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Have Mercy on Me, O God

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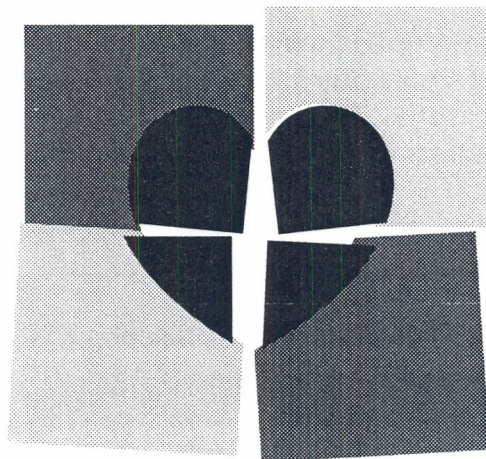
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Have Mercy on Me, O God

By Mark Love



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.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. . . .

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

—Psalm 51:1–3, 10–12

We are never to hear these words apart from the prophet’s ringing accusation, “You are the man.” My sense is that Nathan’s charge against David that day turned the king inside out, brought his carefully crafted world crashing down around him, so that suddenly the oxygen in the room was completely depleted and the wind knocked from his lungs, leaving him to wonder from where his next breath would come.

Which is not a familiar state for a king to be in—winded. You see wind and words, **breath and speech go together**. And the words of a king have creative force. A

king’s life is full of verbs: “Sit. Rise. Go. Come. Wage war with the Ammonites.” And then these things happen. That is the way with kings and words: a king speaks his world into existence—and then is left to survey what his words have created.

And so it is with David that day. His army off at battle in the annual spring war, he is left to survey his world. From the rooftop of his palace he spies a woman bathing, and she is very beautiful. From this point, the story (2 Samuel 11–12)¹ is nothing but verbs. There is no blushing; there are no clumsy romantic overtures, no hearts aflutter. No impressions from the woman, no insights into her heart. There are no seductions—only verbs.

“David *sent* messengers.”

“She *came* to him.”

“He *lay* with her.”

This is not a Harlequin Romance. David takes Bathsheba simply because he can.

“The woman conceived.”

“And she sent and told David.”

The question now is, will the king be able to sustain this world of his own creation? He sends for the woman’s husband, Uriah the Hittite. Uriah, how’s the war going? War’s hell isn’t it? Listen, why don’t you go down to

your house, kick back, and “wash your feet,” if you get my drift? But Uriah is too good, too loyal to sustain David’s world of deception. “As long as you have breath,” cries Uriah, “I will not do such a thing!” Uriah’s loyalty to David keeps him from the one place David needs him to be, Bathsheba’s bed. The cover-up is foiled.

But David is not out of verbs. He writes Uriah’s death warrant and hands it to Uriah himself to deliver to Joab. “Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him so that he may be struck down and die.” And so Uriah dies; and so David covers his adultery with murder.

When Bathsheba has mourned properly for Uriah, David takes her as his wife and she bears him a son. Things have a way of working out for the guy with all the verbs. But David’s world is now in two pieces: the world of appearances, the one over which he is sovereign—and the real world, the one that includes things both seen and unseen, things covered and things exposed. There is another who is sovereign over that world, and he is none too pleased. And so he sends his prophet Nathan to uncover David with a story.

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock . . . , but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him. (2 Sam 12:1–4)

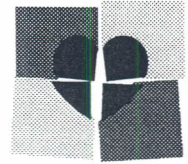
Upon hearing this, David’s anger is kindled. “As the Lord has breath!” he exclaims. Then, just as Uriah had carried his own death warrant, David pronounces his own. “The man who has done this deserves to die.”

“David, you are the man.”

Suddenly, what has been covered is exposed. David’s spoken world tumbles down around him. The weight of his own judgement crushes his shoulders. His chest collapsed by his own guilt, he wonders what has happened to all of the air in the room. Thin words pass through his lips:

“I have sinned against the Lord.”

Things have a way of working out for the guy with all the verbs.



I Have Sinned against Yahweh

“I have sinned against the Lord.” I wonder how much that confession weighs. Once the hidden things have been uncovered, bundled together, and placed on the scale—“I have sinned against Yahweh”—I wonder how much that weighs. Psalm 51 knows. Psalm 51 empties the secret heart and asks, If you had to own this, if you had to claim it as your own before God, would you be able to carry it? “Against you, you alone, have I sinned,” the psalm cries. If I wore that cry as a garment, would I be able to stand?

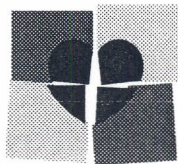
So I bundle it all up to weigh it. I take all the sin, all the times I’ve missed the mark. And I take the transgressions, those times I’ve stepped over the line—and the iniquities, the evil acts of a corrupt heart. Psalm 51 is thorough: there is not a Hebrew word for sin that is left out of the bundle. The psalmist places the bundle on the scale—“Against you, you alone, have I sinned”—and looks down to see how much it weighs. And it is massive. It is stunning. “Against you, you alone, have I sinned.” It is oppressive to behold, so that the psalmist wonders if someone else has his foot on the scale.

Is it Uriah’s foot, the one wronged? Against Uriah I have sinned? True enough, but Uriah is a hapless Hittite, a poor sap fighting someone else’s war. A soldier, and soldiers die. At least he went out a hero. Is it Bathsheba’s foot? Against Bathsheba I have sinned? Please. Things have worked out pretty well for her. She has ended up with the king in the palace; attendants wait on her every need. Besides, she’s an adult. I think she invited it, bathing that way in my presence. Hey, I’m just a man, and a man has his needs. Is it Israel’s foot that makes it so heavy? Against Israel I have sinned? I know I’ve let Israel down. But no one understands the pressures of being king. It’s lonely at the top. Besides, they’re lucky to have me. Other kings are far worse than I am.

No, the weight remains. It’s someone else’s foot. The psalm knows whose foot it is. It is the foot of

Yahweh, the one with whom we have to do, the one before whom there are no excuses, no mitigating circumstances, no wiggle room. It is the foot of Yahweh, the one who is pure and holy. So that my only conclusion is, “You are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement.”

Psalm 51 empties the secret heart and asks, “If you had to own this, if you had to claim it as your own before God, would you be able to carry it?”



The confession of Psalm 51 is massive and comprehensive—and true and just. And this is a miserable place from which to view life. Soon, everything becomes a reminder of my guilt—the casualty reports from the front, the presence of Bathsheba in the palace. The film tonight in the palace theatre is *Fatal Attraction*; someone tells a Monica joke, and I force a nervous laugh; the preacher begins a sermon series on the ten commandments. Everything is a reminder. “My sin is ever before me,” laments the psalm. The reality of this sin is pervasive. It is present in my waking and in my dreaming. It is taped to the inside of my eyelids, written on the tops of my shoes, stenciled on my forehead, sown on my coat like a giant scarlet letter. It is now inside every motive of my life, so that it touches everything I do, whether good or bad. This is not some stain on my shirt that I might wash away, or some dirt on my body that I might remove. It is more—a blight that comes from inside me, right through my very pores. It is in my inhaling and exhaling. O, my sin is ever before me! This oppressive, omnipresent weight forces me to an awful conclusion: My sin is not simply something I did; it is who I am.

And now I see it. The dots connect before my eyes. Like popcorn on a string, the pattern of my life becomes clear—“My sin is ever before me”—reaching back through my entire existence. What else can I conclude? “I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” I cannot separate what I did from who I am and have always been: a sinner.

Yes, Yahweh—“Against you, you alone, have I sinned.” And how much does that weigh? A ton. So that as I wear it as a garment, it pushes vertebra into vertebra, pushes me down, crushes my bones. It is a heaviness on my chest that pulls down my shoulders and robs me of spirit, of the power to draw breath. And I take this crushed form to worship hoping there might be some spirit there to animate these crushed bones, to breathe some life back into me. To see if there might be some sacrifice, some penance, some ritual of cleansing, some sweet word of comfort sung over me. But I find that in worship the weight crushes me all the more. There is no joy to be squeezed from these crushed bones, no spirit to enliven me, no wind to sing praise. I wonder if God’s spirit is even present to me. “O God, do not take your holy spirit from me!”

“Against you, you alone, have I sinned.” Psalm 51 takes the bundle of this confession and places it on the scale. And it is bone crushing.

A Prophet and a Secret Heart

You know, I’m glad there’s no Nathan in my life. Aren’t you? It would spoil a really great week here at Pepperdine to have a guy like Nathan hanging around campus. The popular exclamation “You da’ man” takes on a completely different meaning when Nathan says it.

Imagine what the week would’ve been like if Jerry Rushford, lectureship director, had announced on the opening night, “We have a real treat for this week’s 56th Annual Bible Lectures, all the way from that Judean berg that we have sung of so many times—Zion, mighty Zion—yes, all the way from Jerusalem, we have the prophet Nathan on this great campus. He’ll stand here the final night and lead prayer. We’ll be moved. You won’t want to miss this great experience. We’re so blessed to have him. He doesn’t do many lectureships anymore, but said he was real eager to come to the Pepperdine Bible Lectures. He says he wants to meet with several of you—has some stories he’d like to tell. Thinks you’ll be surprised. I can’t wait. He wants to talk to me first.

Nathan scares us. He scares us because each of us has a secret heart—a place where we’ve tucked away all those accusing and condemning memories to be hidden from everyone’s sight, even our own. All those things that, if brought to light, would say, “The jig is up. You’ve been found out.”

Nathan frightens some of us because we know what is hidden there. We've laid awful things on a bed in a guest room of the heart, a room rarely visited, and we've covered those things with blankets and tucked them in with hospital corners, never to be disturbed. The last thing we need is a guy like Nathan turning back the covers for everyone to see.

Nathan frightens others of us because our secret hearts are secret even to us. We don't know what's there. We've been so seduced by our own performance, our own public version of who we are, that we deny any other reality. We no longer have the capacity to tell the truth about ourselves. We're afraid of what we've hidden—hidden even from ourselves.

The temptation is to read Psalm 51 as someone else's psalm. It's a psalm for someone who's done something like what David did. We sing it the way we sing "Just as I Am," as encouragement for the real sinners to walk the aisles. But our dread of Nathan, someone who sees us like God sees us, suggests that this is our psalm as well. It is a psalm for everyone with a secret heart.

Nathan frightens us because we know that if our secret hearts ever got shaken out, put on display, it would be easy to connect the dots—to see that our sins are not just isolated incidents but a part of the fabric of our lives. We fear that once this is known, there will be no remedy, no quick solution, no way to merely move on. This condition goes too deep for mere words of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a blanket too short to cover the realities of our lives. The cure for who we are goes beyond behavior modification, or hoping that the good we do will somehow outweigh the bad, or thinking that somehow our faithful church attendance will bail us out. This goes beyond what we do. This is about who we are.

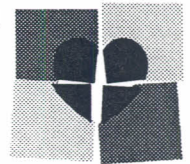
When Nathan enters a life and says, "Mark, you are the man," then the jig is up. I can no longer create and sustain an alternate reality. The world over which I am sovereign is no longer habitable. With my secret heart exposed, my options are exhausted. Who will rescue me from this crushed, spirit-less body of death? Have mercy on me, O God.

Create in Me a Clean Heart

"Create in me a clean heart, O God." You know, the interesting thing about the word create is that in the entire Old Testament it is used only in reference to God. It is the Hebrew word *bara'*, and only God can *bara'*—

create, out of nothing. Where something didn't exist, with no resources with which to work, right out of thin air, by the power of his word—God, and God alone, creates. And that's good news, because God has precious little to work with in my divided heart. I've tried. I've told my heart, "Try harder. Be different. Think less about this, more about that. Be devoted to this; flee from that." God has precious little to work with in terms of natural resources with my old stained heart, now crushed. But if God chose to, he could create a new heart and put it in me.

Nathan frightens us because we know that if our secret hearts ever got shaken out, put on display, it would be easy to connect the dots



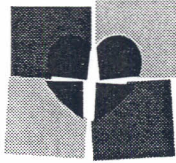
Yes, that is what I long for. A new heart, a clean heart, a pure heart, a willing heart, a consistent heart, a heart of integrity. Could God create that out of the crushed mess of my divided heart?

And if he could do that, then what if I yielded to him the rest of this work of being free from my sin? I have tried my own counsel. But what if God taught me wisdom way down in the covered-over places, the places I cannot go without being crushed? O God, teach me truth in my covered-up places! Wisdom in my secret heart!

I have tried purging my life of sin, cleaning out the evil desires, but to no avail. I have tried to scrub the stain of sin out of my life. I have tried to worship myself back to health. To no avail. But what if God took that hyssop branch and sprinkled on me cleansing blood and purged me of my sin. And O, if God were to wash me, I would surely be clean. I would be whiter than snow, cleansed for his presence in my life.

"My sin is ever before me." But what if God could turn his face from my sin? What if he could take the sponge and blot out the record that stands against me? Then my life could be free of the shame and guilt I carry. O God, hide your face from my sins. Blot out my transgressions; wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Purge

The hope for a new heart, a clean heart, is based squarely in the nature of God himself. The psalm moves in confidence not only that God can but that he will create a clean heart.



me and I will be purged. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and set a consistent spirit within me. Don't take your life-giving presence, your holy spirit, from me. Wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Create in me a clean heart so that these crushed bones might have life, so that I might rejoice again in your salvation. Open these lips and my mouth will declare your praise and teach sinners your ways. "Create in me a clean heart, O God!"

Do you believe God is able to do that? Create a clean heart out of nothing?

It's one thing to believe that he can. It's another to believe that he will. And that's the hard part, isn't it? We've weighed this morning the confession "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." We know how much that weighs. We know the stubborn way of our hearts. We know the record that stands against us. We know who we are and who God is, and it is hard to believe deep down that he would choose to create a clean heart in us. Is this just wishful thinking?

A Covenant-Keeping God

In Exodus 34 God places Moses in the cleft of the rock, covers him with his hand, and passes by him to show Moses his glory. And in the revealing of his glory, he proclaims his name, his covenant identity.

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents

upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exod 34:6-7)

What Moses learns in Exodus 34 is God's covenant identity. What is it that guarantees God's presence in the midst of a stiff-necked people? God's very nature, revealed in his name and expressed in his covenant. "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love . . . , forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

This is what Psalm 51 counts on. It is the first refrain of the psalm. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy . . . wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." The hope for sinners like David, and like you and me, is not to be found in some magnificent penance, or in some remnant of character, or even in some cleansing ritual. The hope for a new heart, a clean heart, is based squarely in the nature of God himself. The psalm moves in confidence not only that God can but that he will create a clean heart.

The psalmist wastes no time imagining burnt offerings, yearling calves, thousands of rams, or ten thousand rivers of oil, because he knows that God takes no delight in worship as payback or cover-up. Psalm 51 knows well that crushed bones and a crushed heart are just the right sacrifice for a God abounding in steadfast love and mercy. As my friend Charme Robarts suggests, here is where the poor in heart meet the kingdom of God. The gospel of this psalm rests in the nature of God himself. He is a covenant-making, covenant-keeping God, and his name means steadfast love and mercy!

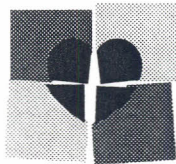
We have weighed this morning with Psalm 51 the confession "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." And massive as that is, Psalm 51 declares that there is something even greater, something that weighs more—the character of the God of mercy.

The language of this psalm is thorough and complete. It is comprehensive. There are no realities overlooked, on our behalf or on God's. If the implications of sin are impossible to evade in this psalm, then the implications of mercy are even more pervasive. If sin be fully admitted and taken into account, then be of good courage, because this psalm proclaims that the steadfast love of God surpasses all realities. O heart bowed down with sorrow, hear the gospel from Psalm 51. When our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts!

You see, in Psalm 51 God has all the verbs. God teaches; he purges; he bathes and cleanses. God turns his face; he blots out; he brings joy and opens lips for his praise.

O heart bowed down with sorrow, hear and believe today: the Lord, the Lord, abounding in steadfast love and mercy will create in you a clean heart.

You see, in Psalm 51 God has all the verbs. God teaches; he purges; he bathes and cleanses.



Mortal, Can These Bones Live?

Is there anything clearer to us this week than the need for renewal in our churches? As I have lived with this psalm during the past nine months, I have often found myself in Ezekiel 33, a place where the people of God address Yahweh: “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?” (Ezek 33:10).

I would submit this morning that we cannot know renewal, we cannot find again a place to live before God apart from the experience of Psalm 51. Do you long for renewal? Are you like Macbeth this morning, willing to drink “some sweet oblivious antidote that would cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart?” Will you drink this cup? Before you answer, know that there are other strategies out there for renewal that will require less of you. Perhaps you could try a praise team instead, or add more drama to your worship, or go to a cell group format. But I think that, in the end, without the experience of a text like Psalm 51, such strategies will prove only to be cosmetic—a little like turning up the stereo in the car to cover the knocking and pinging of a sputtering engine.

But if you’re willing, here is the elixir.

1. “Against you, you alone, have I sinned.” Surely David sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba, but as long as we view our sin in relation to others or to things, we will be able to minimize, trivialize, and evade our sin. We can usually convince ourselves that we are not as

bad as the next guy. But before God there are no such pretensions. To drink this cup, we will have to stand under the knowing gaze of a holy God and live within that reference point.

2. We will have to talk less about sins and more about Sin, less about those things we do and more about who we are as diseased people before God. When we focus talk of sin on behaviors, we tend to start categorizing each other according to the type of sin displayed and then to exclude on that basis. We are like children with chicken pox who see others with more pock marks and so decide that since our marks are fewer or less prominent, we must not have the disease at all. And this is dangerous denial. Psalm 51 cuts deeper, and so must we. Confession of sin as the disease of our fleshly existence must become the practice of all in the church.

3. We will need to seek more than forgiveness. Psalm 51 envisions more than just a forgiving pat on the head. No cheap grace here. Instead, the penitent long to be scrubbed, cleansed, made into completely new people. As long as we are content with forgiveness, we will not have renewal. I fear that we are playing a dangerous game in our churches. We want forgiveness but are very little interested in being new people. We ask for and celebrate God’s forgiveness without desiring new hearts, clean hearts. Psalm 51 demands that we stand before God and ask for more than just forgiveness. Our plea before God must be more than just, “Wash my sin from me.” We must plead, “Wash me.”

4. We will have to let God have all the verbs. Only God can do this work. The sinner cannot be self-restored. The advantage of crushed bones is that they cannot do anything. This is precisely where we need to be. “Nothing in my hand I bring, naught as an offering to Jesus, my King.” Creating is God’s work alone. And this we should know as we consider giving God all the verbs. God delights in being God. If we fail to bring our sin before him, we rob him of the opportunity to be himself, to display his nature, to be merciful and gracious. Our churches will be renewed when we let God be God, when we let him unleash the verbs of mercy in our assemblies.

5. Because this is difficult work, we will need proclaimers to constantly remind us of the covenant-keeping nature of God. He is abundant and merciful. In my experience, sinners don’t need much help in identi-

fyng themselves as sinners. But they do need constant reminders that God's mercy is for them, because that is scarcely believable.

Listen, can we speak the truth here today? This room is full of people with burdened hearts, and so are our churches, our elders' meetings, and our pulpits. We desperately need unburdened hearts. We have weighed two undeniable realities here today: our sin before God, and his steadfast love and mercy. Will we bet the church house on the proposition that God weighs more? I think that deep down, many of us believe the opposite.

But more importantly, perhaps, many of us today desperately believe that God is merciful—but we're not quite sure about church folk. Elders, ministers, church leaders, listen to me today: people in your pews are struggling mightily with the burden of their sin. Look in your own hearts; you know that it's true. We give you permission to be vulnerable before us so that sinners might have a safe place to unburden their sin in the community of faith.

The stakes are huge. When we bet the other way—that sin is greater than God's mercy and is best kept in covered-up places—then we place the burden squarely on ourselves and not on God. And then the air—the spirit—disappears from our churches, and we wonder why it is so hard to breathe in and out.

So stand again with Ezekiel in the hearing of this psalm as he stands overlooking a valley of crushed, dry bones. Listen to God as he asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?" (Ezek 37:3). And imagine now your church as God puts sinew and muscle on crushed bones, as he breathes spirit back into them and opens their lips to praise. Imagine now the renewal of your church as God puts new and clean hearts into people crushed by sin. He can do it, and he will! O God, have mercy on us.

MARK LOVE is Minister of the Word for the East County Church of Christ, Gresham, Oregon. He serves on the editorial board of *Leaven*.

Notes

¹All scripture quotations are from the NRSV.