

Psalm 51

Table of contents

psalm 51. ¹⁻⁶	2
psalm 51. ^{7-12, 16-17}	4
psalm 51. ¹³⁻¹⁵	6

Psalms 51.¹⁻⁶

- ¹Have mercy upon me, O God,
according to thy lovingkindness:
according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies
blot out my transgressions.
- ²Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- ³For I acknowledge my transgressions:
and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
and done this evil in thy sight:
that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest,
and be clear when thou judgest.
- ⁵Behold, I was shapen in iniquity;
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- ⁶Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts:
and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

Words matter. There is no doubt about the Psalmist's principal concern in Psalm 51. His vocabulary gives the game away as he, in just six short verses, confesses his evil, confesses twice of his transgressions, twice of his iniquity, and thrice of his sin. Clearly, he is consumed, even obsessed by a sense of personal failure.

The Psalm's superscript has it that it is King David doing the obsessing and confessing. Some, therefore, unwisely dismiss the Psalm's usefulness under the assumption that David is a sinner of a different order than they. Even if true, which is debatable, we are all just the sort of sinners who often feel much like the Psalmist as we consider our sins. Whatever the nature of our failures and sins, they can become consuming. It can feel as though they define us.

No one cared, for example, how kind or how gentle or how compassionate a leper was. Notwithstanding whatever good qualities the leper might have possessed, he or she remained defined by just one attribute: leprosy. The leper was made to shout, "Unclean, unclean, unclean," not matter how kind he or she was. There was no shouting, "kind, kind, kind." Contrary to such examples, we are not defined by our sins.

So, no, it doesn't matter if it is David feeling overwhelmed by sin. We can all relate to the feelings of desperation expressed in this Psalm. And all of us can benefit by imitating the Psalmist's example of sincere, regret, and faithful confession/ acknowledgement. However aware of and obsessed by his sins, the Psalmist remained aware of and moved by another, greater truth. He could make faithful confession of sin because he knew that God is merciful. He knew that God can be trusted with sin when one feels its soul wound. He knew that God would respond to sin with lovingkindness. He knew what John knew: "if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart."¹

None other than Joseph Smith experienced a regret about sin that was every bit as obsessive as that of the Psalmist. He also possessed a trust of God every bit as impressive as that found in the Psalmist. In his earliest account of that grand and redemptive vision now known as the First Vision, Joseph reports

¹ 1 John 3.²⁰

“My mind become exceedingly (sic) distressed for I become convicted of my Sins... and I felt to mourn for my own Sins...”

As a result of this distress, conviction, and mourning, Joseph

“cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and to obtain mercy.”

As a result of his plea for a merciful forgiveness of sins, Joseph testified,

“the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord in the 16th year of my age a pillar of fire light above the brightness of the Sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I Saw the Lord and he Spake unto me Saying *Joseph my Son thy Sins are forgiven thee. go thy way walk in my Statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified (sic) for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life.*”²

Several years later, on the night of Moroni’s first visit, Joseph found himself, once more ensnared by sin. On that night, Joseph pondered his “many foolish *errors*,” his “*weakness (twice)*,” his “*foibles* of human nature,” his “*sins* (twice),” his “imperfections,” and his “*follies*.” He was dismayed at the “*temptations*” to which he yielded. Joseph’s acknowledgement of sin is not to be dismissed because it was “nonmalignant.” Certainly, Joseph did not, indeed could not dismiss it. By his own witness, his errors, weakness, foibles, sins, imperfections, and follies caused him to feel “*guilty*,” “*offensive in the sight of God*,” and “*condemned*.”³ This language is very revealing and is in keeping with the Psalmist’s witness found in Psalm 51.

But, like the Psalmist, Joseph could see past his spiritual vulnerabilities and frailty. He too could trust in God’s “loving kindness” and “tender mercies.” Because he had encountered God and experienced His merciful forgiveness of sins in his “First Vision,” Joseph tells us that

“I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him...” (JSH. 1.²⁹).

Like the Psalmist, Joseph discovered that when one trusts God with sin and makes open confession, amazing, unpredictable, and unexpected things happen. Here’s hoping that all of us have amazing, unpredictable, and unexpected happenings during this Lent and Easter Season through our trust in God and our faithful confession of sin.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 18, 2025)

² Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, pp. 5-7

³ See JSH. 1.²⁸⁻²⁹

Psalms 51. ^{7-12, 16-17}

- ⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean:
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸Make me to hear joy and gladness;
that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.
- ⁹Hide thy face from my sins,
and blot out all mine iniquities.
- ¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God;
and renew a right spirit within me.
- ¹¹Cast me not away from thy presence;
and take not thy holy spirit from me.
- ¹²Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation;
and uphold me with thy free spirit.
- ¹⁶For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it:
thou delightest not in burnt offering.
- ¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:
a broken and a contrite heart,
O God, thou wilt not despise.

We are all probably familiar with a great number of the Law of Moses' stipulations concerning sacrifice. Among them was the stipulation that for a sacrifice to be acceptable to God and accomplish whatever ends was being sought through the sacrificial act, then the sacrifice had to be perfect. It must needs be, according to the priestly language, "without spot" or "blemish" of any kind. Thus, any animal under consideration for sacrifice required a meticulous and expert examination by a priest. If any flaw was found, it was rejected as unsuitable for sacrifice. This priestly mediation not only increased the chances that the sacrifice would be successful in its intent, it also saved the one offering sacrifice the humiliation and perhaps even angry retribution of an offended God presented with an inappropriate sacrifice.

I have wondered if an awareness of God's rigid expectations for a perfect sacrifice is part of the reason for the misunderstanding that I believe exists about the meaning of a "broken heart," "broken spirit," and "contrite heart." Because we sure do work hard to formulate these into something good and wholesome. Something unblemished and thus, we hope, acceptable to God.

Let's think about the "broken heart," the "broken spirit," and the "contrite heart" in relation to the Psalmist's needs and hopes in Psalm 51. In this Psalm the Psalmist pleads for forgiveness. His need is great—and not because or just because he is David. In this very brief psalm, he confesses of an "evil" in him. He mentions his "transgressions" twice and his "iniquity" or "iniquities" four times. He speaks of sin five times. Because of the extensive evil, transgressions, iniquities and sins, the Psalmist fears the very real possibility of being "cast away" from the presence of God (not only in a future life but in this one) and of losing God's "holy spirit."

Clearly, the Psalmist is not unblemished or whole. He is blemished and broken. He is shattered to pieces, pulverized—this is the nuance of Hebrew word translated as, "contrite." The Psalmist is willing to make any sacrifice to be forgiven, to be released from his blemished and broken and shattered self. But he has come to the conclusion that animal sacrifice will not do the trick. Another sacrifice is needed. It is a startling sacrifice. A daring sacrifice. He must place his brokenness, his own broken heart, upon God's holy altar. If he will muster the courage to do so, he has somehow been assured, God will not,

notwithstanding the Law's demand for things unblemished and whole, "despise" his offering.

Now, we know from his language that his heart is blemished and broken—excessively so. So, there can be no thought of his putting anything unblemished and whole upon the altar. The offering is not "humility," or, at least, not our domesticated version of humility, for then there would be no concern about God despising it. Even if one wished to turn the Psalmist's acknowledgement of sin into some kind of "humility," it is (and yes, this is somewhat awkward) humiliating humility. To put my brokenness out there like that? To have everyone see it? To put it on display for *GOD* to see, undisguised? That's no tame version of humility. It is wild. Undomesticated. Humiliating.

Yes, it takes a good bit of trust in God to offer something as blemished and broken as a heart that has been enmeshed in sin. It is most difficult to believe that God wants and accepts such a sacrifice. Hence, I think, our disguising the very real brokenness symbolized by a "broken heart" as some kind of cute and cuddly humility. Our faith is sufficient to put a cute and cuddly humility on display for God to see. But this interpretation of a "broken hearts is just camouflage. An attempt to "cover," like Adam and Eve's fig leaves, "our sins," "gratify our pride, our vain ambitions."¹ To save ourselves the humiliation of our evil and transgression and iniquity and sin.

Lent provides the opportunity to be real and to put off the camouflage, step into sackcloth, and cover ourselves in ashes—signs, all, that we are uncomfortable with our current state, but that we are willing to trustingly present our uncleanness, our brokenness, our shattered selves to God in the belief that He is not only mightier than our sins, but gentler than our sins deserve. Indeed, as the Psalmist says elsewhere,

"He hath not dealt with us after our sins;
nor rewarded us according to our iniquities."²

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 18, 2025)

¹ See DC 121.³⁷

² Ps. 103.¹⁰

Psalms 51.¹³⁻¹⁵

- ¹³Then will I teach transgressors thy ways;
and sinners shall be converted unto thee.
¹⁴Deliver me from bloodguiltiness,
O God, thou God of my salvation:
and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.
¹⁵O Lord, open thou my lips;
and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

We do not know what sins tortured Enos such that they drove him to his knees in prayer that lasted “all the day long... and when the night came [he] did still raise [his] voice.”¹ They could not have seemed insignificant to him. We do know that his “guilt was swept away” as God spoke peace to his soul through sure forgiveness.²

We know more about the sins of Alma the younger. They felt, he confesses, like murder. Enos’s day and night prayer was tame compared with Alma’s “three days and... three nights” during which he was “racked, even with the pains of a damned soul.”³ Finally, he was redeemed of God, putting an end to his excruciating ordeal. He testified,

“I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!”⁴

As a result of their personal encounter with the God of mercy, both men committed themselves to praying and laboring among their fellow man so that they too might discover and experience the good news that they had discovered in their heavenly encounter.

“And after I, Enos, had heard these words [“thy sins are forgiven”], my faith began to be unshaken in the Lord; and I prayed unto him with many long strugglings for my brethren, the Lamanites.”⁵

“Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.”⁶

The reader might wonder why we have spent time on these two men and their experiences in a meditation focused on Psalm 51. Probably, though, he or she has not wondered long. Poetry can seem a little too indirect. Narrative with its rather concrete storytelling is much more direct and accessible. In these two Book of Mormon narratives, we have concrete examples that closely match the poetic voice and sentiments of the Psalmist as found in this reading.

We do not know the exact nature of the “evil,” the “transgressions,” the “iniquities,” or the “sins” that tortured this psalm’s composer (we should not be too quick to assign composition

¹ Enos 1.⁴

² See Enos 1.⁵⁻⁶

³ Alma 36.¹⁶

⁴ Alma 36.¹⁹⁻²⁰

⁵ Enos 1.¹¹

⁶ Alma 36.²⁴

of this Psalm to King David or be so reckless as to imagine its confession of sin to be anything but universal, whether uttered publicly in ancient Israel's temple or in the dark privacy of a modern-day closet). But we do know that like Enos and Alma the Psalmist was consumed by sins. And we do know that he committed himself to the same post-redemption activity as his two Book of Mormon brethren.

“Then will I teach transgressors thy ways;
and sinners shall be converted unto thee.”

All three make a personal choice to function as a light to the world around them. In so choosing, they fulfill the very purpose for which God called Israel. God stated the call like this to Abraham,

“I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee,
and make thy name great;
and thou shalt be a blessing:
“And I will bless them that bless thee,
and curse him that curseth thee:
and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”⁷

As in Psalm 51, the various Psalmists frequently demonstrate their knowledge and acceptance of this mission. Here is another example of the Psalmists' awareness and acceptance of the mission.

’ēlohîm! May you show us grace, and bless us!
May you lighten us with your presence
so that how you conduct yourself might be known throughout the earth;
made known to all peoples, the victory you can bring.
That the nations might acknowledge you,
all peoples yield to you;
that hosts of people might raise a shout of joy
when you govern the nations justly,
when you supply direction to the peoples of the earth.
That the nations might acknowledge you,
every people yield to you.”⁸

Now, this is an “every member a missionary” calling that one can get behind. It is not about the show and tell of an institution or its leadership, both of which have shown themselves, and that, repeatedly, to be flawed like every other institution and their leadership. Rather it is about showing and proclaiming the most glorious Being imaginable—a Being interested in, willingly involved with, and compassionate toward all his children even beyond imagining.

We can utilize the Lent and Easter seasons to deepen our appreciation for this compassionate Being, as well as our commitment to becoming faithful emissaries of Him. Perhaps during this season of renewal we can more openly and energetically “sing aloud of [His] righteousness and “open our mouths and “shew forth [His] praise,” knowing that He has no flaws and will never be a source of regret or embarrassment. Now, that's something to shout about!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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⁷ Genesis 12.²⁻³

⁸ Psalm 67.¹⁻⁵; author's translation