Psalm 51 and Sanctification
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Of the seven historic penitential psalms (6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), Psalm 51 is clearly associated with the subject of repentance. As Luther states, whoever first referred to this as a penitential psalm “knew what he was doing…Here the doctrine of true repentance is set before us.”¹ Many assume that repentance is a one-time action that takes places at conversion, like exercising initial saving-faith. However, this misunderstands the Bible’s overall salvific message. In particular, Psalm 51 undermines this view since its content indicates that David is already a believer. As such, this suggests that repentance should be an aspect of a believer’s growth in grace. Returning to Luther, in the first of his 95 theses, he further highlights the significance of repentance in a believer’s life: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said ‘Repent,’ willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.” If there is any substance to Luther’s words, this means that a significant part of our sanctification involves repentance. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that Psalm 51 provides a guide to follow in our process of sanctification. Initially, we will examine the content of this psalm. This will be followed by a brief note about the relationship between Psalm 51 and sanctification.

THE CONTENT OF PSALM 51

The verses of Psalm 51 have two basic units: 1–12 focus on God’s forgiveness and 13–19 stress the results of forgiveness. This psalm can further be subdivided into six subunits: 1–2, 3–6, 7–9, 10–12, 13–17, and 18–19. The structural arrangement for these units looks like this:

- **A** Prayer for divine forgiveness, 1–9
  - **B** Confession of sin, 3–6
  - **C** Renewed prayer for forgiveness, 7–9
  - **A¹** Prayer for restoration, 10–12
  - **B¹** Results from restoration, 13–17
  - **C¹** Prayer for the prosperity of Zion, 18–19²

Based upon the structural arrangement of Psalm 51, we could outline the text in this way:

- **A. Request for divine forgiveness, 1–9**


1. Request for God’s mercy to deliver from sin, 1–2
2. Confession of sin, 3–6
3. Renewed prayer for forgiveness, 7–9

B. Resulting request for restoration, 10–19
1. Prayer for restoration, 10–12
2. Results from restoration, 13–17
3. Prayer for the prosperity of Zion, 18–19

Request for Divine Forgiveness (1–9)

The first section is tied together by the various nouns for sin: “transgressions,” peša’ (1, 3), “iniquity,” ‘āwôn (2, 5), and “sin,” haṭṭāt (2, 3, 4, 5, 9). The use of a range of imperatives for forgiveness also unites this section: “blot out,” mḥh (1, 9), “wash,” kbs (2, 7), “cleanse,” thr (2, 7), and “hide,” str (9). By using various overlapping substantives for sin and imperatives for forgiveness, David focuses on his plea for forgiveness from sin. Let’s further see how this emphasis is developed in 1–9. But before examining this unit, we should look at Psalm 51’s heading since it contains helpful background information.

Superscription
For the music director, a psalm of David. When Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone into Bathsheba.

The editor of this psalm’s heading provides two helpful items. First, this is a psalm David composed. The preposition l, “of,” in the phrase “a psalm of David,” supports this understanding. When this preposition followed by a personal name appears in a superscription for a psalm, it is known as the lamed of authorship. Second, the historic information in this psalm’s superscription provides a connection between Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 11–12. As the superscription states and the content of this psalm alludes to, not only did David commit adultery with Bathsheba, he also had her husband, Uriah the Hittite, killed in battle to cover over his sin. After the death of Uriah, Bathsheba becoming David’s wife and giving birth to his son as a result of their adulterous relationship, Nathan confronts David in 2 Samuel 12 about his sins. In response, David repents in 13: “I have sinned against the LORD.” To this Nathan communicates to David that the Lord forgave him and he would not die. In light of this historical background, David composed this contemplative psalm.

Request for God’s Mercy to Deliver from Sin (1–2)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loyal love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity; and cleanse me from my sin!

With this introductory cry, the psalmist pleads with God to have mercy by cleansing him from transgressions. The petitioner emphasizes God’s gracious nature in three ways: his mercy—“have...
mercy,” “loyal love,” and “great compassion” (1). David’s description of God’s nature corresponds with God’s self-description to Moses in Exodus 34:6: “The LORD, the LORD, a compassionate and merciful God, slow to anger, and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness.”

As noted above, David’s defilement is primarily pictured by three words. “Transgressions,” peša’ (1, 3), refers to rebellious activity. “Iniquity,” ‘āwôn (2), appears to have a basic nuance of twisted or distorted. This term indicates that David committed an infraction against God. “Sin,” ḥatā’ (2), has the sense of missing the mark of God’s moral will. These three essentially synonymous terms reflect the serious nature of David’s sin.

David communicates this plea by using the imperative of request, “have mercy, hnn (on me).” This request is for God to act according to his loving and gracious nature. This appeal is specified by three more specific, parallel imperatives of request: “blot out,” mḥh (1); “wash,” kbs; and “cleanse,” thr (2). The first imperative is used for washing off writing from a scroll. It is a metaphor picturing a complete removal of sin. While “wash” is associated with garments, here it pictures the thorough removal of iniquity. The third imperative, “cleanse,” is a cultic term that appears in ritual cleansing contexts that removes defilement and makes the worshipper ritually pure. In our context it portrays the removal of defilement that would restore David to a position of harmony with God. The use of these three overlapping imperatives places a strong emphasis on David’s prayer request.

In brief, the threefold repetition of David’s appeal to God for mercy, his admission of rebellion, and his request for forgiveness emphasizes his prayer for God to purify him. His following lament develops the grave nature of his transgressions.

Confession of Sin (3–6)

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your verdict and blameless when you judge. Surely, I was guilty of sin at birth, and sinful when my mother conceived me. Surely, you desire truth in the inner man, and you teach me wisdom within.

The conjunction kî, “for,” introduces the lament and explains why David needs cleansing. In developing this lament, there are two parts: his confession of explicit sin, 3–4, and the cause for his actual sin, 5–6.
While David mentions his sin in 1–2, he provides in 3–4 an overt acknowledgment of unambiguous wrongdoing. By placing “transgressions” before the verb in the Hebrew text of 3, David places an emphasis on his sin. In doing this, he emphasizes, according to Ross, “that he did not conceal the sin—he put it right out front” (Psalms, 185). By using a first person pronoun with the verb, the psalmist places an emphasis on it “[I] know,” a yiqtol form. This stresses his awareness of sin. This is further accentuated with “my sin is always before me.” Rather than feeling guilty because he got caught, this construction and attendant clause highlight David’s personal culpability. He additionally intensifies his guilt in 4 by acknowledging that his rebellious acts are ultimately against God. The result clause in the last half of 4 indicates that God’s judgment on David was just. This presupposes 2 Samuel 12 where God announced David’s judgment for his defiant sin.

When the psalmist gives the underlying cause for his sin, 5–6, he begins each verse with “surely,” hinnēh. Aside from this similarity, both verses are antithetical. On the one hand, David provides the cause for his wicked behavior (5). Both at conception and birth, he was sinful. David “was affirming,” as Ross states, “that from the very beginning of his existence there had never been a time that he had not been in a sinful state” (Psalms, 187). On the other hand, in contrast to David’s sinfulness, God desires trustworthiness and wisdom in the inner man (6). In brief, 5–6 teach that, though God expects David to be morally faithful and wise, he has committed defiant acts of rebellion and been inherently sinful since conception. As a result of David’s explicit confession of sin in 3–6, he next pleads with God to forgive him.

**Renewed Prayer for Forgiveness (7–9)**

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness, let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins; and blot out all of my iniquities.

Each of these verses makes two requests. The requests in 7 pertain to cleansing, in 8 to rejoicing, and in 9 to forgiveness.

In Hebrew, the two requests for cleansing in 7 are imperfects of injunction. Both injunctions (“cleanse” and “wash”) also appeared in 2 as imperatives of request. The request for cleansing is correlated with a cultic ritual using hyssop. Because David also appeals to be washed, “with hyssop” refers to using a small plant to sprinkle water on the petitioner to cleanse him so that he can worship. This is a metaphor that speaks of David’s need. With his second request, he uses a simile metaphorically (“whiter than snow”) to describe his purification.

The requests for rejoicing in 8 are a result of 7. David continues using the imperfect of injunction two more times. With the first use, the psalmist requests for God to give him “joy and gladness.” This condition can only be experienced when one has been cleansed from his sin. The “bones” in 8b are metaphors that represent the “crushed” person being able to “rejoice” (Goldingay, Psalms 42–89, 132).

In 9 David repeats his request for forgiveness from 1–2. He again uses “sin,” ḫattāʾ (2) and “blot out,” mḥḥ (1). Because of the parallel nature of this verse, “hide your face” is essentially the same as “blot out.” In this verse, David makes his final appeal for God to forgive his sins.

Verses 1–9 have demonstrated that David repented by the nature of his explicit confession of sin...
(3–6) and his repeated request for a merciful God to forgive and cleanse him of his sin (1–2, 7–9). As is true for everyone who genuinely repents, there are results.

**Resulting Request for Restoration (10–19)**

In contrast to 1–9, new terms associated with spiritual renewal along with its results are used in 10–19. These include “create,” bārā’ (10); “renew,” ḥdš (10); “restore” and “return,” šāb (12, 13); “heart,” lēb (10, 17); “spirit,” rūaḥ (10, 11, 12, 17); “salvation,” yēša‘ (12) and rīšū̀a (14); “praise,” ṭhillā (15); and “sacrifice” zebah (16, 17, 19). With the use of these new verbs and substantives in their immediate syntactical setting, the psalmist prays for spiritual renewal and vows to serve God faithfully.

**Prayer for Restoration (10–12)**

Create a pure heart in me, O God; and renew a resolute spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence and take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit.

Verses 10–12 are parallel with each verse making two requests. While this subunit continues David’s pleas, it is transitional in that David prays for restoration with its results following in the remainder of Psalm 51.

David employs two imperatives to request that God would transform him. In this verse, the first imperative “create,” bārā’ is used in the Qal stem. When it appears in this stem (38 out of 48 times), it always refers to divine activity. The divine activity associated with this verb often includes creation ex nihilo (Gen 1:1, 21, 27; 2:3 etc.); however, it may also refer to “initiating something new” (Isa 41:20; 48:6–7). In the context of Psalm 51, the term refers to restoring David’s heart. “Heart,” lēb, metaphorically refers to the intellectual and volitional aspect of a person or to his innermost being, as it is used here. Because of his propensity to sin, David asks God to make him internally pure. Because of the parallel nature of the second imperative “renew,” ḥdš, with the first, this reiterates David’s request for restoration. As in the first half of this verse, “a resolute spirit” corresponds to “pure heart.” “Resolute” emphasizes reliability or steadfastness. Briefly stated, David, in this verse, requests that God makes him a pure and reliable man.

The psalmist advances his petitions with two parallel negative requests in 11 that God would not take away his “presence” and the “Holy Spirit.” Both of these requests focus on God not removing his theocratic anointing. Besides the equivalent imperatives, “your presence” corresponds with “Holy Spirit.” Both references to the Spirit allude to the Spirit’s OT ministry of giving a special enablement for Israelite leaders to function effectively in the theocracy. When Samuel anointed David to be king in 1 Samuel 16:13, “the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day on.” When this verse is compared with the next one (“the Spirit of the

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11 See Auffret, “Ps LX 1–19,” 143–45.
13 Ibid.
14 See Goldingay, *Psalms* 42–89, 133.
15 The Spirit also gave this special anointing to Moses (Num 11:17) and some of the judges (Othniel [Judg 3:10], Gideon [6:34], Jephthah [11:29], and Samson [13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14]).
LORD departed from Saul”) where Saul loses the Spirit’s endowment to function effectively as king, David begs God not to remove this enablement in Psalm 51:11. This verse does not apply to believers in general but only to Israelite leaders in the OT, primarily kings, who experienced this anointing.

David makes two final requests in 12. The first request is for God to restore the “joy,” šāšôn, of his salvation. This request is similar to the one in 8 where David also uses “joy.” David desires to experience again the delight and contentment connected with the LORD’s salvation. This looks to restore his earlier saving experience. The second request is for God to give him a “willing spirit.” This looks to the future. The adjective “willing,” nādîb, is cognate with the cultic term nêdâbâ, “freewill offering, voluntary gift.” The freewill offering was “given for no other reason than an expression of love for Yahweh.” By “willing spirit,” the psalmist desires a disposition that is inclined to love and obey God.

The focus of 10–12 has been on David’s prayer for spiritual renewal along with a concomitant desire to avoid losing God’s theocratic enablement. Having made these requests, some effects follow.

**Results from Restoration (13–17)**

Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, the God of my salvation, then my tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, then my mouth will declare your praise. For you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would offer it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, you, O God, will not despise.

Based on the forgiveness of David’s sins and his spiritual restoration, he makes two vows in these verses. First, David will teach transgressors God’s ways, 13. David’s use of the cohortative of resolve, “I will teach,” stresses his determination to accomplish his promise. The Israelites that David plans to teach are “transgressors” (pōṣᵉʾîm) and “sinners” (ḥâṭṭāʾîm). Since David used forms of these terms to describe himself in 1–2, his goal is to teach people like himself. His reference to God’s ways refers to his “mercy,” “loyal love,” and “great compassion” (1). Because of these divine characteristics, sinners are able to experience divine forgiveness and restoration (Ross, *Psalms*, 196). David’s expectation is that the sinners will return to God.

Second, after God forgives David of bloodshed, he will sing of God’s praise, 14–17. The psalmist makes two requests in 14–15. This first one asks God to deliver him from “bloodshed,” dāmîm. The point of this petition is for God to forgive him of his responsibility for the murder of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah the Hittite. In apposition to “O God” is “the God of my salvation.” This phrase indicates that God saved David. The result of God’s deliverance is that David’s “tongue will sing of” the LORD’s “righteousness.” The verb “sing,” rnn, means to “shout for joy,

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rejoice, exult.” This is an exuberant song. The LORD’s “righteousness” refers to his character. Since God is both holy and compassionate, David realizes that, though it may be veiled, God makes righteous provision for sin. Based on the foundation of his righteousness, God could forgive David’s sin. As such, David joyously praises God for his righteousness. Verse 15 essentially continues the thought of 14. In this verse, the poet uses the imperfect of injunction to make his second request, “open my mouth.” The result of this appeal is that David can proclaim God’s praise for his forgiveness and righteousness.

The causal conjunction “for,” kî, beginning 16, provides a reason why David can praise God’s righteousness. Initially, he negatively explains his reason. God does not delight in only giving a sacrifice or a burnt offering. The word “sacrifice,” zebāḥ, is a general word for sacrifice that often refers to the peace offering. A “burnt offering,” ‘ōlā, is completely consumed on the altar and involved making atonement for sin. The LORD would not accept either of these offerings from an Israelite living in sin. In 17 David provides a positive explanation of his reason. God will accept the offerings and praise of the one who has a “broken and contrite heart.” This refers to the contrition that a repentant sinner experiences when he is under deep conviction for his sin. God does not despise this type of “broken spirit.”

In 13–17 David has shown the results of his restoration by making two promises: to teach transgressors God’s ways and to sing God’s praises for his righteousness. As king, David has another concern.

**Prayer for the Prosperity of Zion (18–19)**

In your good pleasure, do what is good for Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem. Then you will delight in righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings. Then bulls will be offered on your altar.

With this final segment, David moves from personal to national concerns. He makes two final requests in 18 followed by two result clauses in 19. The first request is a general appeal to the “good pleasure” of God to prosper Zion. As the last part of this verse reflects, Zion is a synonym with Jerusalem. The second request to build Jerusalem’s walls specifies the first one. During his reign, David also started to expand the city and build up its defenses. During his reign,

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21. See Tate, Psalms 51–100, 27.
24. Some who take these verses as a later addition to this psalm suggests that, rather than taking the imperfect of injunction as “build,” bnḥ, it should be understood as “rebuild.” For example, Tate states that this verb “probably means ‘rebuild’ and expresses the exilic Israelite hope for the restoration of Jerusalem” (Psalms 51–100, 29; Dalglish argues that 18–19 are a liturgical redaction added in the exilic period [Psalm Fifty-One, 205]). However, these verses are a good extension to the body of this psalm. David’s concerns shift from his personal concerns (1–17) to national ones (18–19). As a king, the psalmist was culpable not only for his personal needs but also for those on a national level (see Bartensen, “Restoration and Its Blessing,” 257–58).
Solomon expanded the city further to include the top of the hill ascending above the city where he built the Temple. He also extended the city’s walls to protect the Temple. This is the type of city where righteous sacrifices and offerings can securely be made on the altar.

In essence, Psalm 51 affirms that true repentance prays for divine forgiveness from sin and for spiritual renewal with its attendant results.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PSALM 51 AND SANCTIFICATION

How does Psalm 51 relate to a believer’s sanctification process? Initially, we must define this topic. In the Old and New Testaments, God calls his people to be holy just as he is (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15–16). God’s work, by which he makes his people holy through their persevering faith, is called sanctification. Hoekema more precisely defines “sanctification as that gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which he delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to him.”

A problem that all believers encounter is that they have periods in life in which they become involved with sin as they become irresponsible with their participation in the sanctification process. Their sin disrupts their communion with God. Such was the case with David after he committed adultery and murder. As we have previously noted, David repented of his sin after being confronted by Nathan (2 Sam 12:13). Subsequent to this event, David composed this poetic reflection about God’s graciousness in forgiving and restoring him from his. With this composition, he has ministered to struggling believers like himself for over 3,000 years.

Consequently, Psalm 51 provides a guideline on how believers should approach God when they have become ensnared in sin. They must come before him with a “broken and contrite heart” confessing their sin and seeking his restoration. In brief, this psalm is an Old Testament poetic expression of 1 John 1:9.

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25 Saved by Grace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 192. For a list of Dispensationalists who hold to this understanding of sanctification, see Jonathan R. Pratt, “Dispensational Sanctification: a Misnomer,” Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal 7 (Fall 2002): 105–6. This understanding of sanctification has also been advocated at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.