great compassion—erase my sins from Your scroll record.

Wash my guilt; cleanse me from my disobedience—I know my offense, my separation from You is always before me.

Against You, and You alone have I sinned; against You and You alone have I done evil. Your standards for evil prove You are right, and justified when You judge.

As for me, I've been a mess from birth, from the very time I was conceived. Surely You deserve to know the truth from my most inner being. It is You who teaches wisdom which is instilled in my primordial essence.

- Q Why should the Lord God Yahweh have mercy? [Hint: unfailing love, compassion, power to “blot out.”]
- Q What's the difference between the sin separations you know and the ones you don't?
- Q Why do we need cleansing from these sin separations, especially the ones we know about?
- Q Why is adultery and murder in David's case a “sin against You [God], and You alone?” What about Uriah, Bathsheba, the people of Israel?
- Q What standard of evil is the best demonstration of the Lord God's righteousness, and His right to exact judgment? [Hint: false witness, oxen & donkey on same yoke, adultery.]
- Q What is inherently sinful (God-separating) about us?
- Q What wisdom has the Lord God created in all humankind; i.e., on a primordial basis?

PSALM 51:1-6

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

²Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

⁵Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. ⁶Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.



¹⁸The Hebrew for this phrase denotes befriending. Appealing to God's “(unfailing) love, kindness, mercy” is frequent in the Hebrew Scriptures since it summarizes all the Lord covenanted to show to Israel (see Dt 7:9,12) as well as to David and his dynasty (see Psalm 89:24,28,33; 2Samuel 7:15; Isaiah 55:3).

Psalm 51:7-12. *I'm dirty, alone, and weak— please do not abandon me.* Cleanse me with the very blood of the innocent—hyssop.¹⁹ Only then will I be clean; wash me, and only then will I be whiter than, fresher than, cleaner than fresh snow.

Oh, let me hear joy, let me hear gladness. Oh, let my being which You have crushed, rejoice! Oh, look away from my sins; blot out the record on the scroll of my iniquities.

I need a pure heart—create in me a pure heart O God! I need a steady spirit within me—renew my spirit O God! Do not make me leave Your presence. I can not live without Holy Spirit. Finally, O God, restore to me the joy of salvation, Your salvation. Grant me a willing spirit to keep me going. I am impure, weak, and alone, for the joy of Your presence is gone. I can not continue without You.

- Q Why should we be asking to be cleansed with hyssop? And the result? Why?
- Q What crushes your very being the most? A child's rejection? A lover's satire? A friend's betrayal? A debt unpaid?
- Q Why do we want the Lord God to look elsewhere when our sins are up front and personal?
- Q What is the spiritually pragmatic value of a "pure heart?" A "steadfast spirit?"
- Q What does it mean to be cast from the Lord God's presence? When does Holy Spirit leave? Ephesians 4:30 Why?
- Q Just what is the joy of the Lord God's salvation?
- Q How and why does a willing spirit sustain us?

And do not grieve Holy Spirit, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ Father God forgave you.

--Ephesians 4:30-32



PSALM 51:7-12

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹⁹Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. —Exodus 12:22

Psalm 51:13-19. *What I want & promise to happen*. So, with Your help, I will then teach other transgressors Your ways—and those who don't listen to Your voice will turn back to You.

Oh God, save me from the guilt that comes only from desecrating the blood offered to cleanse. You are the God who saves, who saves me—I will sing of Your righteousness. So, open my lips, open my mouth—let me declare praise for You.

Look, I know you don't delight in sacrifice; otherwise I would bring a sacrifice. You don't even desire a burnt offering; otherwise I would have given the sacrifice all up to You.

My sacrifice? O God, take my broken spirit, my broken heart, my contrite heart. I know God You will not despise a soul devoted and bent to Your will.

As you see fit, O Lord God, make Jerusalem prosper—build up its walls. Then there will be true sacrifices, righteous sacrifices—fully holocaust offerings to delight you. Then perhaps bulls will be offered on Your altar.

- Q What is the purpose of teaching “transgressors God's ways?”
- Q What is bloodguilt? [Hint: Guilt that comes from rejecting/scorning/ignoring the redemptive sacrifice of the Lord God; e.g., staying angry with a knucklehead.]
- Q How is bloodguilt overcome? What is the bloodguilt in your life?
- Q Why does the Lord God need to open our lips to praise?
- Q What makes a heart contrite, a spirit broken? Why does the Lord God want such a weakened worshipper, follower, disciple?
- Q When did David ask the Lord God to prosper Jerusalem? How so?
- Q So then, what is a righteous sacrifice? Why must it come before burnt offerings (complete) and bull offerings (partial)?

PSALM 51:13-19

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.

14 Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

18 In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. 19 Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

ADVANCED BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR PSALM 51²⁰

Ps 51 David's humble prayer for forgiveness and cleansing. As the prayer of a contrite sinner, it represents a proper response to the Lord's confrontation of his people in Ps 50 (compare v. 16 with 50:8-15). This psalm has many points of contact with Ps 25. In traditional Christian usage it is one of seven penitential psalms (see Ps 6). The psalm is constructed symmetrically: A two-verse introduction balances a two-verse conclusion, and the enclosed four stanzas in Hebrew consist of five lines, three lines, three lines and five lines respectively. The whole is framed by David's prayer for himself (vv. 1-2) and for Zion (vv. 18-19). The well-being of the king and the city stand and fall together (see 28:8 and 3:8).

51:1-2 In mercy grant pardon (see Lk 18:13). Note the piling up of synonyms: mercy, unfailing love, great compassion; blot out, wash, cleanse; transgressions, iniquity, sin (for this last triad see Psalm 32:5).

51:1 *blot out*. See v. 9. The image is that of a papyrus scroll (see 9:5) on which God had recorded David's deeds. The "blotting out" of sins pictures forgiveness (Jeremiah 18:23; see Isaiah 43:25). For the imagery of God's keeping records of the events in his realm in the way that earthly kings do, see 56:8; 87:6; 130:3; 139:16; Nehemiah 13:14; Daniel 7:10; see also Exodus 32:32-33.

51:2 *cleanse me*. Make me clean in your sight (see Lev 11:32).

51:4 *Against you . . . only*. David acknowledges that his sin was against God, and God alone (see 2Sa 12:13; cf. Ge 20:6; 39:9; Lk 15:18). He had violated specific covenant stipulations (Ex 20:13-14,17). As the sovereign of Israel, David legally owed fealty to no one except the Lord God Yahweh.

when you speak . . . when you judge. As the Lord did through Nathan the prophet (2Sa 12:7-12). For a modern application see Romans 3:4.

51:5 He cannot plead that this sin was a rare aberration in his life; it sprang from what he is and has been (in his "inner parts," v. 6) from birth (see 58:3; Genesis 8:21; cf. John 9:34; Ephesians 2:3). The apparently similar statements in Job 14:4; 15:14; 25:4-6 rise from a different motivation.

51:6 The great contrast: He has acted absolutely contrary to what God desires and to what God has been teaching him "in the inmost place." But it is just this "desire" of God and this "teaching" of God that are his hope—what he pleads for in vv. 7,10. *inner parts*. See 139:13-16; Job 38:36.

51:7 *Cleanse me*. Literally, "Un-sin me." *hyssop*. Used in ritual cleansing; An aromatic plant (*Origanum maru*) of the mint family with a straight stalk (see John 19:29) and white flowers. The hairy surface of its leaves and branches held liquids well and made it suitable as a sprinkling device for use in purification rituals (see Lev 14:4,6,49,51-52; Numbers 19:6,18; Hebrews 9:19).



51:8 *Let me hear joy*. Let me be surrounded by joy (see 35:27), or let me hear a prophetic oracle of forgiveness that will result in joy—from the assurance of sins forgiven (see 2Samuel 12:13).

²⁰Adapted, corrected, and revised by D. Thomas Porter from Compton's Interactive NIV © 1996.

51:9 *Hide your face.* From what is "always before me" (v. 3). *blot out.* See note above on verse 1.

51:10-12 Prayer for purity—for a pure heart, a steadfast spirit of faithfulness and a willing spirit of service. These can be his only if God does not reject him and take Holy Spirit from him. If granted, the joy of God's salvation will return to gladden his troubled soul.

51:10 *Create.* As something new, which cannot emerge from what now is (see v. 5), and which only God can fashion (see Ge 1:1; Isa 65:17; Jer 31:22). *heart.* That is, in Biblical thought, one's very center and focus—one's *raison d'être* (reason for being).

51:11 The two requests are essentially one (see 139:7; Eze 39:29). David's prayer recalls the rejection of Saul (see 1Sa 16:1,14; 2Sa 7:15) and pleads for God not to take away his Spirit, by which he had equipped and qualified him for his royal office (see 1Sa 16:13; cf. 2Sa 23:1-2).

Holy Spirit. The phrase is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures only in Isaiah 63:10-11.

Holy Spirit...

1. fulfills His purposes in creation (see 104:30; Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4) and redemption (see Isa 32:15; 44:3; 63:11,14; Hag 2:5),
2. equipped His servants for their appointed tasks (see Ex 31:3; Nu 11:29; Jdg 3:10; 1Sa 10:6; 16:13; Isa 11:2; 42:1),
3. inspires His prophets (see Nu 24:2-3; 2Sa 23:2; Ne 9:30; Isa 59:21; 61:1; Eze 11:5; Mic 3:8; Zec 7:12) and
4. directs their ministries (see 1Ki 18:12; 2Ki 2:16; Isa 48:16; Eze 2:2; 3:14).

And Holy Spirit gives His people a "new heart and . . . a new spirit" to live by His will (see Eze 36:26-27; see also Jer 24:7; 32:39; Eze 11:19; 18:31).

51:13 His praise for God's forgiveness and purification will be accompanied by instruction for sinners (see Ps 34 and 32:8-10).

51:16 Heb 10:5-10 applies these verses to Christ. More important is obedience (see 1Sa 15:22), especially to God's moral law (see Isa 1:10-17; Am 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8)—i.e., the ten basic commandments of His covenant (see Ex 20:3-17; Dt 5:7-21).

51:17 *broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart.* What pleases God more than sacrifices is a humble heart who looks to Him when troubles crush and penitently pleads for mercy when sin has been committed (see 50:7-15; see also 34:17-18).

51:19 *righteous sacrifices.* Such as are pleasing to God; here, sacrifices accompanied by praise for God's mercies.