David Meiklejohn
5 July 2026

The Journey of Restoration

Psalm 51

Introduction

Why do you sing? I'm assuming you sing. Most people do. It seems to be part of human nature from the very young to the very old. We sing when we're happy. We sing when were sad. We sing when we're angry. We sing because a tune is stuck in our head. That's funny, isn't it? A series of sounds can cause our brains to loop around repeating them internally. We call that catchy. The words might not say much, but a well written song can stick with you.

But some songs are more than catchy. Some songs tell a story. They can evoke feelings. They can take you on a journey. Move you. They can make your heart leap, or make your eyes weep.

The psalms are songs. They are meant to be sung. Many of them take us on a journey. They are generally directed to God, so they're also prayers. But there's two aspects to prayer. One is that we're bringing something before the Lord, asking for his help. The second is that prayer changes us. And praying the psalms often changes us as it takes us on a journey.

We looked at Psalm 3 - praying under pressure. David starts the psalm in a state of anxiety - he's being chased down by his own son. But as the psalm progresses, so does David - into confidence that the Lord will protect him.

We looked at Psalm 13 - from the valley to the mountain peak. David starts in despair - why does God hide his face from him? But he ends in rejoicing. He is lifted up, and so are we as we read it and pray it.

In Psalm 25 - magnifying the Lord in trials - David asks God to show him his ways, to guide him. His mood goes up and down as he considers his affliction and distress, but also reassures himself that God is there for those who trust him.

And in Psalm 42 and 43 - from despair to delight - David gave us a title that reflects the same idea of a journey.

So let us look at the journey that David is going to take us on in Psalm 51.

Background

This psalm is probably the clearest one of all 150 about when and why it was written. The preface says "*A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*" We heard this story just a few weeks back in our Sunday evening series on 2nd Samuel. David is walking on the palace roof when he should be out fighting with his army. He sees Bathsheba on the roof of her house, bathing. Instead of turning away from temptation he calls for her to be brought to him, and he commits adultery with her. When she becomes pregnant he tries to cover up his sin by calling her husband back from the field. When Uriah is too honourable to spend time in his own house while his comrades are out in the battle, David sends him into the thickest part of the battle so that he is killed.

The prophet Nathan approaches David and tells him a story - a rich man has a visitor and rather than taking from his own wealth, he steals the lamb from a poor man, and prepares it as a welcome feast. David is outraged at this and when he demands the man is punished Nathan points to him and says "You are the man".

This psalm is David's response to being confronted with his sin. What would you have done? Explained it away? Denied it? Brushed it under the carpet? Said you're the king so you can do what you like?

What David does is write a psalm of confession. More than that, he writes a song that he wants everyone to hear. Look at that preface again: "*To the choirmaster.*." David wants everyone to hear the journey he's going through as he confronts and confesses his sin. And he wants his people to follow in his steps.

Why do we sing? Not very often is it to confess our sins. But that's where this psalm takes us.

A Cry for Mercy

David starts by calling to the Lord for mercy. He doesn't come as a king, or as a righteous man. He comes simply as a sinner, totally relying on the compassion of God. Look at the first two verses:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
[Psalm 51 v 1-2]

When was the last time you asked God for mercy? Oh, you ask him for guidance, for health, for wisdom and strength. These are all good things. But when did you last ask for mercy? Have you stopped sinning since you became a Christian? Then you're different from every other Christian I know. No, we are still sinners, and surely the Holy Spirit should be making us more painfully aware of our sins. These words should be on our lips daily.

The next words are even harder to say:

Confession

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
[Psalm 51 v 3-6]

We sometimes talk about the sanctity of life, and when life begins. It's obvious to science that a baby has its own vitality before it is born. The Bible tells us that too. God says he knew us when we were in the womb.

David takes it a step further. Not only was he an individual when he was in the womb, he was a sinner already. There was no point where he was righteous, not from his very beginning. This big sin hangs before him, but so do all his other sins. God would be just in wiping him out.

But David knows that is not what God wants:

A Cry for Restoration

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
[Psalm 51 v 7-12]

What does David want? He has already asked for mercy, for forgiveness, but he wants more than that. He wants to be restored. And to want to be restored, he must have known what it was like to be close to God before. This isn't the cry of an unbeliever who wants a relationship with God. It's the cry of a believer who has damaged his relationship with God, and wants it to be restored.

The things David asks for give us an idea of the damage that sin does to us:

- Sin taints us, it makes us unclean
- Sin steals away our joy in the Lord
- Sins come between us and God
- Sins crush our spirit
- Sins draw us away from God and inhibit the Spirit's work in us
- Sin takes away our motivation to serve God

Have you ever watched a TV programme and there has been an obvious reference to something but you're not sure what it is, because you're not old enough to get it? There's something like that in here. Look at verse 9: "*blot out all my iniquities*". The same image was used in verse 1 as well: "*blot out my transgressions*". Back in the days when people wrote with fountain pens, or even quills, it was very easy to spill some ink on the page. The writer would have a sheet of special paper - blotting paper - at hand for when this happened. They'd press the blotting paper down on the spill, and it would soak up the ink, leaving the writing paper clean.

Isn't that a lovely picture of Christ. He wants to take away our sins and leave us clean, but to do so he has to absorb the sin onto himself. Peter wrote *"He himself bore our sins in his body*

on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." [1 Peter 2 v 24]

The Promise of a Repentant Heart

David's cry for restoration isn't a forlorn one. He is confident that God will forgive and restore. Not because David is worthy, but because God is faithful. And so he looks forward to the difference it will make to him:

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
[Psalm 51 v 13-17]

Anticipating the joy that forgiveness and restoration will give him, David says he's going to tell everyone about it. He will teach God's ways to sinners, he will sing about God's righteousness, he will praise God with his speech, he will honour God with his humility.

This is the whole story of evangelism. Someone who finds forgiveness from the Lord experiences such a marvellous change in their life, that they must tell others, so that they can find that joy too.

A King's Concern for his Country

And in thinking about others who also need the Lord, David prays for the country he rules:

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;
then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.
[Psalm 51 v 18-19]

David isn't just looking for personal restoration, he wants restoration for the nation. Earlier on he said God takes no pleasure in burnt offerings, but now he says God will delight in them. What has changed? It's the attitude of heart of the one who brings the offering.

Conclusion

David has taken some journey! He went from pleading for mercy, confronting his sin, to seeking restoration, confidently looking to the change it will make in his life, and seeing that same change for all his people.

It should be the journey we take as well, as we read through the psalm.

- We must approach God with nothing in our hands, looking for his mercy
- We must confess and mourn the sin that is before us
- We must seek not just forgiveness but restoration
- Restoration of joy should give us restoration of purpose
- We should also pray for the restoration of those we love