

## What Does True Repentance Look Like?

Psalm 51

Studies in the Psalms #52

**I**T'S so interesting how the Psalms are organized. You'd think Psalms 50 and 51 have nothing to do with each other. Psalm 50 is a psalm of Asaph while Psalm 51 is by David. In Psalm 50 God speaks; in Psalm 51 David speaks. Note how in Psalm 50 **the Mighty One, God, the LORD** calls the world to witness an assembly of his people renew their covenant with him because their relationship is fractured. Psalm 51 is a totally different context: **Nathan the prophet went to [David] after he had gone in to Bathsheba** in 2 Samuel 11–12 (heading). But what is the theme of each Psalm? Repentance.

Turn in your hymnal to page 888. Question 88 of our Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What is involved in genuine repentance or conversion?" Let's say the answer together: "**Two things: the dying-away of the old self, and the rising-to-life of the new.**" Focusing on that first part, question 89 asks, "What is the dying-away of the old self?" What's the answer? "**To be genuinely sorry for sin and more and more to hate and run away from it.**" Question 90 focuses on the second part: "What is the rising-to-life of the new self?" Let's read the answer again: "**Wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a love and delight to live according to the will of God by doing every**

**kind of good work.”** Dying and rising, hating and loving, running from sin and running to the Lord is what repentance is. While we’re here, let’s turn to page 948 and the words of Westminster Larger Catechism, question 76: “What is repentance unto life?” Join me in the answer:

**Repentance unto life is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, and upon the apprehension of God’s mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for and hates his sins, as that *he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavoring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.***

Turning from sin to God. That’s repentance. In Psalm 51 David exemplifies for us WHAT TRUE REPENTANCE LOOKS LIKE.

IT APPEALS TO MERCY (v. 1)

First and most important, David shows us that we dare not come into **the Mighty One’s** perfectly holy presence to ask for forgiveness based on anything in ourselves: **Have mercy on me, O God, according to *my being king; according to my military exploits blot out my transgressions.*** Would you ever come before God in prayer and say, “**have mercy on me, O God, according to *the fact that I believed in you on January 2, 2010?***” Would you ever say to God in prayer “**according to *the fact that I passed an online course on the Reformed doctrine of predestination blot out my transgressions?***”

TRUE REPENTANCE APPEALS TO MERCY. **Have mercy on me...blot out**

**my transgressions** (v. 1) is the language of a sinful beggar that we sing:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,  
simply to thy cross I cling;  
naked, come to thee for dress;  
helpless, look to thee for grace.*

Notice the basis of appealing for **mercy** and **blotting out...transgressions** or forgiveness: **according to your steadfast love...according to your abundant mercy**. This is what is called synonymous parallelism, meaning, they're saying the same thing two ways to intensify the prayer. **Steadfast love** is *chesed*, which we've seen before is the Lord's faithfulness to keep the promises he's made. **Abundant mercy** is *racham*, which we know from Psalm 103, where David calls us not to forget all the benefits of the Lord and then says, "who crowns you with steadfast love (that's *chesed*) and mercy (v. 4). When we sin we go to our Father in prayer and confess our sins because he's *faithful* to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

IT ACKNOWLEDGES SIN (vv. 2–9)

Since I just mentioned confession, that's the second aspect of what true repentance looks like: IT ACKNOWLEDGES SIN. Kids, what do we as your parents say when you've done something wrong: "Say you're sorry." But as you know, mouthing the words is not the same as being sorry. Parents, it's

struck me more and more recently how shallow my prayer is in the area of confession of sin. You and I need to repent of shallowly saying just “I’m sorry.” The Holy Spirit helps us with Psalm 51. If you pay attention and apply it, you’ll have a deeper understanding and experience of forgiveness.

*True repentance acknowledges our many general sins: **Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*** (v. 2) Sin clings onto us like stains on our clothes. And we’ve stained ourselves *a lot!* **For I know my transgressions**—notice the plural—**and my sin is ever before me** (v. 3).

*True repentance acknowledges our specific sins: **Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight*** (v. 4). David was speaking specifically of his adultery and decision that directly led to Absalom’s death. When you’ve committed a specific sin and you know it, it wounds your conscience, doesn’t it? So you have to confess *it* particularly.

*True repentance acknowledges our sinful nature: **Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*** Your sinning isn’t a shouldn’t a surprise. Why? Because the deeper you know who God is as holy you know who you are with a sinful nature (v. 5). That’s why David prays, **behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart** (v. 6). Knowing who you are deep down as a sinner leads you to

want to be taught deep down. This leads to the desire to be cleansed deep down: **Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow** (v. 7). “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa. 1:18). What a promise! What a longing we ought to have! Like David, long for this and cry out: **let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice** (v. 8). How can there be joy in confession? Because we say with Paul not only “wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” but also “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:24–25a)

#### IT DESIRES NEW LIFE (vv. 10–19)

As we appeal to God on the basis of his mercy in Jesus Christ turning from our sins we also turn to God as true repentance also DESIRES NEW LIFE.

*We desire to progress in our sanctification: **Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*** (v. 10). That verb *create* is the same verb that opens up the story of the Bible: “In the beginning God created”—*bara*. As we turn to God in true repentance we’re asking him for nothing less than a supernatural work of grace to renew us in a life that’s pleasing to him.

*We desire to experience true Spirit-ual renewal:* **Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me** (v. 11). David assumes as an Old Testament believer the presence of the Holy Spirit within. Longing for re-creation within leads to a afresh experience of the Spirit's renewing work.

*We desire to experience greater joy.* This leads to a restoration of joy: **Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit** (v. 12). Before repentance there was only sorrow, after joy!

*We desire to experience greater evangelist zeal.* Joy within leads to zeal for others without: **I will teach transgressors...sinners will return to you** (v. 13)

*We desire to offer up pleasing sacrifices.* Note how Psalm 51 ends with a link back to Psalm 50. Like Psalm 50 he says the Mighty One does not need our multitudes of sacrifices if our hearts are not offered up too: **for you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering** (v. 16). When we truly turn from our sins and turn to God this leads us to offer back to God hearts and hands that he truly desires. **The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart...you will not despise...then will you delight in right sacrifices** (vv. 17, 19).

This is true repentance: to turn to our merciful God, give him our sins so that he will send us back out to serve.