

PSALM 51:1–13

Third Week after Pentecost, June 9-11, 2018

Smith

“WASH AWAY MY GUILT”

Children’s Devotion: Words for “forgive” = cover, blot out, take away, wash away.

We read today from a translation called the Christian Standard Bible. Since our time is precious, I won’t go into my reasons for choosing this translation today, but listen to this familiar Psalm and consider the way the translator has presented the words of King David:

For the choir director. A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba. 1 Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion. 2 Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge. 5 Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me. 6 Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within. 7 Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. 9 Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt. 10 God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit. 13 Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you. (*Christian Standard Bible*).

This Psalm was composed after David sinned with Bathsheba, but this Psalm isn’t only about David’s sin with Bathsheba. It’s about every sin, all of human guilt; every one of mankind’s transgressions against God. All of our sinfulness is here in this Psalm—even our original sin, the sin we’re born with. And God’s grace is here, too; God’s compassion and willingness to save. We pray with David four words. “Wash away my guilt. Amen.”

The word “sin” makes some people uncomfortable. Some folks would rather talk about ‘mistake’ or ‘error’ because these words don’t seem to judge the individual. They don’t make you feel uncomfortable. You can still feel good about yourself if you have made an error because you feel as if you’ve maintained a “C” average in life if things just haven’t quite worked out as planned.

But sin? Sin is failure. Sin is a word that’s biased, that’s loaded, and that leaves one feeling bad, down—worse than that. Crushed. Sin is **missing the mark**. Sin is **rebellion against God**. Sin is **stepping over the line** (this is what “transgression” means). Sin is **failing to listen when God is talking**. Sin is **falling when God wants us to stand upright**. And sin has consequences.

And we have to start here at sin because all of theology, all of religion, focuses on man’s relationship to God and God’s relationship to man. But, all of our attention on man must be “man guilty of sin and condemned,” and all of our attention on God must be, “God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner.”^a Any other view of God or man will only lead to errors and heresies and blasphemies that contradict the Bible, the word of God and the will of God.

In our Psalm, David had committed a sin that he thought would go unnoticed. He thought he could invite sin into a room, close the door, send it on its way again, and no one would be the wiser. David turned his back on God. He did what he thought was nobody's business but his. He did what he thought was right for him. But when his pastor showed him how far he had fallen, that he stood condemned before God, sentenced to hell because of his sins, worthy of death—eternal death—David realized just how lost he was.

So David begs for what he's missing. He begs for God's grace and mercy. He pleads for God to wash him and to make him clean. He uses all kinds of words: **wash away, cleanse me, purify me with hyssop, turn away from my sin, blot out my guilt.** They all mean the same thing: God, forgive me. Make my sin go away.

And based on what David says, we see that by falling into this sin, David had discovered how serious all sins are. We commit sins against our neighbor,^b against ourselves,^c and against God.^d Now, when David says in verse 4, "Against you—you alone—have I sinned," he doesn't mean that his sin wasn't also committed against Bathsheba, her husband Uriah, and against his own marriage. He means that he realizes the enormity of his sins—that even what we think are small sins, hidden sins, sins that are nobody's business, stand like monuments chiseled in granite with our guilt proclaimed for all to see for all eternity.

We are blind to this towering condemnation of our sins until it is pointed out to us. And it's not just the sins we commit. It goes back to the guilt we're even born with.

David confesses: "**Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.**" Now, don't misunderstand David. He doesn't mean that his mother was sinning by the act of conceiving her son. That's one misunderstanding of the word of God that needs to end here and now, forever. There is nothing sinful or displeasing to God about the sex between husband and wife—now, any other and every other sexual act or desire is sinful before God. But David's point is that even the God-pleasing act of procreation in marriage is stained with sin. Not because there is any flaw in God's plan, but because there is a flaw in God's people, passed down from Adam and Eve to your parents and to you and to your children.

Before we leave this verse, verse 5 in our translation, we need to recognize that it preaches to us the truth that an infant still in the womb of the mother, even an infant so young and unformed that it has only just been conceived, **is a soul that is guilty of sin, and is a soul who needs a Savior.** Not only does this end any discussion about abortion, since only a human being has a soul that needs salvation, but it also proclaims the need that newborn babies have for baptism. Anyone guilty of sin needs to have their sins washed away, once and for all. This is not just for adults, as circumcision wasn't just for adults, but for babies, too. "The promise (of baptism)," Peter said, "is for you and your children,"^e and Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."^f

So David takes us all into the dark despair of the heart when we know we are not right with God. And he does the only thing we can do: He prays for mercy. And this prayer for mercy comes from faith.

As we plead with God for forgiveness, we are led to use whatever language fits. David says, “Purify me with hyssop”—hyssop is a kind of shrub used as a paint brush and as a scrubber for getting mildew off the walls and for scraping unwanted stains away. It sounds painful, but David doesn’t care. Whatever it takes to make us right again, do that, O Lord, he prays.

But let’s look at what God has truly done, because it doesn’t involve painful scraping for us. But we should remember what painful suffering it meant for Jesus. Our rescue from sin, **our justification**, has two parts.

First, God reveals his grace to us in Christ, who paid the price for our sins on the cross. Through Christ, God shows his mercy to us, and he shows us that sin can’t accuse us anymore, and our conscience can be at peace, trusting in God’s kindness and mercy.

Second, God sends his Holy Spirit to us. David prays, “Do not take your Holy Spirit from me.” The Spirit enters into our flesh when we come to faith, usually at our baptism but sometimes, especially with an adult, before that, when he hears the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins proclaimed.

The Spirit shines a light onto the world around us, so that we see things more clearly, as God sees them. We see what use to be seductive or alluring, tantalizing or thrilling, and now in the eyes of faith we see a trap; we understand the Devil’s shadow lurking nearby, and sin crouching on all fours, waiting to spring out and attack us. He helps us to say “No” to temptations, so that even if they won’t leave us alone, we don’t have to embrace them when they come near.

Jesus Christ is unmarked, unscratched, unscathed by sin. And so even though we are marked, scratched and infected with sin even from birth, remember what Jesus has done for you. When he grabs hold of you, you and Jesus exchange something. He takes from you your unclean, sinful, cursed birth, steeped in sin from Adam and Eve, and he gives to you his birth, pure, new, and holy, and makes it as though his birth was your own. So we glory even in Jesus’ birth as well as in his atoning death and sanctifying resurrection, because everything about Jesus makes us right with God.

It doesn’t matter that your mother wasn’t the Virgin Mary and it doesn’t matter that you didn’t suffer under Pontius Pilate, that you weren’t crucified until you were dead and buried. What matters is that Jesus did those things for you, for your sake, for your sins, to make you whole and healed again.

When you are torn apart over sin in your life, overwhelmed by your shame, your guilt, the product of your rebellion or by the depth of your fall, remember David’s prayer here in Psalm 51. Pray with him, “Wash away my guilt,” and know that you have a Savior from your sin—from all of your sin. And ask God to help you turn away from temptation, to serve him with what you do, with what you say, and even with your very thoughts. And the peace of God, etc. Amen.

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- ^a LW 12 p. 311.
 - ^b Leviticus 19:17
 - ^c 1 Corinthians 6:18
 - ^d Genesis 39:9
 - ^e Acts 2:39
 - ^f Matthew 19:14