

## PSALM FIFTY AND FIFTY-ONE

3. Read verses 1-3 as introducing the judge. Vs. 4-6 as the opening of the judgment.
4. Who are the spectators at this trial?
5. Do you conclude that the first charge in this trial is *Formalism*? Just what is involved in this?—Is this a serious flaw?
6. God *wants* expressions of worship, but He *does not* need them for Himself—why are they given?
7. Read verses 14 and 15 as a description of the true worship of God. Cf. John 4:24.
8. To see just how far hypocrisy can go, read carefully verses 16-21. It is possible to speak against stealing and at the same time be a thief! Discuss the psychological development of this tragic condition.
9. What commandments of the ten commandments were taught against and then performed by the very ones who taught against them.
10. God did nothing while such open rebellion was practiced—how did these people interpret the silence of God? Cf. Rom. 2:1-4.

## PSALM 51

### DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

The Prayer of a Penitent.

### ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-4, Petitions for Pardon and Cleansing sustained by Confessions, Condemning Self and Vindicating God. Stanza II., vers. 5-9, In Further Pleading for Pardon, the Psalmist Confronts his own Deep Need and God's Just Requirements, passing on to Consenting Petitions and Petitions pure and simple. Stanza III., vers. 10-14, Petitions for Renewal, against Banishment and Deprivation, for Restoration and Upholding; urged, with Alternating Hopes and Fears. Stanza IV., vers. 15-19, Assured that Only his Divine Lord can open his Lips, the psalmist Depreciates Accustomed Sacrifices as Inadequate to meet his Own Desperate Case, but prays for Such Prosperity in behalf of Jerusalem as shall make Right Offerings Acceptable.

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(Lm.) Psalm—By David—When Nathan the prophet went unto him, when he had gone in unto Bathsheba.

- 1 Be gracious unto me O God according to thy kindness,  
in the multitude of thy compassions blot out my  
transgressions;
- 2 Thoroughly wash me from mine iniquity,  
and from my sin make me pure.
- 3 For my transgressions I myself acknowledge,  
and my sin is before me continually:
- 4 Against thee only thee have I sinned,  
and that which is wicked in thy sight have I done,—  
That thou mayest be justified when thou speakest,  
be clear when thou enterest into judgment.
- 5 Lo! in iniquity was I born,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- 6 Lo! truth thou hast desired in the inward parts,  
and in the hidden part thou wouldst cause me to know  
wisdom.
- 7 Thou shalt<sup>1</sup> cleanse me from sin with hyssop that I may be  
pure  
thou shalt<sup>2</sup> wash me that I may be whiter than snow.
- 8 Thou shalt<sup>3</sup> satisfy<sup>3</sup> me with joy and gladness,—  
the bones thou hast crushed will exult.
- 9 Hide thy face from my sins,  
and all mine iniquities blot out.
- 10 A heart that is pure create<sup>4</sup> for me,<sup>5</sup>  
and a spirit that is steadfast renew.<sup>6</sup>
- 11 Do not cast me away from thy presence,  
and thy Holy Spirit do not take from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of thy salvation,  
and with a generous spirit shalt thou uphold me.
- 13 I would fain teach transgressors thy ways,  
and sinners unto thee would return.

1. Literally, "purge me with hyssop." See Exodus 12:22, Hebrews 9:18-22.

2. These verbs "thus give utterance to the psalmist's faith that God can and will restore him—Kp. We might almost call these "consenting petitions."

2. So *Gt.* Cp. 90:14—Gn.

4. Does not imply creation out of nothing—Br.,—true: "always used strictly of the creative power of God"—Pe.,—equally true. "The whole spiritual being of the man had fallen into chaos"—Pe. Yet in chaos are the elements which "the creative power of God" can turn into kosmos.

5. M.T. adds: "O God."

6. Or: "make anew." M.T. adds: "within me."

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- 14 Snatch me away from the guilt of bloodshed<sup>1</sup> O God,<sup>2</sup>  
my tongue will ring out thy righteousness.
- 15 Sovereign Lord! my lips shalt thou open,  
and my mouth will declare thy praise.
- 16 For thou wilt not delight<sup>3</sup> in peace-offering,<sup>4</sup>  
Ascending-sacrifice will not please:<sup>5</sup>
- 17 The peace-offerings of God are a spirit broken,—  
a heart broken and crushed<sup>6</sup>  
thou wilt not despise.<sup>7</sup>
- 18 Do good in thy favour unto Zion,  
thou shalt build the walls of Jerusalem:
- 19 Then wilt thou delight in the sacrifices of righteousness,<sup>7</sup>  
then shall ascend on thine altar young bulls.

(Lm.) To the Chief Musician.

## PARAPHRASE

### PSALM 51

*(Written after Nathan the prophet had come to inform David of God's judgment against him because of his adultery with Bathsheba, and his murder of Uriah, her husband.)*

O loving and kind God, have mercy. Have pity upon me and take away the awful stain of my transgressions.

2 Oh, wash me, cleanse me from this guilt. Let me be pure again.

3 For I admit my shameful deed—it haunts me day and night.

4 It is against You and You alone I sinned, and did this terrible thing. You saw it all, and Your sentence against me is just.

5 But I was born a sinner, yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.

1. Ml.: "from bloods." "Guilt of" seems necessarily implied; as neither "killing" nor "being killed" can be meant as something impending.

2. M.T. adds ("for emphasis"—Del.) "thou God of my salvation." Too long a line for Br., who conjectures "Yahweh" instead of "O God." The additional words are in both Sep. and Vul.

3. As futures, these verbs readily lend themselves to the restriction: "in my case."

4. M.T. adds: "that I should give it."

5. M.T. adds: "O God."

6. How natural, that friends of the injured should "despise" a repentance which, however sincere, could never be the restoration of innocence and life.

7. M.T. adds: "ascending-sacrifices and entire-offerings."

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6 You deserve honesty from the heart; yes, utter sincerity and truthfulness. Oh, give me this wisdom.

7 Sprinkle me with the cleansing blood<sup>1</sup> and I shall be clean again. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 And after You have punished me, give me back my joy again.

9 Don't keep looking at my sins—erase them from Your sight.

10 Create in me a new, clean heart, O God, filled with clean thoughts and right desires.

11 Don't toss me aside, banished forever from Your presence. Don't take Your Holy Spirit from me.

12 Restore to me again the joy of Your salvation, and make me willing to obey You.

13 Then I will teach Your ways to other sinners, and they—guilty like me—will repent and return to You.

14, 15 Don't sentence me to death. O my God, You alone can rescue me. Then I will sing of Your forgiveness,<sup>2</sup> for my lips will be unsealed—oh, how I will praise You.

16 You don't want penance;<sup>3</sup> if You did, how gladly I would do it! You aren't interested in offerings burned before You on the altar.

17 It is a broken spirit You want—remorse and penitence. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not ignore.

18 And Lord, don't punish Israel for my sins—help Your people and protect Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

19 And when my heart is right,<sup>5</sup> then You will rejoice in the good that I do<sup>6</sup> and in the bullocks I bring to sacrifice upon Your altar.

## EXPOSITION

The lesson of the First Psalm is, Blessed is the man who has not sinned. The lesson of the Thirty Second, is, Blessed is the man who, though he has sinned, has been forgiven. The lesson of this psalm is, That the removal of sin by pardon and purification is so difficult, that none but God can accomplish it. This ultimate lesson is here so taught as to make it deeply impressive.

1. Literally, "purge me with hyssop." See Exodus 12:22, Hebrews 9:18-22.

2. Literally, "righteousness."

3. Literally, "a sacrifice."

4. Literally, "Do good in Your good pleasure unto Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem."

5. Implied.

6. Literally, "then you will delight in the sacrifice of righteousness."

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There is in this psalm no cheap promise of amendment—in fact no promise at all, until, by every form of supplication, God himself has been importuned to grant deliverance from the condemnation and stain and power of sin.

Of all the one hundred and fifty Psalms, this is pre-eminently *the Penitential Psalm*. There are others; but this is the chief. In fact, throughout all the Bible, this prayer for pardon stands pre-eminent. It is all prayer, and its prayer is so personal, so comprehensive, so sustained, that it naturally serves for all time as a fund of feeling and storehouse of words, to help all petitioners who are craving for pardon at the hands of Infinite Love. It includes no fewer than seventeen distinct petitions, two of which are repeated, so as to total nineteen; and these are urged with great fulness and urgency of pleading. Many of the petitions are winged with considerations which at once embolden the petitioner and present pleas for a favourable answer: *according to thy kindness—in the multitude of thy compassions—that I may be pure—that I may be whiter than snow*; coming down to physical results, *the bones thou hast crushed will exult*; going out to the good of others, *sinner unto thee would return*.

The STRUCTURE of the psalm is worth notice. After the historical *occasion*, which the whole psalm sustains, the petitioner leads off with four petitions, the first general, then three specific, touching *transgressions, iniquity, sin*. These are followed by frank *confession*, the psalmist condemning himself, and vindicating his Divine Judge, before whom he feels himself to be arraigned; succeeded by two *discoveries* (*lo! lo!*) both of which form an aggravation of the condition of the suppliant—he comes of a corrupted stock, and has to do with a God whose requirements are exacting. He is thus driven back to *petitions* for Divine mercy and help as his only hope, three of which are “consenting petitions”—*thou shalt cleanse, wash, satisfy*, which have all the appearance of being a laying hold of promises expressed or implied, and an accepting of the Divine method of restoration; the two remaining petitions being the bare imperatives of urgency—*Hide, blot out*.

Having devoted two stanzas (twenty lines) mainly to entreaties for pardon, the psalmist now goes more deeply into the need for renewal. His need is for a *heart*—mind, inner man—that is *pure* from the trail and stain of sin; and for a *spirit*—a directing inward energy—that is *constant* in its action, in holding him unwaveringly to the higher ends of life. The supply of a

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need so deep must come from God: the offender has no hope in himself. Hence his prayer: *create, renew or make anew*. The precise nature of such Divine action need not preplex us. It may be said, that to re-create a man is a greater work than to create him. And yet, if creation itself does not necessarily include the production of new material, but rather the new disposal and fashioning of the old, as the history of *bara'* plainly shows (see especially Num. 16); much more must it be so in re-creation, which is the new fashioning of the same man, and not the making of another independent being. Personal identity *must* remain. But herein lies the supreme wonder of the new creation—that with the preservation of personal identity, should be harmonised the new fashioning of its moral character. To remember the sin of the past, and yet no longer to feel its fascination: this is indeed a wonderful thing. To own responsibility for the past, and yet no longer to dread capital punishment: this is another wonder, equally great. Both wonders demand the creative energy of God for their production.

Probably this is no mere academical discussion; although, it must be owned, that the succeeding deprecatory petitions of the psalmist form links with a better past than with most men can be assumed to have existed; for it is much to be feared that heaven does *not* lie about *all* human beings in their infancy. The psalmist, at any rate, knew what it was to live in God's *presence*; hence his prayer not to be *cast away from* it: knew what it was to possess God's *Holy Spirit*; hence his cry not to be *bereft* of it: knew by experience *the joy of God's salvation* hence his entreaty to have it *restored* to him. And doubtless this happier past colours all he has yet to say: suggests the *generous* care for others which flows therefrom, which *would fain teach transgressors* the right way, and would work for them with a hope of inducing them also to *return*. But now suddenly starts up a spectre—the horrible spectre of conscious *blood-guiltiness*. It is as though in the realm of the spirit could be seen a Blood-Avenger in hot pursuit. *Snatch me away*, he cries, to God himself. Nothing so vivid could have sprung to a brave man's lips as to any of the ordinary dangers of war; and of any feeling of revenge, moving to the shedding of any other man's blood, there is certainly no trace in this psalm. Hence we are psychologically compelled to endorse the avowed occasion of the psalm which stands at its head. It is not surprising that the psalmist should reveal his assurance that such a display of Divine mercy would

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be sure to result in a public outburst of thankfulness,—an assurance well vindicated by the composition of Ps. 32, which was evidently written after this; but the wonder is, that God's *righteousness* should be signalised as the Divine attribute to be celebrated. Had he here written, "My tongue will ring out thy COMPASSION," we should not have been surprised; but *righteousness!* that is another matter, and demands thought; for the great demonstration of Divine rectitude, even when forgiving offenders, had not then been displayed (Rom. 3:25, 26). Still, of course, it *is right* that God should exercise his *right* to forgive. He will not, cannot, exercise it wrongfully. It is well that we should at least see how thorough was this offender's repentance.

The *opening* of David's *lips* is instructive; for they had doubtless been significantly closed, first in obstinacy (32:3), and then in shame. Now that they are opened once more, it is to good purpose. The Levitical sacrifices were never intended to cover wilful and flagrant sin. David ought to have been cut off from among his people. His double crime richly deserved it. But then, who could set the law in motion against him? He could only be left in the hands of that Heavenly Lord whose vicegerent he himself was; and if He, in loving severity, had already been chastising him, as from several psalms (such as 32, 38, 39) we have seen reason to believe was the case,—who are WE that we should wish to stay the hand of Divine Mercy? Admitting all this, it is fitting that we should see how little disposed the Royal Penitent was to daub with untempered mortar his own desperate case; which he would have been doing, had he piled up animal sacrifices to atone for his awful guilt. Of unspeakably more worth than they, for the purpose of restoring fellowship with God, was that offering which David had left him to render,—the presentation of *a broken spirit*,— of *a broken and crushed heart*. These, *men* might *despise*—excusably despise, but David's merciful God would know how to value them, as being in fact beyond all price. It is any great wonder that, for such a truly humbled spirit, there should come a rebound? that the feet of a man thus uplifted out of the abysses of degradation and despair should already show signs of being consciously placed on a rock (40:2)? Hence we need not restort, with many critics, to the hypothesis of a later origin for the conclusion of this psalm. With Dr. Briggs, we prefer to regard the psalm as a consistent whole; only, unlike him, we cannot for a moment think that in the first instance this penitent suppliant was a nation: the

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conscience of a nation, though not to be despised, is a very conglomerate product, compared with an individual conscience with such exquisitely delicate folds in it as this which quivers and groans and is made glad in this psalm. In any case, the walls of Jerusalem were as yet unfinished, as the history plainly shows (1 K. 3:1); and it seems like a natural outburst of patriotism that the true worth of the Temple ritual should now at length come into the view of the better self of that King David whom we otherwise know to have been so profoundly interested in the orderly ritual worship of Jehovah his God.

There are still a few words and phrases scattered throughout this precious psalm, which will repay us for a parting recognition. The reader is presumably familiar with the words *transgression*, *iniquity*, *sin* here used, as "meaning respectively, (1) defection from God or rebellion against Him: (2) the perversion of right, depravity of conduct: (3) error, wandering from the right way, missing the mark in life"—Kp. The phrases to express the removal of sin are also worthy of note: (1) *blot out*, twice employed (vers. 1, 9), which regards sin as a debt recorded in God's book which needs to be erased or cancelled—who then can cancel it but God? (2) *wash*, which it is remarkable properly applies to clothes, yielding the profound suggestion, that no mere skin-deep cleansing meets the sinner's case; but that, as garments become ingrained with filth, so the very fibers of our minds become defiled, so that a process of much treading and rinsing is needed to detach and remove sin therefrom—again who can thus "wash" but God? (3) *cleanse*, for which we lack a literal rendering in English, seeing that the Hebrew word is an intensification of the verb "to miss the mark," or "lose," or "sin," and we have no such word as *unsin*, which Edersheim suggests. (4) To render *pure*, physically, ceremonially, morally—the Levitical association of this and the foregoing with the removal of leprosy, being another profound suggestion, calling to mind the corroding and contaminating and generally loathsome nature of that which has to be removed. (5) But perhaps the association of *hyssop* with the process of "unsinning," is most striking of all—far more significant than would at first sight appear. Hyssop is "a well-known aromatic plant which grows on walls (1 K. 5:13); and when bound in bunches serves as a brush or fan in sacred sprinklings (Exo. 12:22; Lev. 14:4-6, 49, 51)." Its significance lies in the fact that, when employed in ceremonial sprinkling, it was always closely or remotely connected with blood-shedding;



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closely, when dipped in blood (Exo. 12:22) or in blood and water (Lev. 14:6, 7, 49-52), remotely though not less really when dipped in the water of separation (Num. 19); when thus remotely then even the more impressively, as furnishing the singular idea of sacrifice perpetuated any length of time, and individually applied to any person or thing. It is surely remarkable, that in this very psalm in which the penitent declares the inapplicability of animal sacrifices to his case, he should nevertheless employ terms so intimately bound up with the sacrificial system. This, at least, may be said: that when a Christian intelligently rejoices that his "heart has been sprinkled from an evil conscience," his gladness is intensified by the realisation of an individual bringing home to him of an offering made once for all away in the past whose efficacy has not yet been lost. This survey of the sacrificial and cleansing terms employed in this psalm, especially as bringing leprosy into view, may perhaps throw a welcome sidelight on the word "righteousness, which rather puzzled us when we came across it in our general survey of this psalm. "Righteousness," as faithfulness to promise, we can easily understand; but had God then ever promised the forgiveness of deadly sin to David? In literal explicitness—no; by gracious construction of his plighted word—yes! In his covenant with David by the mouth of Nathan the prophet concerning David's descendants (2 Sam. 7) Jehovah had promised never to remove his kindness from David as he had removed it from Saul. If his sons should commit iniquity—alas! the father himself has done that now: Jehovah would correct them with the rod of men—David is even yet smarting under that rod: and with the stripes, the plague-strokes, or leprosy-strokes, of the sons of common men—even these we have already seen have not been withheld from David. What a mercy! David himself has thus been brought within the very terms of the covenant formulated for his sons. And now, if God will only answer David's outcry for mercy: that mercy will be the *righteousness* which fulfills the Divine word to the letter:—

*My tongue will ring out thy righteousness!*

Righteous in smiting—righteous in sparing: a covenant-keeping God is Jehovah "the Becoming One," who thus "becometh" the gracious interpreter of his own covenant; so as to treasure up unlooked-for grace, and, when unveiling it, shewing it to be at the same time unsullied *righteousness*.

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One thought more. David—as we have seen—had enjoyed the presence of the Holy Spirit, or he could not have prayed, *Take it not from me*. Was that Spirit, not hallowing, as well as illuminating and revealing? Can we really enter into the undercurrent of this psalm, without perceiving that a hallowing Divine Presence had lain at the roots of the writer's spiritual life; without recognising that this anxious petitioner is craving, not only again to sing psalms, but also and mainly to live a pure life? By how much soever this is clear, by so much also must it be clear that the Evangelist spoke *comparatively* when he said (Jn. 7:39) that the Spirit could not be given until Jesus was glorified. If then the inward presence of the Holy Spirit meant so much to David, how much more, as a dynamic working out righteousness, ought it not to be to ourselves unto whom the ages have reached forth their gifts!

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the one essential lesson of this psalm?
2. Rotherham says there are no fewer than seventeen distinct petitions in this psalm. Find them and list them—how many of them express your own need?
3. There are qualities in our Lord which give us boldness at the throne of grace. Name three mentioned in this psalm.
4. As to the structure of this psalm: there are four petitions—a “frank confession”, and two “discoveries”, and finally three more petitions called “consenting petitions”, and then two imperative petitions. Please, please for your own soul's development: work out this structure for yourself.
5. In this tragic sin there is a desperate need for “renewal”—what two elements of man must be re-created? How is this to be done? Please note the wonder of it all.
6. David lost two or three wonderful possessions that he sadly missed and wanted back—name at least two of them.
7. David was “blood guilty”—what does this mean?
8. Oh, that we could believe with David that God is the one who sees and knows all we do and therefore cannot be unfair in judgment—how shall we develop this capacity?
9. Define: “transgression”; “blot out”; “wash”; “cleanse”.
10. Define: “pure”; the use of “hyssop”; “righteousness” as used of God to David.