

Psalm 51

Ash Wednesday; 1st Lent Year A; 5th Lent Year B

24th Sunday Year C

Friday Morning Prayer Weeks 1-4

Office of the Dead

In the previous psalm (Psalm 50) God accuses the people of sin. Psalm 51 is the second part of the penitential cult: pleading for forgiveness. The focus is on God's justice: the truth that God always acts in accordance with who God is. In Part One the psalmist humbly admits his sin and so acknowledges God's justice in judging him as a sinner. In Part Two the focus is on God's justice in bringing him salvation. God, being God, will always show mercy and re-create his life so that, freed from sin, the psalmist will be able to live beautifully from the heart. On the penitential cult see Ezra chapters 9 to 10; Nehemiah chapter 9; Daniel 3:24-45; Daniel chapter 9; Baruch 1:15 - 3:8.

The psalm is carefully constructed, as can be seen in the chart following the commentary. Part One hinges at verse 4b, the second half mirroring the first. It is the same with Part Two, which hinges at verse 13. Key themes in Part One are repeated in Part Two. This is indicated in the chart by use of CAPITALS. The title reads: 'To the leader. A Psalm* of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba (see 2Samuel 12:13).

Part One: God's justice in judging

The psalmist is confident in the kindness [hesed, חֶסֶד] of God. He calls on God to be gracious [Hebrew ḥānan, חָנַן]; and, confident in God's tender compassion [rah^amîm, רַחֲמִים], he begs God to blot out the record of his transgressions [Hebrew pāša', פָּשָׁע]. It is only in the light of God's kindness and tender compassion that we dare to look at our sins. It is only in that same light that we see them for what they truly are.

We have met the word translated here as 'tender compassion' only twice so far in the psalms (Psalm 25:6 and Psalm 40:11). See the article 'Compassion' in the Introduction. All three qualities attributed to God in verse 1 are found in the creedal formula found throughout the Old Testament when speaking of YHWH:

YHWH, YHWH, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and faithfulness.

– Exodus 34:6

The Greek Septuagint translates 'tenderly compassionate' as oiktirmōn, a word used by Luke in the following injunction from Jesus:

Be tenderly compassionate as your Father is tenderly compassionate.

– Luke 6:36

**¹Be gracious* to me,
O God, according
to your kindness*;
according to your
tender compassion*
blot out my trans-
gressions*.**

God's judgments are just

²Wash me thoroughly from my guilt*; PURIFY me from my sin*.

³For I know my TRANSGRESSIONS*; my sin* is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned*, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are acknowledged as JUST* in your sentence, and blameless when you pass judgment*.

⁵Indeed, I was born in guilt*, in sin* when my mother conceived me.

⁶You DESIRE truth in my innermost being; therefore in my hidden depths make me know wisdom.

The psalmist prays that he will be washed clean from the filth left by his guilt [Hebrew 'āwōn, אֲוֹן] and that his sin [Hebrew ḥāṭā', חַטָּאת] will be purified (as from leprosy). Within Part One, notice the repetition of the words 'blot out' (verses 1 and 9), 'wash' and 'purify' (verses two and nine). Purification, a key theme of the psalm, recurs in Part Two (verse 10).

'Know' and 'sin' in verses 3 and 4 are balanced by 'sin' and 'know' in verses 5 and 6. 'Acknowledged as just' is placed at the centre of Part One, and recurs in Part Two (verse 14), as do 'transgressions' (verse 13) and 'desire' (verse 16). The second part of verse four is quoted by Paul in Romans 3:4.

Verse five echoes the following from the Book of Genesis:

The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.

– Genesis 8:21 (see 6:5)

The psalmist knows that deep inner truth is possible only with the gift of wisdom from God.

Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

– Job 28:28

For a holy and disciplined spirit will flee from deceit, and will leave foolish thoughts behind, and will be ashamed at the approach of unrighteousness.

For wisdom is a kindly spirit, but will not free blasphemers from the guilt of their words; because God is witness of their inmost feelings, and a true observer of their hearts, and a hearer of their tongues.

Because the spirit of the Lord has filled the world, and that which holds all things together knows what is said, therefore those who utter unrighteous things will not escape notice, and justice, when it punishes, will not pass them by.

– Wisdom 1:5-8

Note the repetition of ‘sin’, ‘purify’ and ‘wash’ – all terms found in verse two. We recall the words of the prophet:

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

– Isaiah 1:18

We recall the ‘music and dancing’ (Luke 15:25) that celebrated the return of the prodigal son.

The word ‘crushed’ recurs in Part Two (verse 17). Compare the following:

I cry for help until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end.

– Isaiah 38:13

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones.

– Lamentations 3:4

Happy the person who is absolved from transgression, whose sin is buried and forgotten.
Happy the person to whom YHWH imputes no guilt, whose spirit is not darkened.

– Psalm 32:1-2

⁷Purge my sin* with hyssop, and I shall be PURIFIED; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have CRUSHED rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins*, and blot out all my guilt*.

Part Two: God’s justice in saving

Only God’s gift of the Spirit can effect the reconciliation for which the penitent is praying. ‘Purified’ picks up the theme of verse 2. Within Part Two notice the recurrence of ‘heart’ and ‘spirit’ in verse 17.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

¹⁰Create in me a PURIFIED heart*, O God, put a new and right spirit within me.

God who saves

As Christians, the spirit we long for is the Spirit of Jesus himself, given to us from the cross and constantly offered by the risen Jesus. As Paul says:

The spirit gives life.

– 2Corinthians 3:6

You were taught ... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

– Ephesians 4:23-24

The new spirit has created a new way of being human, a new ‘Adam’(Genesis 2:7). We long for restoration of our baptismal consecration and the holiness of being incorporated again into God’s people.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence. Do not take your holy spirit from me.

Notice the twofold negative again in verse 16. A further indication of the carefully balanced structure of the psalm.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation*, and sustain in me a generous spirit.

Within Part Two, ‘salvation’ recurs in verse 14.

**¹³Then I will teach TRANS-
GRESSORS* your ways, and
sinners* will return to you.**

The psalmist promises to tell others about God’s ways and so to attract others to follow him in repentance so that they, too, will enjoy the life that God wants for them, and give glory to God.

**¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed,
O God, O God of my salva-
tion*, and my tongue will sing
aloud of your JUSTICE*.**

As in Part One (verse 4), so here, justice is the central theme. Here the focus is on ‘salvation’, rather than ‘judgment’.

**¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and
my mouth will declare your
praise.**

**¹⁶For you have no DESIRE for
sacrifice; if I were to give a
burnt offering, you would not
be pleased.**

Note the repetition of the theme of ‘desire’(verse 6) and compare the following:

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offer-
ings.

– Hosea 6:6

**¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to
God is a broken spirit;
a broken and CRUSHED heart*,
O God, you will not despise.**

Note the repetition of the theme of ‘crushed’(verse 8). The psalmist’s hard heart is broken, crushed back to dust, so that God can, once again, breathe his spirit into the dust and recreate him.

Postscript

These final verses are outside the tight structure of the psalm. It is likely that they were added after the return to Judah from Babylon.

**¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
¹⁹then you will delight in right sacrifices,
 in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
 then bulls will be offered on your altar.**

* * * * *

We noted that this psalm celebrates the second part of the liturgical rite of penance and reconciliation. There is no psalm specifically composed to express the third part, which is when God forgives and takes us back into communion. However the promise is beautifully expressed by the prophet Ezekiel in a passage already quoted:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

Elements of this can be found in Psalms 103 and 130; also in the following texts:

You will be holy once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then YHWH will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

– Isaiah 4:4-6

For a brief moment favour has been shown by YHWH our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery. For we are slaves; yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to give us new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem.

– Ezra 9:8-9

See also Nehemiah 9:6-37; the song of Azariah in Daniel 3:24-45 (LXX); Daniel 9:4-19; and Baruch 1:15 - 3:8.

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On the following two pages Psalm 51 is set out in order to bring out its structure. Within each page the correspondence is indicated by straight vertical lines and underlining. Key themes that occur on both pages are indicated by use of capitals.

God's justice in judging

¹Be gracious to me, O God, according to your kindness*;
according to your tender compassion **blot out** my transgressions*.

^{2a}**Wash** me thoroughly from my guilt;

^{2b}**PURIFY** me from my sin.

³For I **know** my TRANSGRESSIONS;
my sin is ever before me.

^{4a}Against you, you alone, have I **sinned**,
and done what is evil in your sight,

^{4b}so that you are acknowledged as **JUST***
in your sentence,
and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵Indeed, I was born in guilt,
in **sin** when my mother conceived me.

⁶You **DESIRE** truth in my innermost being;
therefore in my hidden depths make me **know** wisdom.

^{7a}Purge my sin with hyssop, and I shall be **PURIFIED**;

^{7b}**wash** me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have **CRUSHED** rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins, and **blot out** all my guilt.

^{10a}Create in me a **PURIFIED heart**, O God,

^{10b}put a new and right **spirit** within me.

^{11a}Do **not** cast me away from your presence.

^{11b}Do **not** take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your **salvation**,
and sustain in me a generous spirit.

¹³Then I will teach **TRANSGRESSORS** your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my **salvation**
and my tongue will sing aloud of your **JUSTICE**.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

^{16a}For you have **no** **DESIRE** for sacrifice;

^{16b}if I were to give a burnt offering, you would **not** be pleased.

^{17a}The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken **spirit**;

^{17b}a broken and **CRUSHED heart**, O God, you will not despise.