

Psalm 51: How God Creates Loving, Open Hearts

In contrast to the casual way we sometimes treat our frailty and failings before God, the Seven Penitential Psalms can be surprisingly helpful and much needed reminders of both our frailty and God's graciousness. As we read them in order, we experience how their similar mood and theology unites them.

Their very number also adds something to their credibility—as in some sense 'right and proper'—given the completeness associated with the number seven. They were even linked to the seven deadly sins and the seven canonical hours used in many monastic and liturgical traditions. This culminated in a medieval tradition of a process of seven penitential steps. (M.J. Whiting, The Seven Penitential Psalms on his blog, *PsalterMark*)

These *seven steps* formed a “ladder of repentance,” moving up the ladder's steps:

Step 7. Prayer Against the Final Judgment, Psalm 143:2

Step 6. The Distrust of Self, Psalm 130:6

Step 5. Longing for the Heavenly Jerusalem, Psalm 102:16

Step 4. Love of a Cleansed Soul, Psalm 51:7-8

Step 3. Hope for Pardon, Psalm 38:15

Step 2. Sorrow for Sin, Psalm 32:5

Step 1. Fear of Punishment, Psalm 6:1

Whatever the original thinking behind this grouping, they have been bound together since at least the sixth century (probably earlier). They also show a symmetry in their sevenfold nature that *draws attention to the central psalm, Psalm 51*. On either side of **Psalm 51**, the opening words of four of the psalms reveal two pairs. **Psalms 6** and **38** both open with a similar address, generally made identical in their Latin liturgical titles, *Domine, ne in furore*. In a similar way **Psalms 102** and **143** have identical openings in Latin: *Domine, exaudi*. The Book of Common Prayer includes these Latin liturgical titles. Check it out.

Our Lenten challenge is to pray these Seven Penitential Psalms with increasing understanding and to experience how they confront us with the damage of our sin, the need for confession, the wonder of repentance, and the joy of forgiveness. They redirect us to living in love in Christ for the sake of the world.

Of course, we can't pray penitential psalms on our own, by bootstrap self-will. *We do not pray on our own; we pray in Christ and he prays in us. He demonstrates his solidarity with us in our sin as He leads us in praying these*

psalms, His songs. He identifies with our struggles and offers freedom and hope through his crucifixion and death, his resurrection and ascension. By the Spirit, Jesus Christ, Ruler of the universe, takes the lead in praying for, with, and in us.

1. “Lord Jesus, lead us as we read **Psalm 51**. We know that you know the burden of our sin and deceitfulness.”

Notice and mark words or phrases that stand out for you in **Psalm 51**, starting with its *superscription* and *historical title*.

2. David didn't deserve to write **Psalm 51**. He deserved death for having sex with the wife of one of his most faithful servants, murdering him, and trying to cover it all up (**2 Samuel 11**). Either one of those things required the death penalty in the Law that God gave Moses. In **Exodus 34:6-7a**, God also revealed Himself to Moses as “YHWH! The LORD, the God of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness...I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin.” This passage is so important that it is quoted within the Bible itself more times than any other scripture.

David knew all of this. He knew his sin was inexcusable, like that of Israel with the Golden Calf.

And so did Saul. They both knew about God's Law and God's gracious character. God used prophets to confront both Saul and David, Samuel with Saul and Nathan with David. (Saul's story is in **1 Samuel 15**, and David's story is in **2 Samuel 12**.) Both Saul and David were “caught redhanded” disobeying God. David's experience produced **Psalm 51**; Saul's experience produced shallow repentance and revealed his deep fear of people that overshadowed fear of God. He refused to trust God with his life and call Samuel's God (“your God”) my God, the master and ruler of my life (**I Samuel 15:15 and 30**). Saul remained self-referenced, more concerned for himself than for YHWH's reputation.

How does the contrast between Saul and David impact you in Lent 2022?

3. Psalm 51 is personal and honest and is also ahistorical and eternally relevant – applicable when it was first written and also today, showing the extreme sins that David committed juxtaposed against the extreme love and pardon he receives from God. (Woude, *The Honesty of the Psalms*, 142-143)

Psalm 51 follows the structure of the *lament*. Keep noticing which verses get your attention now:

I. Verses **51:1-2** are an introductory address.

II. Then he shares his difficulty, the mess he is in, his complaint in **51:3-6**, an exact commentary on **2 Samuel 12:13**—“I have sinned against the LORD.”

III. Next he petitions for forgiveness and moral renewal that will restore fellowship and joy in **51:7-12**.

IV. He vows that if forgiven, he will praise God, restore others to him, and offer the sacrifice of a spirit and mind broken of all self-assertion (**51:13-17**). Sins of adultery and murder were not covered by sacrificial provision in tabernacle worship.

V. Finally, since the King’s sin threatened the fabric of public life, he asks God to prosper Jerusalem and the worship of the community of penitent individuals in **51:18-19**. When penitent sinners depend on God for their security, spiritual practices become delightful to God as they are all that God meant them to be (specifically sacrifices for commitment [burnt offerings] and for sharing thanks in community [peace offerings]) (Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, 519). **Psalm 50** confronts this issue, addressing both the misled and the wicked.

4. Find the two references to “heart” in **Psalm 51**. The parable Nathan told David awakened David’s “heart”. How would you define “heart”?

The particular Hebrew word translated “Create” can only have God as its subject. God creates, God births newness in us (**51:10, 17**). “Broken” in verse 17 means “brings to birth,” known to be a painful process.

There is a “birth process” for humility in us. When has God “birthed” humility in you? How might he be doing that now? How has your understanding and experience of a humble heart changed over time?

These famous verses from **Psalm 139** can help us pray for *hearts* broken and created anew by God.

Search me, God, and know my *heart*;
test me and know my concerns.
See if there is any offensive way in me;
lead me in the everlasting way.

—**Psalm 139:23-24** (CSB)

The warning section of **Psalm 95, verses 7b-11**, also addresses the danger of hardened *hearts* that go astray because of not intimately knowing God’s ways. Those who refuse to rely on YHWH, to entrust themselves to YHWH’s care, will not experience rest and peace in YHWH. YHWH opposes the evil of our human distrust of YHWH and our self-sufficiency.