

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

The psalmist, with a deeply penitent heart, prays for remission of sins, Psalm 51:1-4; which he confesses, and deeply deplores, Psalm 51:5-14; states his willingness to offer sacrifice, but is convinced that God prefers a broken heart to all kinds of oblations, Psalm 51:15-17; prays for the restoration of the walls of Jerusalem, and promises that then the Lord's sacrifice shall be properly performed, Psalm 51:18, Psalm 51:19.

The title is long: "To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bath-sheba." The propriety of this title has been greatly suspected, says Bishop Horsley: "That this Psalm was not written on the occasion to which the title refers, is evident from the Psalm 51:4 and Psalm 51:18. The Psalm 51:4 ill suits the case of David, who laid a successful plot against Uriah's life, after he had defiled his bed: and the Psalm 51:18 refers the Psalm to the time of the captivity, when Jerusalem lay in ruins." Dr. Kennicott is of the same mind. He says: "The title is misplaced; that it was written during the captivity, and the cessation of the temple worship; the author under great depression of mind, arising from the guilt of some crime, probably some compliance with heathen idolatry, not murder nor adultery; is plain from the Psalm 51:4, "Against Thee Only have I sinned."

The crime mentioned in the title was not only against God, but against the whole order of civil society; against the life of the noble and valiant captain whose wife Bath-sheba was, and against every thing sacred in friendship and hospitality. It was a congeries of sins against God and society. Were it not for the Psalm 51:4, Psalm 51:18, and Psalm 51:19, the rest of the Psalm would accord well enough with the title, and the deep penitence it expresses would be suitable enough to David's state. But see on Psalm 51:4 (note), Psalm 51:18-19 (note).

Verse 1

Have mercy upon me, O God - Without mercy I am totally, finally ruined and undone.

According to thy loving-kindness - Mark the gradation in the sense of these three words, Have Mercy on me, $\text{x} \rightarrow \text{x} \times \text{x}^{\text{TM}}$ (chonneni); thy Loving-Kindness, $\text{x} \rightarrow \text{x} \text{ix} \text{ "x} \text{š}$ (chasdecha); - thy Tender Mercies, $\text{x} \text{ "x} \rightarrow \text{x} \text{žx}^{\text{TM}} \text{x} \text{š}$ (rachameycha), here used to express the Divine compassion. The propriety of the order in which they are placed deserves particular observation.

The first, rendered have mercy or pity, denotes that kind of affection which is expressed by moaning over an object we love and pity; that natural affection and tenderness which even the brute creation show to their young by the several noises they respectively make over them.

The second, rendered loving-kindness, denotes a strong proneness, a ready, large, and liberal disposition, to goodness and compassion, powerfully prompting to all instances of kindness and bounty; flowing as freely as waters from a perpetual fountain. This denotes a higher degree of goodness than the former.

The third, rendered tender mercies, denotes what the Greeks called *spлагnizesqai*, that most tender pity which we signify by the moving of the heart and bowels, which argues the highest degree of compassion of which nature is susceptible. See Chandler.

Blot out my transgressions - $\text{x} \text{žx} \rightarrow \text{x} \text{ "}$ (mechah), wipe out. There is a reference here to an indictment: the psalmist knows what it contains; he pleads guilty, but begs that the writing may be defaced; that a proper fluid may be applied to the parchment, to discharge the ink, that no record of it may ever appear against him: and this only the mercy, loving-kindness, and tender compassions of the Lord can do.

Verse 2

Wash me thoroughly - $\text{x} \text{ "x} \text{ "x} \text{ "x} \text{ "}$ $\text{x} \text{ix} \text{ "x} \text{ix} \text{ x}^{\text{TM}}$ (harbeh cabbeseni), "Wash me again and again, - cause my washings to be multiplied." My stain is deep; ordinary purgation will not be sufficient.

Verse 3

For I acknowledge my transgressions - I know, I feel, I confess that I have sinned.

My sin is ever before me - A true, deep, and unsophisticated mark of a genuine penitent. Wherever he turns his face, he sees his sin, and through it the eye of an angry God.

Verse 4

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned - This verse is supposed to show the impropriety of affixing the above title to this Psalm. It could not have been composed on account of the matter with Bath-sheba and the murder of Uriah; for, surely, these sins could not be said to have been committed against God Only, if we take the

words of this verse in their common acceptation. That was a public sin, grievous, and against society at large, as well as against the peace, honor, comfort, and life of an innocent, brave, and patriotic man. This is readily granted: but see below.

That thou mightest be justified when thou speakest - Perhaps, to save the propriety of the title, we might understand the verse thus: David, being king, was not liable to be called to account by any of his subjects; nor was there any authority in the land by which he could be judged and punished. In this respect, God Alone was greater than the king; and to him Alone, as king, he was responsible. *Nam quando rex deliquit, Soli Deo reus est; guia hominem non habet qui ejus facta dijudicet*, says Cassiodorus. "For when a king transgresses, he is accountable to God Only; for there is no person who has authority to take cognizance of his conduct." On this very maxim, which is a maxim in all countries, David might say, Against thee only have I sinned. "I cannot be called to the bar of my subjects; but I arraign myself before thy bar. They can neither judge nor condemn me; but thou canst: and such are my crimes that thou wilt be justified in the eyes of all men, and cleared of all severity, shouldst thou inflict upon me the heaviest punishment." This view, of the subject will reconcile the Psalm to the title. As to the eighteenth and nineteenth verses, we shall consider them in their own place; and probably find that the objection taken from them has not much weight.

Verse 5

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity - A genuine penitent will hide nothing of his state; he sees and bewails, not only the acts of sin which he has committed, but the disposition that led to those acts. He deplores, not only the transgression, but the carnal mind which is enmity against God. The light that shines into his soul shows him the very source whence transgression proceeds; he sees his fallen nature, as well as his sinful life; he asks pardon for his transgressions, and he asks washing and cleansing for his inward defilement. Notwithstanding all that Grotius and others have said to the contrary, I believe David to speak here of what is commonly called original sin; the propensity to evil which every man brings into the world with him, and which is the fruitful source whence all transgression proceeds. The word חָלַלְתִּי (*cholalti*), which we translate shaped, means more properly, I was brought forth from the womb; and $\text{יָצַאֲנִי מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי}$ (*yechemathni*) rather signifies made me warm, alluding to the whole process of the formation of the fetus in utero, the formative heat which is necessary to develop the parts of all embryo animals; to incubate the ova in the female, after having been impregnated by the male; and to bring the whole into such a state of maturity and perfection as to render it capable of subsisting and growing up by aliment received from without. "As my parts were developed in the womb, the sinful principle diffused itself through the whole, so that body and mind grew up in a state of corruption and moral imperfection."

Verse 6

Behold, thou desirest truth - I am the very reverse of what I should be. Those desirest truth in the heart, but in me there is nothing but sin and falsity.

Thou shalt make me to know wisdom - Thou wilt teach me to restrain every inordinate propensity, and to act according to the dictates of sound wisdom, the rest of my life.

Verse 7

Purge me with hyssop - $\text{טָהַרְתָּ אֶת־פָּעֻלָּתִי בַחֲסִידִים}$ (*techatteeni*), "thou shalt make a sin-offering for me;" probably alluding to the cleansing of the leper: Leviticus 14:1, etc. The priest took two clean birds, cedar-wood, scarlet, and hyssop; one of the birds was killed; and the living bird, with the scarlet, cedar, and hyssop, dipped in the blood of the bird that had been killed, and then sprinkled over the person who had been infected. But it is worthy of remark that this ceremony was not performed till the plague of the leprosy had been healed in the leper; (Leviticus 14:3); and the ceremony above mentioned was for the purpose of declaring to the people that the man was healed, that he might be restored to his place in society, having been healed of a disease that the finger of God alone could remove. This David seems to have full in view; hence he requests the Lord to make the sin-offering for him, and to show to the people that he had accepted him, and cleansed him from his sin.

Verse 8

Make me to hear joy - Let me have a full testimony of my reconciliation to thee; that the soul, which is so deeply distressed by a sense of thy displeasure, may be healed by a sense of thy pardoning mercy.

Verse 9

Hide thy face from my sins - The sentiment here is nearly the same as that in Psalm 51:3: His sin was ever before his own face; and he knew that the eye of God was constantly upon him, and that his purity and justice must be highly incensed on the account. He therefore, with a just horror of his transgressions, begs God to turn away his face from them, and to blot them out, so that they may never more be seen. See the note on Psalm

51:1 (note).

Verse 10

Create in me a clean heart - Mending will not avail; my heart is altogether corrupted; it must be new made, made as it was in the beginning. This is exactly the sentiment of St. Paul: Neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation; and the salvation given under the Gospel dispensation is called a being created anew in Christ Jesus.

A right spirit within me - אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן (ruach nachon), a constant, steady, determined spirit; called Psalm 51:12, אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן (ruach nedibah), a noble spirit. a free, generous, princely spirit; cheerfully giving up itself to thee; no longer bound and degraded by the sinfulness of sin.

Verse 11

Cast me not away from thy presence - Banish me not from thy house and ordinances.

Take not thy Holy Spirit from me - I know I have sufficiently grieved it to justify its departure for ever, in consequence of which I should be consigned to the blackness of darkness, - either to utter despair, or to a hard heart and seared conscience; and so work iniquity with greediness, till I fell into the pit of perdition. While the Spirit stays, painfully convincing of sin, righteousness, and judgment, there is hope of salvation; when it departs, then the hope of redemption is gone. But while there is any godly sorrow, any feeling of regret for having sinned against God, any desire to seek mercy, then the case is not hopeless; for these things prove that the light of the Spirit is not withdrawn.

Verse 12

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation - This is an awful prayer. And why? Because it shows he once Had the joy of God's salvation; and had Lost it by sin!

Uphold me with thy free spirit - Prop me up; support me with a princely spirit, one that will not stoop to a mean or base act. See on Psalm 51:10 (note).

Verse 13

Then will I teach transgressors - I will show myself to be grateful; I will testify of thy loving-kindness; I will call on transgressors to consider the error of their ways; and shall set before them so forcibly thy justice and mercy, that sinners shall be converted unto thee. With a little change I can adopt the language of Dr. Delaney on this place: "Who can confide in his own strength, when he sees David fall? Who can despair of Divine mercy when he sees him forgiven? Sad triumph of sin over all that is great or excellent in man! Glorious triumph of grace over all that is shameful and dreadful in sin!"

Verse 14

Deliver me from blood-guiltiness - This is one of the expressions that gives most color to the propriety of the title affixed to this Psalm. Here he may have in view the death of Uriah, and consider that his blood cries for vengeance against him; and nothing but the mere mercy of God can wipe this blood from his conscience. The prayer here is earnest and energetic: O God! thou God of my salvation! deliver me! The Chaldee reads, "Deliver me (אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן אִישׁוֹן (middin ketol)) from the judgment of slaughter."

My tongue shall sing aloud - My tongue shall praise thy righteousness. I shall testify to all that thou hast the highest displeasure against sin, and wilt excuse it in no person; and that so merciful art thou, that if a sinner turn to thee with a deeply penitent and broken heart, thou wilt forgive his iniquities. None, from my case, can ever presume; none, from my case, need ever despair.

Verse 15

O Lord, open thou my lips - My heart is believing unto righteousness; give me thy peace, that my tongue may make confession unto salvation. He could not praise God for pardon till he felt that God had pardoned him; then his lips would be opened, and his tongue would show forth the praise of his Redeemer.

Verse 16

For thou desirest not sacrifice - This is the same sentiment which he delivers in Psalm 40:6 (note), etc., where see the notes. There may be here, however, a farther meaning: Crimes, like mine, are not to be expiated by any sacrifices that the law requires; nor hast thou appointed in the law any sacrifices to atone for deliberate murder and adultery: if thou hadst, I would cheerfully have given them to thee. The matter is before thee as Judge.

Verse 17

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit - As my crimes are such as admit of no legal atonement, so thou hast reserved them to be punished by exemplary acts of justice, or to be pardoned by a sovereign act of mercy: but in order to find this mercy, thou requirest that the heart and soul should deeply feel the transgression, and turn to thee with the fullest compunction and remorse. This thou hast enabled me to do. I have the broken spirit, $\text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{o}}\text{x}^{\text{r}} - \text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{o}}\text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{r}}$ (ruach nishbarah); and the broken and contrite heart, $\text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{o}}\text{x}^{\text{r}} \text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{o}}\text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{r}} \text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{o}}\text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{r}}$ (leb nishbar venidkeh). These words are very expressive. $\text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{o}}\text{x}^{\text{r}}$ (shabar) signifies exactly the same as our word shiver, to break into pieces, to reduce into splinters; and $\text{x}^{\text{r}}\text{x}^{\text{o}}\text{x}^{\text{r}}$ (dakah), signifies to beat out thin, - to beat out masses of metal, etc., into laminae or thin plates. The spirit broken all to pieces, and the heart broken all to pieces, stamped and beaten out, are the sacrifices which, in such cases, thou requirest; and these "thou wilt not despise." We may now suppose that God had shone upon his soul, healed his broken spirit, and renewed and removed his broken and distracted heart; and that he had now received the answer to the preceding prayers. And here the Psalm properly ends; as, in the two following verses, there is nothing similar to what we find in the rest of this very nervous and most important composition.

Verse 18

Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion - This and the following verse most evidently refer to the time of the captivity, when the walls of Jerusalem were broken down, and the temple service entirely discontinued; and, consequently, are long posterior to the times of David. Hence it has been concluded that the Psalm was not composed by David, nor in his time and that the title must be that of some other Psalm inadvertently affixed to this. The fourth verse has also been considered as decisive against this title: but the note on that verse has considerably weakened, if not destroyed, that objection. I have been long of opinion that, whether the title be properly or improperly affixed to this Psalm, these two verses make no part of it: the subject is totally dissimilar; and there is no rule of analogy by which it can be interpreted as belonging to the Psalm, to the subject, or to the person. I think they originally made a Psalm of themselves, a kind of ejaculatory prayer for the redemption of the captives from Babylon, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the restoration of the temple worship. And, taken in this light, they are very proper and very expressive.

The Psalm 117:1-2 contains only two verses; and is an ejaculation of praise from the captives who had just then returned from Babylon. And it is a fact that this Psalm is written as a part of the cxvith in no less than thirty-two of Kennicott's and De Rossi's MSS.; and in some early editions. Again, because of its smallness, it has been absorbed by the cxviiiith, of which it makes the commencement, in twenty-eight of Kennicott's and De Rossi's MSS. In a similar way I suppose the two last verses of this Psalm to have been absorbed by the preceding, which originally made a complete Psalm of themselves; and this absorption was the more easy, because, like the cxviiiith it has no title. I cannot allege a similar evidence relative to these two verses, as ever having made a distinct Psalm; but of the fact I can have no doubt, for the reasons assigned above. And I still think that Psalm is too dignified, too energetic, and too elegant, to have been the composition of any but David. It was not Asaph; it was not any of the sons of Korah; it was not Heman or Jeduthun: the hand and mind of a greater master are here.