

**Teach Us to Pray**  
**Psalm 51—God, Forgive Me**

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I have been on staff at The Creek for almost two years. I am so thankful for our elders and their integrity, and for our lead pastor Dan Hamel and his friendship. I am grateful for our staff and volunteers. This is an environment filled with joy, vulnerability, courage, and conviction. I am a better man, a better husband and a better father because we are at this church. Thank you for the many ways you have invested in my life and our family.

We are in the fourth week of our series *Teach Us to Pray*. Each prayer this summer emerges from the Old Testament.

Week 1:	God, Empower Me (Nehemiah)
Week 2:	God, Provide for Me (Hannah)
Week 3:	God, Guide Me (Solomon)
Today:	God, Forgive Me (David's prayer in Psalm 51)

In this Psalm we bring the mess that our sins have created before a God who is merciful and compassionate, and we ask Him to cleanse us and to change us into people with clean hearts.

This Psalm includes an opening section that gives some context for this prayer.

*For the director of music.*  
*A psalm of David.*  
*When the prophet Nathan came to him*  
*after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.*

King David has a friend named Uriah. Uriah is one of his thirty strongest warriors and closest friends. One spring, when kings would go out to war, David decides to send his men to war, but he stays at the palace. While he is in the comfort of the palace, David summons Bathsheba into his room and sleeps with her. She becomes pregnant. To protect his name, David sends Uriah into the heat of the battle and then withdraws the troops so that Uriah will die. It's murder. David marries Bathsheba, the wife of the friend he has just murdered. It is a twisted story.

David has another friend, Nathan, who has the courage to confront the king. Upon being confronted, David repents, saying "I have sinned against the Lord," and he pens the words of Psalm 51 as a confession.

The prayer Jesus taught us to pray says, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Forgive *us*. We all sin, so this prayer, Psalm 51, is for all of us.

- "We all, like sheep, have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6).
- "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10).

Everyone in this room can feel Romans 7:15 deep in our bones: "What I want to do I do not do. But what I hate, I do."

What is that for you? Is it the worrying, or the endless anxiety that you can't seem to get a handle on? Is it the overeating or undereating? Maybe it's the hatred you can't release, or the judgmental spirit, or alcohol, lust, cheating, or lying. Maybe it's dishonoring the Sabbath, or hoarding for yourself when others go hungry, or gossip. Maybe it's the pride you find welling up in you because you don't struggle with any

of these vices. Pride is the sin that Satan committed, so “be careful when you think you are standing firm, lest you fall.”

As Anne Lamott puts it, “*Everyone* is screwed up, broken, clingy, and scared, even the people who seem to have it more or less together. They are much more like you than you would believe. So try not to compare your *insides* to their *outsides*.”

The Psalms are prayers that help our insides be congruent with our outsides. They teach us that prayer is honest and vulnerable. It’s not about “getting the words right” as much as it is about getting the words *out*:

Out in the open.  
Out of our mouths.  
Out of our hearts.  
Getting our true selves out to God.

When we do this, we discover that God’s restoration power can transform our lives. Psalm 51 provides a framework that helps us experience this kind of transformation. This framework provides four movements that help us come near to God in our confession. These movements are not designed simply to be understood, but to be experienced, so this morning after we introduce each movement, we will also put the prayer into practice.

### **Movement 1: Appeal to God’s Character (51:1-2)—God, this is who you are and what you do**

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.

David appeals to three virtues of God.

#### *David Appeals to God’s Mercy*

Mercy is an intrinsic part of God’s nature. The Hebrew word here is “chanan,” and it is related to the idea of bending or stooping in kindness toward an inferior. It literally means to show gracious favor to one who does not deserve it.

In ancient Hebrew, the letters were symbols that carried visual meaning. This word chanan had three symbols:

- Chet symbolizes a wall or fence, like a protective boundary.
- Nun is a seed sprouting, indicating new life or activity.
- When Nun is at the end of a word it takes a different form and symbolizes humility or bending down.

So, the symbols in the word itself suggest a protected space where life and grace are extended downward in mercy. It’s the picture of the incarnation. The King of kings literally humbles himself, stooping down, becoming obedient to death for those who do not deserve it, for me and you.

David recognizes God could pour out His fury, but He calls on His favor. Mercy is not a virtue that God is sometimes willing to display; it is core to who He is.

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have *mercy* on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:10-14)

Mercy is so essential to God’s character that the very beginning place of prayer is to appeal to this virtue. “Have mercy!”

### *David Appeals to God’s Love*

The Hebrew word often translated as “love” or “mercy” is “chesed,” and it has to do with the loyal love of God that is based on God fulfilling His promises. This love extends grace and forgiveness and does not waver in the wake of our shortcomings but meets us just where we are.

- “The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His *mercies* (chesed love) never cease” (Lamentations 3:22).
- “He delights in showing *mercy* (chesed love)” (Micah 7:18).

### *David Appeals to God’s Compassion*

David says, “Oh God, I know you. I know that your heart aches over my sin according to your great compassion!” The Hebrew word translated compassion comes from the same word that refers to the tenderness of a maiden’s womb. Think about this: David’s sin resulted in the woman he slept with bearing a child in her womb. A mother holds a fragile child tenderheartedly in the most vulnerable, protected place in her body. David is saying, “God, hold me in your most tender, protected place and let me be born again into a new kind of person.” Compassion is at the core of who God is.

Amy Carmichael says that “we never come to the place where we pass out of the reach of the compassion of our God.” His compassions fail not.

### **Response to Movement 1**

Let’s put this into practice. We begin our confession by appealing to God’s character as a prayer. Please stand with me and we’ll pray this together. I will read for the leader; you read the refrain.

Leader:

God, you are merciful.

You stoop down toward us in kindness.

Your mercy stretches farther than our sin.  
You do not treat us as our sins deserve,  
but invite us to return to you and live.

**All:**  
**Christ, have mercy on us.**

Leader:  
God, you are abounding in steadfast love,  
a refuge for all who call on your name.  
You rescue the crushed in spirit,  
and bind up the wounds of the brokenhearted.

**All:**  
**Christ, have mercy on us.**

Leader:  
God, you are slow to anger and rich in compassion,  
inviting us to be born again.  
You see our secrets and still speak peace,  
welcoming us in love, not shame.

**All:**  
**Christ, have mercy on us.**

Leader:  
God, you are holy and just,  
yet you chose mercy over wrath.  
You laid our guilt on Christ, the spotless lamb,  
so we could be made clean.

**All:**  
**Christ, have mercy on us.**

Leader:  
God, you are the one who renews our minds,  
who creates in us a clean heart.  
You breathe your Spirit into our weakness,  
and lead us in the way everlasting.

**All:**  
**Christ, have mercy on us.**

**Movement 2A: Acknowledge My Condition Before God (51:3-5)—This is who I am and what I have done**

For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight;  
so you are right in your verdict



and justified when you judge.  
Surely I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

David says, “I know my transgression and my sin is always before me.” The word translated “transgression” means to trespass. This is what David did—he trespassed, stepped into a relationship that was forbidden. In essence, Bathsheba had a “no trespassing” sign on her life. She was not David’s wife. But he trespassed, he transgressed, and his sin was *always* before him.

Do you ever feel like that, like your sin is always before you? Do you wake up in the middle of the night wondering if you’ll be found out or weeping because of the sadness you feel over the choices you have made? If you have regrets for wrongdoing that you just can’t shake, then you know a little bit of what David felt like.

He writes “Surely I was sinful at birth. Sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” As David looks back on his life, he sees that sin has had a life-long influence on him from the very beginning. His sin with Bathsheba and Uriah was not an anomaly in an otherwise unblemished life. Actually, sin began to take up residence early and over time sin has pervaded and perverted his core identity as a child of God.

Several weeks ago I saw a groundhog run under my porch. We set out a trap. No luck. We set out three traps. No luck. Occasionally, we would see the groundhog in our yard or scurrying under the porch. Earlier this week I looked out the window and it turns out our groundhog now has a family!



Four groundhogs have made a home under *my* home. Sin is like this. It starts out small and then eventually it grows and the problem that was manageable gets out of control.

David is the picture of a broken-hearted man. He is not making excuses, not downplaying his choices. We are so prone to minimize our sin. I want to say things like,

- “It could have been worse.”
- “At least I’m not as bad as that guy.”
- “I rarely give into temptation (and I want you to know that), but today I did sort of just accidentally stumble into something. It wasn’t really my fault.”

If David was the king of Israel, I am the king of minimizing the depth and depravity of my sins. But David takes full ownership. He is saying, “Sin has been part of my life from the moment I was conceived. It has taken root and taken over.”

Recently my wife Adrienne and I were guiding a retreat in Savannah, Georgia, at a place called Wesley Gardens. We were using the gardens as a metaphor for our life with God. There was one area that I walked through on the first day of our retreat that loomed large for me for the remainder of the week. In this garden, everything was beautiful and symmetrical. But in the center was a circle filled with weeds. I took note that this part needed work. Then, a few hours later, I walked past the garden and noticed three

gardeners working on that very spot. When I asked about the project, the gardener pulled up a handful of dirt and pointed out all the broken clam shells. He said these had been piled up there hundreds of years ago by native Americans.



The entire section of the garden is full of old clam shells, which put too much alkaline in the soil so that nothing could flourish there. Throughout the course of the week, these gardeners kept taking out loads of shells and replacing them with fresh compost and soil.

I realized that this garden was a picture of my life. I wrote this in my journal that week:

My own problems are deeper than they appeared.  
What is this harmful stuff in the soil of my soul?  
And how has it lasted here for so long?  
Over these many years there are areas of my life where the waste has piled up.

Lack of discipline.  
Toss it in.  
The laziness, the pride.  
I try to hide.  
Self-centeredness, insecurity.  
All these worst parts of me.  
Idolatry, greed, laziness, lust.  
I hoped, over time, it all would turn to dust.  
But instead it's here in a heap.  
This stuff goes deep.  
Sometimes I know He must weep.

Maybe you can relate to this garden as well—too much of the wrong stuff in the wrong place.

### **Response to Movement 2A**

Let's put the first part of Movement 2 into practice. Close your eyes for a moment as you prepare to acknowledge your condition before God. Take a minute and scan over your life in recent days, weeks or even years. Begin to take stock of the areas in your life:

- Where you hope no one else can see.
- When you have hurt someone and been unwilling to make it right.
- When you have operated out of pride or self-reliance.
- When your addictions have gotten the best of you.

Confess this to God: "When I did "x," this was sin against you. Please forgive me. Amen."

## **Movement 2B: Acknowledge My Condition Before Another Person (51:6)**

This is important groundwork. Movement 2 has two parts. Part A is to acknowledge my condition before God; part B is to acknowledge my condition before another person.

Yet you desired faithfulness even in the inner parts;  
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

Confessing our sins to God is the first step to healing. But if we do not include at least one other person, it short-circuits the healing process. For David, Nathan the prophet is that person. Nathan confronts him and David confesses: “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:13.)

These are potent words and they can change a life. But the words of Nathan in response are perhaps just as powerful: “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die” (2 Samuel 12:13).

The practice of confession to another person has power. “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).

God knows everything and nothing can be hidden from Him, so when we confess to God, we are naming what He already knows. It’s an important step, but it’s crucial to confess and renounce sins to another person. “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive the power of sin over him.” David confessed his sin to Nathan. Who is your Nathan?

Shortly after I graduated from college, I realized that I needed to have some men in my life who I could confess my sins to on a regular basis. For almost thirty years I have had a regular meeting with a group of men primarily for the purpose of confessing our sins. It has been a lifeline for me. Sometimes it’s a text. Typically, it’s face to face. But it is regular, humbling, beautiful, and lifesaving. And I am grateful to many of you in this room who have received my confessions on the trail, over coffee, in my office, or in life group. You have met me with grace, courage, wisdom, forgiveness, and hope. Thank you.

Who do I confess to?

1. A trusted person in my life—a friend, mentor, accountability partner, or, for starters, someone on the prayer team here at The Creek.
2. The person I sinned against—Matthew 5:23-24 says, “If you’re brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go be reconciled.”

How do I confess?

1. Be humble—accept full responsibility.
2. Be honest—without being graphic.
3. Be heartfelt—“See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done” (2 Corinthians 7:11).
4. Be hungry—for change and ready to take action.

How do I receive a confession?

1. Hear them—be a good listener.
2. Honor them—thank them, tell them that confessing takes a lot of courage; hold what they shared in confidence as long as it's appropriate.
3. Hold them before God in prayer—consider speaking the words that Nathan spoke over David: “The LORD has taken away your sin.”
4. Help them with a pathway forward—discuss steps for accountability, any healing plan, etc.

### **Response to Movement 2B**

This is the hardest part and the most important. This is the moment when we “confess our sins to another person so that we may be healed.”

The worship team is going to sing Psalm 51 over us and as they do, you are invited to bring into the light anything that has been lurking in the shadows.

Here is how you can respond:

- Come forward to confess to another person and receive prayer. We have some staff members and folks from the prayer team here in front.
- Share with another person in this room.
- If you are with us online, bring a confession to the person or people you're with, or make a phone call or send a text.

As the song plays, allow God's Spirit to speak to you, and as the Lord prompts you to share your confession, come. You can keep it brief, such as, “I am convicted today about my judgmental spirit towards others and I confess this.”

Remember,

- Be humble
- Be honest
- Be heartfelt
- Be hungry

### **Movement 3: Ask for Cleansing (51:7-13)—This is who I want to become**

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins  
and blot out all my iniquity.  
Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.  
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
so that sinners will turn back to you.

To be cleansed means to strip away any harmful substances. The pathway forward is to help create new habits and even a new environment so that I can live a clean life, filled with the Holy Spirit and restored to joy!

My half-hearted attempts to get the groundhog didn't work. I need to change the environment so the groundhogs can't get in, using webbing, buried mesh that they can't dig through, repellents, etc. We still have some work to do.

In Movement 3 we are asking God to change the environment of our soul. Make this heart clean, whiter than snow, a place that repels sin and is so filled with the Holy Spirit that sin can't take up residence.

### **Response to Movement 3**

As a response, let's pray this out loud together.

God, you and you alone have cleansed us.  
So we humbly say, "Thank you."  
Thank you for your grace and your salvation.  
Thank you for the completed work of Christ,  
Crucified, resurrected, and reigning.

Through your grace, create in us a pure heart.  
May your Spirit empower us to live in holiness  
May we follow your call to embrace this new day,  
Walking not in shame, but in confidence of your grace.

### **Movement 4: Adoration & Communion (51:14-19)—This is what I am going to do**

Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,  
you who are God my Savior,  
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.  
Open my lips, Lord,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;  
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.  
My sacrifice, O God, is <sup>[b]</sup> a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise.  
May it please you to prosper Zion,  
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.  
Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous,  
in burnt offerings offered whole;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

When the joy of our salvation is returned, there is nothing left to do but praise. God does not despise a broken and contrite heart. That's something to praise Him for.

The enemy wants us to live in hiding, but God rejoices in our contrition. He celebrates when the lost son comes home. And when he throws that party, we get to be free.

Praise the Lord!!

So, we bring him our adoration in worship, which we will do in a moment. But this process of confession also leads us to Communion. We can be united with God again because of reconciliation, and communion is the exclamation point!

#### **Response to Movement 4**

Our response to this will be to worship and to take communion. As the worship team returns for one final song, we invite you to get your communion elements. There are stations around the worship center.

Psalm 51 closes with the words, "There will be righteous sacrifices." And so, there would come a day, even after everything David had done wrong, when God would bring a Messiah from David's line. Jesus would become the ultimate righteous sacrifice. Jesus would go into Jerusalem with his friends. He would break the bread and drink the cup, and say to his friends, "Every time that you share this meal together, remember me." He would then be nailed to that cross for our sins. He would be the only righteous sacrifice. And from the cross he would cry out these words, "Father, forgive them."

So take the bread. This represents the sacrifice that Jesus made so our sins could be forgiven. We celebrate God's forgiveness as we eat together.

And now take the juice. This represents the blood of the new covenant that is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. We celebrate the communion we have with God and each other because of His forgiveness as we drink together.

Amen.