

MERCY

FOR TODAY

———A Daily———

PRAYER

———from———

PSALM 51

JONATHAN PARNELL

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JONATHAN PARNELL

B&H
PUBLISHING
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Printed in the United States of America

978-1-5359-5927-8

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 234.1
Subject Heading: REPENTANCE / GRACE
(THEOLOGY) / BIBLE. O.T. PSALMS 51

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INTRODUCTION

There are two things you should know before you read this little book: first, and most important, God is merciful; and second, because of God's mercy, our repentance is possible.

Right away I'm assuming this doesn't sound strange to you. If you're a Christian, you've heard before in one way or another that God is merciful. It's one of his most frequently cited virtues. In fact, I wonder if perhaps it's so frequently cited, right along with "grace," that we tend to yawn at the word. God's "mercy and grace" can become a blob category that we just use to say he's more nice than harsh. It can become our way of giving a respectful hat-tip, a creaturely nod of acknowledgment—but it no longer captivates us.

You know how this goes. Our overuse of deep words can tend to diminish our sense of wonder. We can reference realities with our mouths that our hearts can't grasp—partly because it's easier to polish our words than grow our affections. Indeed, this is one of the diciest things about being a pastor. I once heard it said that the most difficult part of pastoral ministry is that pastors must be close to God, or at least be good at *pretending* to be close to God. Oh my.

Am I truly close or am I pretending?

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This is the kind of question that really matters to me, and it's in the foundational mix of why I've wanted to write about God's mercy. Pastors tend to *talk about God's mercy* at the conceptual level (I plan to do that in these pages), but we must also *testify of God's mercy* from our own experience (I plan to do that too). And though I'm writing as a pastor, I'm coming at this as plainly human. I'm as desperate for God's mercy as anybody who ever lived, and I'm going to talk and testify about God's mercy like that's true. My hope is that you freshly grasp the wonder of God's mercy in your own life.

HIS MERCY IS MORE

The mercy of God is a reality true to God's nature that we could not live without. Now, I realize we could say that about everything to do with God's nature; everything that is of God, pertaining to his identity, is indispensable. We don't get to shuffle the pieces and rank them. God is God, and he gives *himself* in all that he is. At the level of our existence, though, as fallen creatures who borrow every breath, God's mercy is the mystifying pathway of hope into everything else. I have breathed again, just now, and my heart is still beating—and I know about oxygen and organs and all that biologically enables me to stay alive—but beneath these ingredients and functions I am here in this moment *because of God's mercy*. And I mean that as deeply and truly as I can. If it weren't for God's mercy, I would not be here. You wouldn't either. We *are* because God *is . . . merciful*.

God is kind—that is what mercy means. Maybe you've heard it said before that God's grace is getting what you don't deserve, and

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God's mercy is not getting what you do deserve. That's true, in one sense, and it will certainly preach, but it doesn't tell the whole story. God's mercy is more than that. Yes, it means pardon, and yes, it means God withholds judgment—but it all starts in the heart of God himself. In other words, God *shows* mercy because God *is* merciful. So we're not just talking about a thing God does, but who God is.

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•————•

NOTHING HELD BACK

There is a special phrase in Luke's Gospel that speaks to these depths. It's found in Zechariah's prophecy in Luke chapter 1. Zechariah is prophesying about God's purpose for his son, John, and he says in verses 76–78:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the
Most High; for you will go before the Lord to
prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to
his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because
of the tender mercy of our God.

Verse 78 is the third time *mercy* is used in the chapter. First, in verse 58, Elizabeth's pregnancy of John was understood as the Lord's "great mercy" to her. Then in verse 72, Zechariah called God's faithfulness to Israel "mercy promised to our fathers." Both of these mentions have to do with actions and things. The old, barren woman was pregnant with a child, and *that* was God's great

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mercy to her. It became as practical as a crying baby she thought she'd never have.

And also, many years before Zechariah and Elizabeth, God swore to Abraham that he'd do certain things for his people. He'd conquer their enemies and rescue them from trouble, and Zechariah summarizes all those things as God's "mercy promised." A surprising pregnancy and fulfilled promises—both are called *mercy*.

But in verse 78, it goes deeper. Salvation was coming for God's people, and the mission of John the Baptist was to make that known. He was preparing the way for Jesus by spelling out for folks how big a deal Jesus is. Jesus meant salvation. Jesus meant the forgiveness of sins. *But why?* What is behind even the sending of Jesus and his gospel?

Verse 78: "... because of the tender mercy of our God."

Jesus has come because of God's "tender mercy"—that's the special phrase, and in the entire New Testament, it only shows up here. The word *tender* actually means "inward parts." It's referring to the stuff deep down on the inside, like how we might use the phrase "the bottom of my heart." We're talking about the place of profoundest motivation, and in Luke 1:78 that describes God's mercy. It is mercy as true and sincere as it possibly could be. There's nothing held back. This is ultra mercy—mercy extreme in its compassion. In fact, it's so unexpected and wondrous that we really can't wrap our heads around it. That's why Luke gives us images, first with a sunrise that overcomes the darkness,¹ and then with an

1. See Luke 1:78–79.

unforeseen neighbor who helps a man half-dead,² and then with a father who runs to embrace his estranged son who is timid with shame.³ This is how the mercy of God looks. This is God's *tender mercy*.

BRIDGING THE GAP

At this point, though, mercy is still conceptual for us, even with our imaginations in overdrive. And while that is valid and important—*thank God for our imaginations*—something different happens when we begin to understand that we ourselves are in the same place as those people stuck in darkness, and as that man left for dead, and as that son who smelled like pigs rehearsing his lines on the long road home. That requires our imagination, too, but it's our imagination employed by the integration of truth and experience.

One counselor-friend of mine often says that Christians have a mental category for God's truth but a "learned sense" of God in everyday life. Sadly, those two are rarely the same, and bridging the gap between them is what the life of faith is all about. *Will I take God at his Word even when it's not clicking for me? Will I believe what God says over the other voices? Will I live like God is more real than my troubles?* Our faithful resolve to answer these questions in the affirmative becomes the most important strides throughout our Christian walk, especially when it means overcoming the hurdles of past wounds. It's not arbitrary that the apostle Paul uses the

2. See Luke 10:25–37.

3. See Luke 15:11–32.

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metaphors of a footrace and a fight to describe enduring faith.⁴ We must take the unchanging truths of God and wrestle them into personal relevance:

Yes, God is kind and merciful. He says so. He shows us in Scripture. I recognize this as truth. And I also know what it's like to be lost, to sit helpless, to feel shame. I know what it's like to need God's mercy.

Connections like this shape our lived reality. It makes us see things differently. It is what we do when we pray.

BUILDING THE BRIDGE

There are already a hundred reasons to pray, and here's one more: prayer is the exercise of connecting God's truth to our experience. And I don't just mean the specific things we say in prayer, but the very act of prayer itself. Prayer, most basically, means *we come to God*. It means that we—you and I, people like us—approach God. *How marvelous is that?* We address God! Whether we're sitting in darkness (Ps. 88:6) or crying from the depths (Ps. 130:1) or resting in God's deliverance (Ps. 116:8–9), prayer is the act of speaking to God from our experience. It's when we actualize the truths about God we believe. It's the first and most important step of faith in lived reality.

This is the reason the psalms are so helpful.

When I was a kid in Sunday school, the book of Psalms was always the easiest book in the Bible to find. I had a teacher once tell

4. See 2 Timothy 4:7.

me that the psalms were right in the middle, and that if I ever wanted to read one I just needed to place my thumb halfway into the golden fore edge. It was almost like magic. “Hey, Mom, watch this.” *Voilà!* The psalms. And it might as well have been magic—not how I could get there, but that the psalms really are in the middle.

In the earliest days of my discipleship I learned that the center of my Bible showed me how to pray. This book that was supposed to be a “lamp to my feet” (Ps. 119:105)—the verse quoted at my baptism as I exited the water—was a book that didn’t just report truth, but modeled for me how to live truly. The Bible has never been a sterile collection of propositions, but more like a soundtrack to everyday life, and we get to sing along. Indeed, *we must sing along*. That’s one way to talk about praying the psalms.

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Prayer is the exercise of
connecting God’s truth
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•————•

HELPFUL AND GNARLY

God didn’t us leave us to ourselves to figure out who he is, or how to come to him—and as we pray the psalms, we are learning both. We are learning to express, in real life, the truth we embrace. But it’s not just truth about God, it’s also truth about ourselves.

The Psalms show us that there is such a thing as *the way* of truth. God intends for us to live in congruence with his reality regardless of our circumstances, but the problem is that this isn’t easy—and the angst is clear. We’re only three psalms into the book before David is working through the difficulty of a good night’s sleep. David penned the psalm after he had been chased out of

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Jerusalem by an army of conspirators. There was a growing mob of men who wanted his head, and David was looking for a pillow. His enemies were chasing him, and the man needed sleep:

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory,
and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the
LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill.
(Ps. 3:3–4)

David remembers that God is his shield, and that God hears his prayers—and so, *goodnight*.

The Psalms get much gnarlier than this, though. While the psalmists often display brazen faith in the midst of adversity, at other times they are just trying to find their way back to God. “O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger . . .” (Ps. 6:1). “For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt . . .” (Ps. 25:11). “I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin” (Ps. 38:18). “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared” (Ps. 130:3–4). Most notably among these psalms of contrition is Psalm 51, which begins: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (Ps. 51:1). This is the psalm behind the contents of this book.

Psalm 51 is the psalm *par excellence* when it comes to repentance, but its greater message is simply that repentance is possible. That’s the second thing you need to know for this book you’re holding now, right alongside God’s mercy.

REAL REPENTANCE

It's no secret that the good news of Jesus includes the call to repentance. The Gospels show us right from the start that John the Baptist rocked the Israeli world with his stunningly straightforward "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). The book of Acts only makes it clearer. The preaching of the apostles demanded their hearers to repent. Jesus Christ has come back from the dead, for crying out loud! *That means something*. It means, at the very least, that business as usual isn't going to work. If Jesus has really defeated sin and death, then you can't live as if he hasn't. The new creation has broken into this darkened world and now everything is different. For the apostles, then, every human who heard this news—and who hears it to this day—is confronted with a decision. The message of the gospel has always been a fork in the road, and the invitation, the command, has never changed: "Repent."⁵

Repent because it's possible. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, whatever path you're following, you can turn. You can stop. You can *decide to follow Jesus*, as the old song goes.

Now, there are depths of wonder when it comes to *how* that happens. Repentance doesn't mean you're pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. Not at all. It is something that God grants⁶—something he gives, not something you achieve.⁷ And at the same time, the fork is in *your road*. The invitation is for *you*—and not as a one-time sort of thing, but as an all-of-life sort of thing. The

5. See Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 14:15; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20.

6. See Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25.

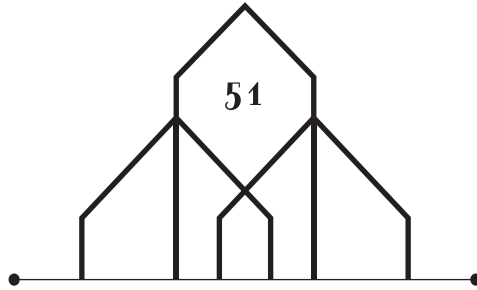
7. See Ephesians 2:8–9.

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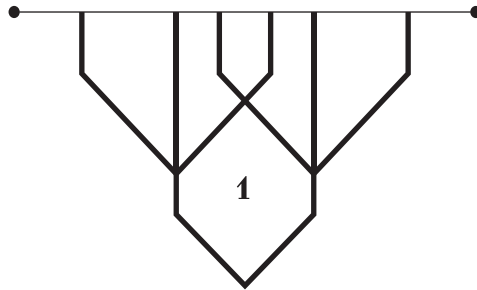
Reformer Martin Luther said it best in the first of his Ninety-Five Theses: “When our lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”

When you choose to follow Jesus, you are born again—*born again to follow him*. And every day you continue down that path, that long obedience in the same direction,⁸ putting off and putting on, crucifying the old self and giving life to the new self, saying “No” in order to say “Yes.” That life—an “entire life” of repentance—requires much mercy. As you walk this road, you are walking deeper into the mercy of God. That’s what this book is about.

8. Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 1980, 2000).



**HAVE MERCY ON ME, O GOD,
ACCORDING TO YOUR STEADFAST LOVE;
ACCORDING TO YOUR ABUNDANT MERCY
BLOT OUT MY TRANSGRESSIONS.**



PEOPLE LIKE US

PSALM 51:1

Psalm 51 was in my back pocket, and I intended to keep it there.

By the end of high school, the psalm had been there so long, and through so many washes, that it's outline was practically embossed into the denim of my conscience. I don't remember whether I had heard the psalm from someone else or bumped into it while reading the Bible on a whim, but either way, I knew it came from a nasty situation. I had attended enough Sunday school to get that part right. And, of course, there is this dead giveaway before the first verse:

TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN
NATHAN THE PROPHET WENT TO HIM, AFTER HE HAD
GONE IN TO BATHSHEBA.

This is meant to be an uncomfortable psalm. It was so uncomfortable to me that, years ago, it hardly felt relevant. The only reason I didn't toss the psalm altogether was just in case I ever found myself in a terrible circumstance where I thought it'd come

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in handy. That's why I held onto it. That's why I kept it close—*in my back pocket*.

I didn't recall the psalm everyday, just when I did something really bad—like a high-handed sort of sin that wrecked my conscience and afflicted me with regret. Whenever I ended up there, in that gut-wrenching place, in that terrible circumstance, I'd reach for the psalm and quote it again:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your
steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly
from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!
(Ps. 51:1–2)

If God could forgive David, I figured, then God could forgive me. And since God expected me to forgive others seventy times seven, then there was no need to keep count of how many times I would ask it of him. This was my neat, logical arrangement, and I thought it was working.

THE STORY OF PSALM 51

Those superscript introductions we see atop the individual psalms—like the dead giveaway of Psalm 51—are meant to give readers a heads-up on the kind of psalm you're about to read. Sometimes the superscripts tie individual psalms together as larger sections, and other times they simply provide the biblical context in which the psalm was written. In the case of Psalm 51, the superscript does both.

Right away when we open the Bible to Psalm 51, we know we're looking at a "Psalm of David." That is one thing the superscript makes clear. If we've been paying attention to the superscripts of the previous psalms, we also know that it's been a while since we've heard from David. Book One of the Psalms (chapters 1–41), according to the superscripts, is loaded with psalms "of David," but the ones immediately preceding Psalm 51 are mostly from the sons of Korah (and then one from Asaph). Psalm 51 marks a return back to David that continues through Psalm 71,¹ and many of the superscripts found in this section include more than just the "of David" note. Unlike other places in the book of Psalms, these superscripts in Psalms 51–71 mention historical vignettes from David's life, with Psalm 51 being the most infamous.

The Backstory to Psalm 51

Psalm 51 goes back to 2 Samuel 12 when Nathan the prophet confronted King David. The writing of the psalm was occasioned by this confrontation, but the whole ordeal has to do with the terrible thing David did before Nathan got in his face. That is found in 2 Samuel 11. It had happened "in the spring of the year."

King David, who had been anointed king over Israel against all odds, was walking on the roof of his palace. That is how the story begins, and we're supposed to know right out of the gate that there is something off with this. We're told that springtime in Palestine was the time when the kings would go out to battle. But King

1. This means we count the "anonymous psalms" of Psalms 66, 67, and 71 as fitting within the pattern of psalms belonging to David.

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David, at least in this instance, sent Joab and his servants to battle while he “remained at Jerusalem.” David was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The very first verse of chapter 11 tells us about this oddity, and while we shouldn’t overdo the note, there is something to say about David sitting this one out, sitting at home, alone, doing whatever kings do when they sit at home alone.

David was raised as a shepherd. His father Jesse put a wooden staff in his hand, not a silver spoon in his mouth. David was at his best when he was on mission, focused, whether that meant killing lions to protect the sheep or leading an army to defeat his enemies. David had done both, and his impressive military triumphs are actually highlighted twice in 2 Samuel 8: “And the LORD gave victory to David wherever he went” (vv. 6, 14).

David, the scrappy kid brother of Jesse’s sons who grew up watching sheep, had “made a name for himself” as king.

But this was the springtime, and David, for some inexplicable reason, was staying home. The text of Scripture tells us: “It happened, late one afternoon . . .” (v. 2).

Unthinkable Shame

King David saw a woman bathing. He saw her from a distance that late afternoon while he was walking on the roof of his house.

The story immediately gets embarrassing.

We’re not given a great many details about exactly how all this happened—probably because it’s too shameful—but David goes on to ask about who the woman is, the woman he had watched naked from a distance. He finds out her name is Bathsheba, and that she is

the wife of one of his brightest soldiers. Then we're told that David "took her" and she became pregnant, and then after a failed attempt at deceiving her husband into thinking the child was his own, David arranged for her husband to be stranded in the field of battle, where he was killed by the enemy. Then David took Bathsheba, now a widow, to be his own wife.

In a matter of a few verses the whole thing goes from bad to worse to unthinkable. King David has committed horrible sins. It is sick and repulsive and inexcusable, no matter how you look at it. David, God's chosen king over God's chosen people, is called to be the model Israelite. He's meant to be the national exemplar in holiness and faith—the quintessential good guy—but instead has become the harshest of villains. Reputation recovery is impossible, and we modern readers should feel as incensed against him as we do against the men of power in our own day who are found out for similar crimes.² He is a scumbag. King David, this man whom men should emulate, this man whom women should trust, has perpetrated evil and tried to hide it.

But then comes Nathan the prophet.

The spokesman of God, Nathan, is the *gift* in this story. He is the embodiment of God's *grace* to David. He confronts him with a penetrating report about a powerful man who has murderously oppressed a poor man. Nathan says there was a rich man who had

2. David's primary sin, even worse than adultery and murder, is "the abuse of the office and position entrusted to him by God." See James Jordan, "Bathsheba: The Real Story," *Biblical Horizons*, No. 93 (1997). Accessed September 25, 2018, <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/biblical-horizons/no-93-bathsheba-the-real-story/>.

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an abundance of flocks and herds—too many to even keep track. There was also a poor man who had nothing but one little lamb—a lamb he loved so much that he'd feed it from his own plate and rock it to sleep at night.

Well, one day, some travelers came and needed something to eat, but the rich man refused to offer them something from his abundance; instead he stole the poor man's beloved lamb and cooked it to feed his guests.

Nathan barely finishes telling David the story before David's anger is "greatly kindled." Outraged by this atrocity, David declares that this rich man deserves to die for what he has done.

Then Nathan replies: "*You* are the man!" (2 Sam. 12:7, emphasis added).

Suddenly, it sinks in for David. And in a drastically shorter time than it took David to devise his sin, against all odds, *he repents*.

David says in 2 Samuel 12:13, "I have sinned against the LORD." And as the superscript of Psalm 51 tells us, David wrote Psalm 51 *in that repentance*.

MY BACKSTORY

David asks God to have mercy on him, and to blot out his transgressions, and to wash him thoroughly from his iniquity, and to cleanse him from his sins. And so I figured, as a teenage boy reading this psalm thousands of years later, that if God could do *that* for David, then God could certainly have mercy on me.

It wasn't hard to make this connection. I was a normal church kid growing up in the American South. I had a good family. I stayed

out of trouble. I played sports and made decent grades. And on the rare occasions when I thought I sinned against God, or really, when I offended my conscience, I at least knew where to go. Psalm 51 was in my back pocket.

But the whole project, as I would come to see, was *religion* thick and *gospel* thin. My sin made me more superstitious than sorrowful, and my faith was borne more from convenience than actual conversion. It was no way to live, and so God intervened.

During my senior year of high school, I rolled my vehicle and sustained a traumatic brain injury. Pretty much everything I know about that wreck has been told to me. All I remember is waking up one day in the hospital, lying on my back with some shoulder pain and a dream-like daze. My first memory in this new world was seeing an eclectic bunch of faces gathered around my bed—my baseball coach, a pastor, my parents, and some unnamed medical professionals.

You crashed, they said, and hit your head.

Two small tears had ripped on the left side of my brain, and they had been bleeding. When my parents first rushed into the doors of the emergency department, they were greeted by a chaplain who had been waiting for them. Unless the bleeding stops, the doctors reported, the neurosurgeon would need to open me up and fix it. During that first night it was impossible to assess the full scope of the injury—*Would he survive? Would he walk again? Would he ever be the same?* No one knew. And so they all prayed.

Within a matter of hours, so I'm told, the tears sealed and the bleeding stopped (and my writing this sentence is living proof). When I finally regained consciousness, the gap in my memory felt like years. It had hardly been a day between the crash and when I

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opened my eyes to see the faces around me. I was still seventeen years old.

I came home from the hospital a couple days later and slowly recovered in the weeks that followed. There was no permanent damage. The whole thing was a miracle—there was no way around it. Photos of my mangled vehicle confirmed what people were telling me. I should not have been alive, but I was. I was very much alive, and my girlfriend was too. She had been riding in the passenger seat and had seen it all unfold in real-time. Apart from some cuts and scratches, her memory was unscathed. She had been among the faces praying for me to get well; and like with all the surprises surrounding this wreck, I would have never imagined that one day she'd be my wife and the mother of our seven children. It was a miracle, I'm telling you.

Locked Up and Buried

That wreck changed the course of my life. I had enough of a theological framework to understand that God had spared me, and that he must have spared me because he had a purpose for my life. One's senior year of high school is a time of big questions anyway. I had already been trying to figure out college and what I was going to do with adulthood. The wreck had humbled me and intensified the sort of things anyone my age would have been thinking about. Within the year, I knew I wanted to pursue Christian ministry, so I transferred to a small college where I could study the Bible with others who loved the Bible. It was in that study, during that discipleship, when I came to see I had Psalm 51 all wrong.

I didn't so much *understand* the psalm wrongly, but I had *used* it wrongly. David's prayer is a psalm for the guilt-ridden types who can't sleep at night. That is sure. The psalm is unmistakably a plea for God's mercy, based upon God's steadfast love. David's only hope for forgiveness is banking on God's heart, not his own. But see, I had *used* God's heart, and David's hope, as a trump card to throw down whenever I sinned. Understanding God's heart had not changed my own, it had just given me an "out" when I failed.

I realized that I had presumed upon the riches of God's kindness, and that it had turned me into stone. It wasn't long before I believed that a miracle greater than gashes sealing in my brain were the cracks forming in my hard heart. God moved me to deeper repentance, and it was during this time that I felt like I truly became a Christian. It was my "gospel awakening," you might call it, and it meant I had to change the way I went to Psalm 51. So I took it out of my back pocket and locked it in a safe. It had become a dirty psalm to me, and I thought that if I was serious about holiness, then I'd be better off pretending Psalm 51 didn't exist. So I buried the safe far out of sight and threw away the key, and it stayed there for more than a decade.

Understanding God's heart had not changed my own, it had just given me an "out" when I failed.

I'd still bump into the psalm on occasion—at least annually when reading through the Bible. But every time I'd read it I always hoped in the back of my mind that I wouldn't ever *need* it again, not like I once did. I was convinced of God's mercy—and *I was changed*

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by God's mercy—but I never wanted to be in David's shoes. I wanted to keep my distance from Psalm 51.

Front and Center

One morning years later, during a time of Bible meditation and prayer, I found my way to a short daily devotion in *The Book of Common Prayer*. The devotion included a prayer of four petitions, each taken from the infamous Psalm 51. I was determined to stomach through this abbreviated form, and so, repeating David's original words, I simply prayed:

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

It was short and straightforward, and yet, to my surprise, God met me with a powerful experience of his mercy. Just like that, completely unexpected, I became convinced that this prayer was full of truth and relevance that *I* needed, not once or twice, but *again and again*. And so I went back and prayed it the next day, and then again the next day, and then the next day after that—and I haven't stopped praying it since.

In God's mysterious providence, I've found myself in a complete turnaround. This little four-petition prayer from Psalm 51 has become indispensable to me. It's the first thing I do every morning. It gives me footing for the rest of the day, and it's a

lifeline in moments of chaos. I pray it for my soul and for my family, for my church and for my friends. This psalm that once seemed to me all about desperation, and then about shame, has now become a central part of my understanding of what it means to live the Christian life.

To be clear, I don't think there's any magic in the prayer itself. The good effect it's had on my soul hasn't just been in the fact that God is pleased to answer these petitions, but it's been in the ways the petitions themselves have shaped me. Prayer, of course, is about much more than just getting what you want. As Augustine has said, the words we use in prayer are not intended to instruct God, but to construct our own desires. That was Augustine's rationale for why Jesus taught us a formula for prayer in Matthew 6.

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As Augustine has said, the words we use in prayer are not intended to instruct God, but to construct our own desires.
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God doesn't need us to inform him of what we need—Jesus makes this clear when he tells us “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:8). And yet, God still wants us to pray. In fact, it's actually *because* God knows our needs that Jesus tells us to pray a certain way—“Pray then like this” (Matt. 6:9). There are particular things God wants us to ask in prayer, and it's in that asking, in that constant remembering, that he works on us. So it's not “vain repetition” to sincerely ask God for the same things everyday. We tend to pray what we desire, and we desire what we love, and what we love makes us who we are. In this light, how do we not pray every chance we get, “Our Father in

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heaven, hallowed be your name”? These four petitions from Psalm 51, at least for me, are in that same category.

These petitions are worth repeating, fundamentally, because of *who* is doing the praying. Where I used to think Psalm 51 was more for the guilt-ridden types consumed with regret—a place I’d been before—I came to see that these petitions are actually for every human who knows they cannot make it without the mercy of God. As Eugene Peterson reminds us, prayer is, after all, “our most human action.”³

And so if prayer itself is *that* human and *that* real, then what prayer could be the *most* human and *most* real other than a prayer for mercy?

What we read in Psalm 51, then, is not merely the prayer of a king who has messed up, but the prayer of a man who has fallen short of God’s glory. This isn’t so much the prayer “of David” as it is the prayer of a human, and that means a prayer for you and me, a prayer for people like us. As much as I didn’t want to be like David, the truth is, at the human level, I am exactly like David and always will be. What he needed in his worst of moments is what I need all the time, because that’s how it goes with God’s mercy. And that’s the point of these four petitions from Psalm 51. This prayer is about trusting God for the mercy we all need—mercy for today.

3. Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed by the Word of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2017), 59.