

Praying With The Prayers Of The Bible: Praying with Penitential Tears

Psalm 51:2; 'Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.'

Psalm 51 is the most personal, the most passionate and the most profound prayer for forgiveness found anywhere in the Bible. Without any introduction, explanation or excuse, the Psalmist cries out, 'Have mercy on me, O God.' Jewish and Christian scholars have almost been unanimous in seeing this Psalm as David's personal prayer for pardon, following his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and then scheming to have her husband Uriah killed (2 Sam. 11).

As we go through the Psalm, its various stages take us from deep contrition to joyful testimony. First, the confession; vv.1-4. As David bares his soul to God, there is no blaming other people, no excuses made, no pleading special circumstances.

'Have mercy on me O God.' Notice the personal pronouns. 'My transgressions,' twice (vv.1 and 3); 'my iniquity;' 'my sin,' twice (vv.2 and 3). And David knows that while he has sinned against his own family and against the murdered Uriah, all sin is ultimately against God. 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned' (v.4).

Second, the condition; vv.5-6. While David alone is responsible for the sins he has committed, he recognises that he is part of fallen, sinful humanity. Both Judaism and Christianity have a doctrine of original sin. So deep and all pervasive is the condition of fallen humanity that he speaks of being 'conceived' in sin and 'brought forth' in iniquity (v.5).

Although some commentators have tried to dismiss this teaching here by saying that David was conceived out of wedlock, its implications are far more profound. In v.6 he speaks about 'the inward being' and 'my secret heart.' David knows only too well that behind the sins he has committed lies a human heart prone to sin, attracted by sin and enticed to sin.

Third, the cleansing; vv. 7-12. With this deep, penitential confession of his transgressions, his iniquity and his sin, David now cries out for the only remedy – God's power to conquer human sin. The prayer began with a plea for mercy (v.1) and then followed the repeated petitions for the 'blotting out,' the 'washing' and the 'cleansing' from sin. Now the plea is for something deeper still; 'Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.' (v.7). But David wants more and so we have the prayer in v.10; 'Create in me a clean heart.' And still David prays, 'Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me.'

Resulting from this sincere confession and heart-felt prayer for forgiveness and cleansing, comes the assurance of God's gracious answer. When David is spiritually restored he will teach others the way of God's salvation (v.13) and praise God for his own deliverance (v.14).

So Psalm 51 promises forgiveness, cleansing, restoration and a place to serve God when we, in true penitence, make the same unqualified confessions of our sins.). *By the Revd Dr Herbert McGonigle, Senior Lecturer in Historical Theology & Church History, Nazarene Theological College, Manchester*