

May 8

Scriptures: Read Psalms 51, 52 & 53

Key Verse: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”
(Psalm 51:10)

Overview

Psalm 51 is the most profound of all the psalms of penitence by King David. In it we see his deepest emotional confession and plea for forgiveness. Down and through the years, it has been the model prayer for the penitent. The occasion for David’s writing of this psalm would have been shortly after his committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah (for further information see commentary on 2 Samuel 11 & 12). His sin (adultery, deception, lies, conspiracy, and murder) is so great that all he can do is fall on the mercy of God. He envisions his transgression as being recorded in God’s register, and so he asks that it be blotted out, that God may forgive him and remember it no more (51:1, 9; cf. Isaiah 43:25).

He is deeply convicted of sin and feels the need to be cleansed from the ever-present filthiness of sin in his life (51:2-3, 7; Isaiah 1:18). He alludes to the religious ritual of cleansing through the use of a hyssop branch to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice upon that which was defiled, that it (or a person) may be purged and sanctified to the Lord’s service (Hebrews 9:14,19; Numbers 19:18; Leviticus 14:4-6). David can do nothing to make himself pure; it is the work of God upon his heart, so he pleads with God to create in him a clean heart (Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:25-26) and to give him a steadfast spirit, that he might not fall into temptation again (51:10).

Once God forgave, cleansed, and delivered David from blood-guiltiness (for the murders of Uriah and those who fell with him, 2 Samuel 11:17), then the joy of God’s salvation and fellowship could be restored. David promises that if God would restore and uphold him, he will use his strength to lead other sinners to the Lord, and he will once again sing praises to God (51:12-15).

He is aware that his sin is more than just a sin against man; it is a sin against God, who is holy, pure, just, and blameless. David, however, is the total opposite: born in iniquity and conceived in sin (51:5). He is not saying that his mother sinned at the time of his conception or that he was conceived out of wedlock, but his intent is to express the general sinful condition of all people as natural-born sinners since the Fall of Adam (total depravity of man/original sin). This is not a basis for an excuse, for David makes no excuses. He knew that he was guilty and that he, like Saul, deserved to be cast away from God’s presence. He was horrified at the thought of being denied the presence of the Holy Spirit, for he had seen the result of this in the misery of Saul (1 Samuel 15:26; 16:14). Unlike Saul, however, David was truly humble and sincerely repentant; this is what made him a man after God’s own heart. No, God would not cast David out. The Lord accepted the sacrifices of his broken spirit and contrite heart (51:17). King David encouraged his subjects to sacrifice unto the Lord, but he understood that if the worshipper’s heart and motivation was not right, then God took no pleasure in their sacrifices; they must be “sacrifices of righteousness” or else they are futile, for God sees the heart (51:19; Isaiah 1:11-17; Amos 5:21-22; Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 13:15).

We learn from the title of Psalm 52 that it was written against the wicked tyrant Doeg the Edomite who deceived and betrayed David (1 Samuel 21:1-9; 22:9-10). The worst crime of Doeg was that he spoke lies to Saul in order to bring destruction, gain Saul's favour, and thus be rewarded with riches and position; therefore, David condemns and curses him because he "strengthened himself in his wickedness" (52:7b). David was utterly disgusted with such a person who took pleasure in doing evil. Doeg was violent and unscrupulous. He was not only the cause but also the hatchet man of the great and terrible massacre of the priests and their families at Nob (1 Samuel 22:11-22). David prophesies that just as he had invaded homes and destroyed lives, so God would destroy him and pluck him out of his dwelling place. He would then be held up to ridicule and mockery by the righteous. Because Doeg was a traitor, who trusted in his riches and his own strength and not in God, God would uproot him from the land of the living. In sharp contrast, David, who trusted in the mercy of God, was like a firmly planted green olive tree (which has a very long life, representing peace, blessings, fruitfulness, and patriotism).

Psalm 53 is very similar to Psalm 14, except that it has been adapted or revised by the same author for use under a different, yet similar, set of circumstances. The psalmist expresses the total depravity and corruption of mankind in an even stronger way (compare 14:1b; 53:1b), and exposes the ignorance and foolishness of the practical atheist who denies the presence and power of God. Verse five is totally revised (compare with 14:5-6) to suit the new situation. It speaks of the enemy having fear where there was no visible reason to fear. It may refer to the defeat of the Ammonite coalition in the days of Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:22-24), or possibly the fear of the Syrian army caused by the supernatural force (2 Kings 7:6-7). When the ultimate salvation of the Lord comes, namely the Messiah Jesus who set the captives free, then the Lord's people will have even more reason to rejoice (53:6), but the fool who says, "There is no God" will be in great sorrow and will be no longer able to deceive himself.

Prayer

Dear God, with the sincerity of David, we humbly repent of any sins and ask that You create within us a clean heart. Thank You for the blood of Jesus which cleanses from all unrighteousness.