

Psalms: Petition Psalms, Psalm 51

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke examines Psalm 51 as a premier example of a petition psalm for forgiveness, setting it against the historical backdrop of David's sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. He explores how David acknowledges his severe guilt, capital violations, and innate sinful nature while appealing to God's unfailing covenant mercy, compassion, and grace. Waltke analyzes the structural motifs of the psalm, detailing David's progression from introductory petitions and lament to requests for spiritual renewal, cleansing, and renewed praise. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how God's transformative grace and forgiveness outweigh even the most egregious human transgressions when met with genuine contrite repentance.

Outline

I. Introduction and Historical Context of Psalm 51

A. Selection and Significance of Psalm 51

1. Regarded as one of the most famous psalms alongside Psalm 23.
2. Serves as a foundational model for petition psalms seeking forgiveness of sin.
3. Rich historical liturgical usage across traditions:
 - a. Recited seven times daily in medieval Roman breviary monastic services.
 - b. Selected for Ash Wednesday services in Christian practice.
 - c. Recited with the ram's horn on the Day of Atonement in Jewish tradition.

B. Historical Superscript and the Narrative of David's Sin (2 Samuel 11–12)

1. Dual nature of David's transgressions:
 - a. Sin of passion: Adultery with Bathsheba fueled by momentary lust.
 - b. Coldly calculated murder: Premeditated plot against Uriah the Hittite spanning twelve days.
2. The calculated cover-up process:
 - a. David remains in Jerusalem while troops fight at Ammon Rabbah.
 - b. Attempts to force Uriah to return home to mask the pregnancy (failed over 8–11 days due to Uriah's integrity).
 - c. Execution order sent via Joab to abandon Uriah at the city wall under enemy fire.

3. Prophetic accusation and capital offense:
 - a. Nathan's accusation: David despised the word of the Lord (2 Samuel 12:9).
 - b. Violations of capital laws: Murder (Numbers 35:16) and Adultery (Deuteronomy 22:22).
4. Torah, Repentance, and Divine Grace:
 - a. Torah includes the interpretation of law through divine mercy when accompanied by true repentance (Proverbs 28:13).
 - b. Impossibility of human restitution (inability to restore Uriah's life or Bathsheba's purity).
 - c. Complete forgiveness granted ('you will not die'), yet accompanied by historical consequences (death of the child).
5. Hermeneutical application: Extracting principles behind ancient laws (e.g., roof parapets applied to modern car brakes).

II. Structural Analysis of Psalm 51 by Motifs

A. Address and Introductory Petition (Verses 1–2)

1. Address to 'O God' (Elohim):
 - a. Part of the Elohist Psalter (Psalms 42–83) emphasizing God's transcendence and creator status.
 - b. Association of the number 42 with themes of premature death.
2. Comprehensive vocabulary for human sin:
 - a. Transgressions (pesha'): Open rebellion against God's standard with a raised fist.
 - b. Iniquity ('awon): Twistedness, perversion, and associated guilt.
 - c. Sin (chata'ah): Missing the mark or falling short of God's holy standard.
3. Appeal to divine covenant attributes (Exodus 34:6): mercy (hen), unfailing love (chesed), and great compassion (rachamim).
4. Dual request for relief:
 - a. Forensic forgiveness: Blotting out transgressions and wiping the legal slate clean.
 - b. Liturgical cleansing: Washing and laundering from ceremonial/moral defilement.

B. Lament and Confession of Sin (Verses 3–6)

1. Confession of overt acts of sin (Verses 3–4):
 - a. Full personal accountability indicated by singular pronouns ('I, my, me').
 - b. Sin against God alone ('against you, you only'): Violation of divine authority as absolute lawgiver.
 - c. Vindication of God's righteous verdict and judgment.
2. Confession of moral impotence and original sin (Verses 5–6):
 - a. Innate sinful condition from birth and conception (original sin).
 - b. Human dilemma: Inner contradiction between inherent depravity and God's desire for internal truth and wisdom.

C. Petition for Cleansing, Renewal, and Empowerment (Verses 7–12)

1. Petitions regarding overt acts of sin (Verses 7–9):

- a. Cleansing with hyssop: Symbol of ritual transfer from the realm of death to the realm of life.
- b. Restoration of emotional joy and physical vitality upon hearing divine absolution.
- c. Complete eradication of guilt: Hiding God's face from sin and blotting out iniquity (chiastic tie to vv. 1–2).

2. Petitions regarding moral impotence (Verses 10–12):

- a. Creation (bara') of a pure heart and renewal of a steadfast spirit (Verse 10).
- b. Preservation of God's presence and continuation of the Holy Spirit's royal anointing (Verse 11).
- c. Restoration of salvation's joy and grant of a willing, obedient spirit (Verse 12).

D. Praise, Vow, and True Sacrifice (Verses 13–17)

- 1. Vow to teach transgressors God's gracious ways to prompt their return (Verse 13).
- 2. Prayer for deliverance from bloodguiltiness leading to vocal praise of God's righteousness (Verses 14–15).
- 3. The nature of acceptable sacrifice:
 - a. Insufficiency of external ritual sacrifices alone in situations requiring deep personal contrition.
 - b. True offering to God: A broken spirit and a contrite heart (Verses 16–17).

E. Concluding Prayer for Zion and the Kingdom (Verses 18–19)

- 1. Intercession for national restoration: Praying for God to prosper Zion and rebuild Jerusalem's walls.
- 2. Restoration of righteous public worship and whole burnt offerings upon God's altar once the king and kingdom are aligned.