

Restoration from Sin

A exegetical – theological reflection on Psalm 51.

Assignment 1b

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This paper begins with an exegetical overview of Psalm 51. It will do so with a focus on sin, its nature and extent, the effects of sin on the human condition and the psyche and the divine solution to the problem of sin as depicted in this Psalm. Many key words will be analysed in the footnotes as these footnotes are central to the argument of this paper.

The context of the Psalm is given in lines 1 and 2. David has been confronted by Nathan the prophet about his adultery with Bathsheba.¹ Nathan's confrontation included the charge of the murder of Uriah who was, like David, an expression of God's image².

The structure of the Psalm is in six stanzas. Gerald H. Wilson writes:

Structurally, the psalm may be divided into six parts: an opening plea for forgiveness from sin (51:1—2), a confession of sin (51:3—6), a plea for cleansing from sin (51:7—9), a plea for spiritual restoration (51:10—12), a vow of praise and public contrition (51:13—17), and a concluding expanded plea for the restoration of Zion/Jerusalem and "righteous" sacrifice (51:18—19).³

Wilson regards the concluding verses of the Psalm a later addition when he writes:

"This latter section may well have been added to an essentially individual psalm in order to reflect the needs of the exilic community, who had lost Jerusalem and the temple and were struggling to understand what constituted "righteous sacrifice" in their new circumstance scattered among the nations, far from their ancestral home."⁴

I cannot agree. The concluding verse of the Psalm actually reflect David's desire that as king and the image of God, the city under his influence may once again receive the blessing of being under faithful and obedient divine influence. As will become clear in

¹ 2 Samuel 11 - 12

² Genesis 9:6

³ Wilson, Gerald H. . *The NIV Application Commentary: From biblical text... to contemporary life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub., 2002. p. 773.

⁴ Ibid., p. 773

the exegesis, the concept of the *imago dei* and the concepts of sin and worship are closely intertwined.

¹ לְמִנְצַחַת מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד :

² בָּבוֹא אֱלֹהֵינוּ נִתֵּן הַנְּבִיא כְּאֲשֶׁר-בָּא אֶל-בֵּית-שָׁבַע :

³ חָגְנִי אֱלֹהִים כְּחֶסֶדְךָ⁵ כָּרֹב רַחֲמֶיךָ⁶ מִחַה⁷ פְּשָׁעֵי⁸ :

⁴ הָרַב כְּפִסְנֵי⁹ מְעוֹנֵי¹⁰ וּמַחְטָאֵתִי¹¹ טַהַרְנִי¹² :

⁵ “like your kindness” (literal) “according to your kindness” (NIV), from חֶסֶד with the כְּ preposition indicating “like, as” and second singular suffix. Though the word חֶסֶד has been hard to completely translate into English “In general...(it) refers to the obligation assumed by one person to act on behalf of another, who is usually dependent on the aid of the first and helpless to function adequately without it.” (Marvin E. Tate. *Word Biblical Commentary, Psalms 51-100, Vol. 20.* Dallas Texas, Word Books, 1990. p. 13) חֶסֶד has been variously translated “loyal love” (ibid.) “unfailing love” (NIV), “steadfast love” (NRSV) and “lovingkindness” (ASV). At the heart of the word is a confidence (trust, hope) in the reliability of the Divine character in relation to the true worshipper whose heartfelt dependence is on God alone.

⁶ “like your compassions” (literal) כָּרֹב (“like, as, according to”) and רַחֲמֶיךָ (“compassions” from רַחֲמִים – plural noun with singular 2nd person suffix). The plural is construed in translation as an absolute plural intensive of רֶחֶם (“womb or bowels” – a “gut feeling”) and so is translated as “great compassion.” (NIV) The use of this term reflects the awe and covenant worship language of Exodus 34:6-7 where the JWH reveals himself (and his character) to Moses (Tate, ibid., p. 14).

⁷ “to blot or wipe out” from the verb מָחָה (imperative, qal, 2nd person singular). This is the first reference (of three) to the action of God with regard to human sin in the Psalm. The verb has to do with wiping away a mark as in erasing writing from a written scroll (Psalm 69:28) as in erasing a debt (of guilt), removing from remembrance and removing a curse (Tate, ibid.)

⁸ “transgression” from the verb פָּשַׁע which means “to step” with the sense in the qal of against or away from (cf. Isaiah 59:13a, 15b, Hosea 7:13). Thus dispositions of rebellion or “self assertive defiance of God” (Tate, ibid., p. 15) indicate a pride which this paper will argue, lies at the root of sin.

⁹ “wash out” or “scrub clean” from the verb כָּבַס imperative piel verb “to clean” with first person singular suffix. This is the second reference to God’s action with regard to human sin. “The usage for washing clothes accords with the basic meaning of the verb, which is “to tread” or “to pummel,” since clothes were washed by beating or treading them in water.” (Tate, ibid., pp. 14-15) A thorough cleansing is indicated.

¹⁰ “iniquity” from the singular noun עֲוֹן with the 1st person singular suffix. This 2nd description of sin describes sin with a different nuance. S. Terrien writes... “iniquity” designates a state of distortion, bending, or twisting, which vitiates the whole outlook and therefore the subsequent behavior... It is the disintegration of heart and volition.” (in Tate, ibid., pp. 15 - 16) Or it could have a sense of deviation from a prescribed path. Either interpretation has scriptural support (Tate, ibid.)

¹¹ “sin” as in “missing the mark.” From the noun חַטָּאת preceded by the ו conjunction and followed by the 1st person singular suffix. Failure is an important nuance in this word, failure to meet expectations (of commandments given Tate, ibid., pp. 16,17).

5 כִּי־פָשַׁעִי¹³ אָנִי אֲדַע¹⁴ וְחַטָּאתִי¹⁵ נִגְדִי תָמִיד¹⁷:

6 לָּהּ לְבַרְךָ חַטָּאתִי וְהִרַע¹⁸ בְּעֵינַיִךָ¹⁹ עֲשִׂיתִי

לְמַעַן תִּצְדַּק²⁰ בְּדַבְרֶךָ תִּזְכֶּה²¹ בְּשִׁפְטֶךָ²²:

7 הֵן־בְּעוֹוֹן²³ חוֹלַלְתִּי²⁴ וּבַחַטָּא יַחַמְתָּנִי אֱמִי:

8 הֵן־אֲמַת²⁵ חִפְצָתְךָ בְּטַחוֹת וּבְסִתָּם חָכְמָה²⁶ תוֹדִיעֵנִי:

¹² “cleansed” from the verb טָהַר in piel form imperative with 1st person singular suffix. This is the third word for God’s action with regard to human sin in the Psalm. This word has senses of the ritual cleansings that were necessary for items in the temple and has the sense of removing dross from metal as we would remove oxide from silver. Only those things which were ritually cleansed were fitting for the presence of God in worship (Tate, Ibid., p. 15)

¹³ See footnote #4

¹⁴ “to know” from the verb יָדַע qal imperfect 1st person singular. יָדַע is a rich concept in the Hebrew language indicated a holistic knowing, every part of a person “knows” or experiences the realities of that which is known. There is a powerful theme in the use of this word. Often when individuals acknowledge or confess a wrong (two possible translations), they do not recognize the full gravity and impact of what they have done. By using this word, David indicates that he has come to the point of recognizing not only that he has murdered Uriah, that he has committed adultery with Bathsheba, but he is also recognizing the gravity of his sin in his relationship to himself and especially his relationship with God.

¹⁵ See footnote #7

¹⁶ Preposition with 1st person singular suffix.

¹⁷ Adverb “continually” or “constantly.” The sense of נִגְדִי תָמִיד is that of shame. What David has done presses on his attention day in day out, there is no escape. People are talking. His conscience will not rest. There is no escape from the cage of shame and the spear thrusts of guilt. Here we have a hint at the consequences of sin. Sin enslaves. Its effects and affects continue on and on...

¹⁸ “evil” an adjective preceded by conjunction followed by the verb עָשָׂה (“to do”). David knows that his actions are evil because he is evil. Actions and being cannot be separated.

¹⁹ “eyes” עֵינַי with the preposition בְּ “in” and the singular suffix 2nd person. David is very aware that the heart of sin is in ones relation to God, and the key question in life is how God sees us. As an image of the living God, David has failed God in being His image. This theme lies at the heart of the argument of this paper.

²⁰ “right” or “correct” from the qal imperfect verb צָדַק 2nd person singular. Once again, a familiar Hebrew word used repeatedly to describe when something is right and in good order. We might say that the words God uses about our sinfulness, is, to say the least, are accurate and appropriate.

²¹ “clean, pure, unmixed” from the verb זָכָה qal, imperfect 2nd person singular. David acknowledged that God’s judgements contain pure justice. There is no inequity in God’s judgements in contrast to judges who judge unfairly, are bribed or have bad counsel.

²² “to judge” from the verb שָׁפַט infinitive with 2nd person singular suffix.

²³ See footnote #6. This time preceded by the preposition בְּ to indicate “in” or “among.”

²⁴ 1st person singular pual verb from חוֹלַל “bring out.” Combined with יָחַם “to conceive” it is clear that David means to show that sin has been a pervasive characteristic of his existence. I do not take this verse to mean that sex is sinful (although having had sex with Bathsheba, he certainly may have had guilt feelings around the concept of sex). Rather David is asserting that he has been living and breathing sin since the day of his conception. Sin is part of who and what he is. He has been infected from conception on.

9 תַּחֲטָאֵנִי²⁷ בְּאֵזוֹב²⁸ וְאַטְהָר²⁹ תְּכַבְּסֵנִי³⁰ וּמְשַׁלֵּג³¹ אֶלְבִּין:

10 תִּשְׁמִיעֵנִי³² שְׁשׁוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה תִּגְלֶנָּה³³ עֲצָמוֹת דְּכִית׃³⁴

11 הִסְתֵּר³⁵ פְּנֵיךָ³⁶ מִחַטָּאֵי וְכַל־עֲוֹנֹתַי מִחָה׃³⁷

12 לֵב³⁸ טָהוֹר בְּרָא־לִי³⁹ אֱלֹהִים וְרוּחַ⁴⁰ נְכוּן⁴¹ חִדַּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי:

²⁵ Note that both lines 7 and 8 begin with the interjection הֵן . Many commentators suggest a correlation between the two lines (Tate, *Ibid.*, p. 20, Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub, 1978. pp. 503-504). If it was even in the secrecy of conception that sin was influential, so also was the revelation of God’s “truth” or “faithfulness” (from the noun אֱמֻת). Thus the Psalmist is not just a victim, truth was with him at all times also, there were always choices to make. Responsibility for sinful action resides only and completely with the actor.

²⁶ “wisdom” תְּכֻמָּה in the sense of ethical and religious. Like truth, God places in the human heart, in the inward parts, a sense of right and wrong which is suppressed in our rebellion against God, but to which we are still accountable (Romans 1:18-20), thus God is justified in his judgments.

²⁷ “sin” but here taken as a “sin offering.” חַטָּא in the context of this prayer (2nd person singular piel form with 1st person singular suffix) indicates that it is a cleansing action of God. In the piel form it means “to be set free from (the effects of) sin.” (Gerald H. Wilson. *The NIV Application Commentary: From biblical text... to contemporary life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub., 2002, p. 775).

²⁸ “hyssop” from אֵזוֹב . The small plant was used for sprinkling blood on the doorposts at Passover (Exodus 12:22) and was used in ritual washings for purification (Tate, *Ibid.*, p. 21, Kraus, *Ibid.*, p. 504).

²⁹ See Footnote #8

³⁰ See Footnote #5

³¹ “snow” from שֶׁלֶג . Snow does fall on occasion in Palestine.

³² “to hear” from the verb שָׁמַע hiphil form imperfect 2nd person singular with 1st person singular suffix and should be translated “cause me to hear” or “enable me to hear.” The nouns that follow שְׁשׁוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה both refer to sounds heard. The sounds may be that of the worshipping community where there is the joy and exultation of salvation (Tate, *Ibid.*, p. 21) or it could be that the king’s community was ‘abuzz’ with the sad news of his kingly failure and his unrighteous acts. Not only was he depressed, those over whom he ruled were depressed with him. Again, the king as the image of God fallen brings the painful effect of the curse upon everything under his influence. When leaders fall, in a sense, all fall with them.

³³ “to rejoice” from the verb גִּיל imperfect 3rd person plural – clearly referring to the crushed bones that follows. I love the sense of the NEB translation. May the bones you have crushed dance with joy again (Tate, *Ibid.*, p. 22).

³⁴ “to crush” דָּכָה piel 2nd person singular. The effect of sin is to bring a crushing load of guilt upon the sinner. This is seen as God’s action for he does the crushing, but he is also the one who can make broken bones dance again.

³⁵ “to hide” from the verb חָתַר hiphil imperative singular.

³⁶ “your face” from the noun פָּנֶיךָ . In an interesting turn, David asks that instead of experiencing the forsakenness or hiddenness of God because of sin, that God instead would hide himself from our sin (Wilson, *Ibid.*, p. 776). The crucifixion of Christ and his cry “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” takes rich nuance as we discover in God hiding his face from his one and only Son he choose to turn his face toward us (cnf. Numbers 6:26).

³⁷ See Footnote #3. Notice the chiasm in the description of the actions of God regarding our sin. “blot out” – “wash away” – “cleanse” X “cleanse” – “wash away” – “blot out” (Wilson, *Ibid.*, p. 775).

³⁸ “heart” from לֵב

13 אֶל־תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי⁴² מִלְּפָנֶיךָ וְרוּחַ קְדֹשְׁךָ אֶל־תִּקַּח⁴³ מִמֶּנִּי:

14 הֲשִׁיבָה לִּי שְׁשׁוֹן יִשְׁעֶךָ וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִּסְמְכֵנִי:

15 אֶלְמֹדָה פִּשְׁעִים דְּרָכֶיךָ וְחַטָּאִים אֶלֶיךָ יָשׁוּבוּ:

16 הַצִּילֵנִי מִדְּמַיִם⁴⁴ אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵי תְּשׁוּעָתִי תִרְנֵן לְשׁוּנֵי צַדִּיקְתֶּךָ:

17 אֲדַנִּי שְׁפָתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יִגִּיד תְּהִלָּתֶךָ:

18 כִּי לֹא־תִחַפֵּץ זִבַּח וְאַתָּנָה עֹלָה לֹא תִרְצֶה:

19 זָבַחֵי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ נִשְׁבָּרָה⁴⁵ לִב־נִשְׁבָּר וְנִדְכָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִבְזֶה:

³⁹ “create in me.” Here David speaks of transformation that starts with the creative action of God.

“Create” (בָּרָא) is the same verb that describes God’s action in the original creation (Genesis 1:1), creating something totally new (Kraus, *Ibid.*, p. 204).

⁴⁰ “spirit” or “breath.” The word רוּחַ again reminds the reader of creation where God breath into Adam the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). The imagery of the passage is that David needs to be recreated and once again have the breath of life breathed into him by God. The effect of sin is a kind of deadness that only God can revive. Based on the study Genesis 1:26f done previously, there are repeated references in this Psalm to the implications of the *imago dei*, as part of the image was to be inbreathed with the very presence of God.

⁴¹ “to be strong or firm” from the verb כָּוֵן niphil, participle singular. David seeks a heart and spirit that is truthful and constant, not a spirit that obeys one day and disobeys the next. A faithful spirit is his desire.

⁴² “to cast or throw out” from the verb שָׁלַךְ hiphil imperfect 2nd person singular with 1st person singular suffix. Again a theme from Cline in his article “*Humanity as the Image of God*” comes to the fore (as studied in previous paper). One of our greatest fears is that as the image of God we are rejected, lose our status as, and become victims in a creation that rebels against illegitimate authority, losing the presence and the Spirit of God, the fluid of His presence within. The connect strikes familiar cords in the number of people to which I have given pastoral care, and having fallen in some form of sin (not incidentally sexual) feel like they have lost the presence of God in their lives.

⁴³ “to take” from the verb לָקַח qal imperfect 2nd person singular. This verb has the sense of “to take in hand” or “take back.” The obvious implication is that the Spirit once given can be taken away where there is wilful disobedience.

⁴⁴ Lines 14-18 have obvious references to the context of worship. Teaching sinners, deliverance from blood guilt (this plural noun דָּם) has definite resonances with the actions of sacrifice and blood in the temple, opened lips and a singing worshipper are seen as a consequence of being forgiven with commitment to praise, a commitment so repeatedly made as an act of worship in the Psalms.

⁴⁵ “to inspect, examine” from the verb שָׁבַר niphil participle feminine singular. I have difficulty finding exegetical reasons for the interpretation of “broken” from the Hebrew and the commentaries I have neglect to show the reason for the interpretation. It would seem to me that an thoroughly examined heart, and an examined spirit, which knowing the true nature of our fallenness is in a sense broken (note וְנִדְכָה from דָּכָה “to crush”) could be a very acceptable interpretation. I would therefore translate this climatic line in the prayer “My sacrifices to God

are an examined spirit;
an examined and crushed heart
O God, you will not regard with contempt.”

20 הַיְטִיבָהּ⁴⁶ בְּרִצּוֹנָהּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן תִּבְנֶה חוֹמוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם:

21 אִז תִּחַפֵּץ זְבַח־צֶדֶק עוֹלָה וְכֹלִיל אִז יַעֲלוּ עַל־מִזְבֵּחַךָ פָּרִים:

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The Nature of Sin:

The foundation of David's appeal is to the character of God, his unfailing love and gut felt compassion for those dependent upon him.⁴⁸ Only because of this foundation does David dare make his appeal. And David's appeal is filled with transparent honesty in self examination.

David uses three words to describe sin. Sin is described as *transgression*, *iniquity* and *sin*.⁴⁹ The variety of descriptions demonstrates that sin has nuances that cannot be limited to one or two words because sin has to do with not only actions, but will, disposition, thought and ultimately a perverted direction in worship.⁵⁰ With regard to sin, it clearly affects the whole being. No part of David is immune from its effects. It goes to his very heart, out of which all the issues of life flow.

David acknowledges not only that the dynamic of sin is thorough in his person, he also acknowledges that his history, his biography is characterized by sin. Though this Psalm could be supportive of the doctrine of "original sin," and this passage should not be viewed as a support for the sinfulness of sex,⁵¹ what is intended is that sin has been part of who David (and by implication the rest of humanity) was from the very first

⁴⁶ The conclusion of the Psalm seeks the Lord's blessings on all that David has authority over. The *imago dei* restored results in blessing for all under its influence.

⁴⁷ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia : with Westminster Hebrew Morphology*. electronic ed., Ps 51:1. Stuttgart; Glenside PA: German Bible Society; Westminster Seminary, 1996, c1925; morphology c1991.

⁴⁸ Verse 1

⁴⁹ See footnotes #8, 10, 11 as I will not repeat the exegetical work in the body of the paper.

⁵⁰ This theme will be further developed in the paper. Romans 1:25 highlights the theme clearly.

⁵¹ See footnote #24.

moment of his existence. At the same time, David clearly takes responsibility, because even though sin has been part of his existence from the beginning, truth also has been a part of his existence from the beginning.⁵² Sin has been a choice David has made, the responsibility lies on his shoulders alone.⁵³

Of deep interest in this Psalm is the theme that sin is defined as an action against God. Clearly David has sinned against Bathsheba, clearly David has sinned against Uriah, but the Psalm makes it very clear that sin is ultimately against God. I suggest that this is not first of all because David murdered and since Uriah was the image of God in essence, David's act was against God, though this is certainly true. David's act was against God because David himself, as king, as the Spirit filled image of God with the "fluid of God present within him" choose in pride to go his own way, refused the appropriate humble stance of an image and so his disobedience was against the God who had appointed him king and image. At the heart of sin is the proud refusal to be under and obedient to the God who had made him as image of the living God. Sin is against God. As we continue reading the Psalm, this becomes even clearer. In the previous study of image from Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, we discovered that at the heart of being the image was to be a bearer of the Spirit of God, faithfully obedient and in deep awe and worship of the one who created the image. In this Psalm, David fears the loss of God's Spirit, that it might be taken away and when God restores, David sees the effect of that restoration as best described by terms of worship. The image was also seen as having divine influence. Where the image of God is clearly seen, creation submits and blessings

⁵² See footnotes #25, 26.

⁵³ The main theme of Ezekiel 18.

result.⁵⁴ David sees that when he is restored, he will teach sinners God's ways⁵⁵ and blessings will return to all he rules over.⁵⁶

The effects of sin on the human condition:

The effects of sin are *pervasive guilt* (verse 3), *anticipation of judgment or condemnation* (verse 4), a sense of *defilement* (and thus the need for ritual cleansing as pictured in verse 7), *depression* (and the hunger for joy returned, not only in David but over all he had authority over – verse 8, 12), *a sense of being crushed or imprisoned* by the consequence of our actions (verse 8), a feeling or fear of being forsaken or abandoned by God (verse 11), a *lack of authority to teach or rule* (and once restored as the image, this would be regained and sinners would turn back to God – verse 13), an *inability to truly worship* (rituals and sacrifices by themselves are not sufficient – verse 16) and finally *a sense of death* (thus David's cry that God create him and breath into him once again – verse 10).

The Divine solution to sin:

If sin is described with three basic terms, God's action to deal with our sin has three basic terms showing up in the chiasm as mentioned in the exegetical notes. "Cleanse," "wash away," and "erase"⁵⁷ all demonstrate God's forgiving and cleansing action for the true penitent. In a sense, the scrubbing God gives brings out the shine of

⁵⁴ And so Christ, the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, John 14) demands obedience from creation and creation responds accordingly.

⁵⁵ Psalm 51:13

⁵⁶ Psalm 51:18,19

⁵⁷ See footnotes #7, 9, 12.

his image again.⁵⁸ But the effects of the divine solution are to restore to us everything that the image means – peace with God, no condemnation, a cleansing, joy, dancing, freedom, accepted by God, the authority of the image in creation, true worship and praise and life.⁵⁹ In response to the penitent’s petition, God chooses to avert his eyes from our sin and accept us once again.⁶⁰

The Central Message of this Psalm:

Clearly, the heart of salvation is God’s action on our behalf. We cannot remove the tarnish of sin ourselves. No meritorious work would be sufficient. But the Psalm brings out a very clear theme, that when we bow our lives in total humility before God, when we with humble honesty are willing to know (עָדַרְתִּי) not only the depths of our sin but our total dependence on God, if we in that way are willing to examine ourselves, look within and look without and up to His grace, this is an attitude of daily worship that God will honour from those who are his image in this world. When we humble ourselves, God chooses to lift us up, so that as his image, we may once again stand erect in this world.

“My sacrifices to God,
are an examined spirit;
an examined and crushed heart
O God, you will not regard with contempt.”

⁵⁸ I have been preparing a used communion set for a church our congregation is planting in Mexico. The set was tarnished and looked useless until I scrubbed it with silver polish. Its brilliance now makes me wonder why we would want to give it away. In much the same way, it seems this cleansing God gives lets His image come through again – from one degree of glory to another. 1 Corinthians 3:18.

⁵⁹ Many Old and New Testament references could be collected to support this consequence of the divine solution.

⁶⁰ See footnote 36.