

# Saying Sorry to God

#  Psalm 51

Psalm 51 is among the most well-known of David’s prayers, given its link to a moment of profound crisis in his life, the occasion of his adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of Uriah. Initially David appears to be in denial about what he has done. It is only when challenged by the prophet Nathan (see 2 Samuel 12) that he is brought to his senses about the extent of his sin.

This is a raw and emotional prayer, which powerfully conveys the extent of the crisis David is in, his awareness of the gravity of his sins and the fallenness of a heart that has committed such actions. Yet it is telling that the psalm actually starts by speaking of God’s willingness to forgive, as if David knows this is the only basis on which he can make a plea. As John Goldingay notes, ‘The psalm begins from the reality of divine grace, commitment and compassion, a powerful trinity of divine qualities; God is not fundamentally a judge figure but a parent figure.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

David acknowledges before God not only the seriousness of his wrongdoing on this occasion (v4), but also the sinfulness of his whole heart and soul (vs5,6). This is a prayer which invites all of us to be realistic and discerning about our motivations, impulses and capacity for wrongdoing. As David asks for forgiveness, he frequently uses terms which refer to cleansing and washing (vs1,2,7).

For centuries, Psalm 51 has provided the people of God with the classic template for a prayer of confession. As well as showing us what heartfelt repentance looks like, it also offers us the hope found in David’s prayer for the creation of a ‘pure heart’ and the renewal of ‘a steadfast spirit within me’ (v10). ‘… the hope is that God will offer a fully constituted new self who can live freely and gladly before God.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

This the prayer of one who knows that God believes in the rehabilitation of offenders and also a psalm that moves from introspection to looking outwards. David sees ahead to a moment when he will gladly tell others about his experience of forgiveness and renewal, encouraging them to turn to God also.

**For discussion**

1. When we feel guilty, it’s tempting to suppress or deny that feeling. But Psalm 51 suggests that guilt needs to be confronted and brought before God. Why do you think we often struggle to be honest with ourselves about the things we’ve got wrong (v6)?
2. On Sunday, Trevor spoke about how the Old Testament often speaks of forgiveness in terms of dealing with a ‘thing’ that has been created as a result of our sin: our stains are washed away (see Psalm 51:1,2), our burdens are carried from us (e.g. Isaiah 53:12), a debt is paid (e.g. Isaiah 40:2). How do these images broaden your understanding of what it means for God to forgive us?
3. At first glance, the statement of verse 4, that David has sinned only against God, seems strange, given that his actions have involved violating Bathsheba and killing Uriah. So how are we to make sense of this statement and what difference does it make to how we respond in times when we have fallen short of what God wants from us?
4. In Ps 51:10, David asks God to ‘create in me a pure heart… and renew a steadfast spirit within me.’ Writing about this verse, John Goldingay comments: ‘The fact that the spirit is broken, the heart crushed, actually clears the way for renewing. Only something that is broken can be made new.’ Can you think of a time in your life when an experience of brokenness led to God renewing you? Could you share that experience with others? And could it shape your prayers for someone who is struggling and needs God to create something new in their life right now?
1. John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms, Volume 2*, 2007, p140 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Brueggemann, *New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Psalms¸* 2014, p237 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)