

RESOURCE:

8 STEPS FOR REAL REPENTANCE FROM PSALM 51

BY CATHERINE PARKS AT TGC

My brother and I had a nightly childhood ritual of asking one another's forgiveness for a list of vague sins. Having been warned not to let the sun go down on our anger, we made sure to cover all possibilities of sins we may have committed during the day. "Aaron, I'm sorry for yelling at you, hitting you, being selfish with the Nintendo, and tattling on you today. Will you forgive me?" His answer, along with his own confession, came back to my room in return. Thus we slept in the peace of the slightly remorseful.

When I read Psalm 51 (written by David after the prophet Nathan confronted him with his sin), I realize how lacking my childhood confessions were. Even many of my confessions in adulthood leave much to be desired.

Often we treat repentance as a statement—an "I'm sorry, please forgive me" that checks a box and (hopefully) alleviates our guilt. But if we look closely at Psalm 51, we see that repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning toward God—a process that doesn't merely alleviate guilt but cultivates deep joy.

So how do we grow in a joy-giving habit of repentance? Here are eight steps.

1. Define the sin.

The first step to meaningful confession is understanding what sin is. David uses three different words for it in Psalm 51: "iniquity," "sin," and "transgressions" (vv. 1–3). Each term has been deliberately chosen for its unique meaning. "Transgression" is rebellion against God's authority and law, "iniquity" is a distortion of what should be, and "sin" is missing the mark. David also says his sin is deep—there is no minimizing or excusing it.

2. Appeal to God's mercy.

The psalm begins: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love" (v. 1). Here, David appeals for forgiveness based on what he knows about God's character: that he is merciful. David knows God is committed to him in a relationship of "unfailing love"—and when we come before God in repentance, we do so because of his covenant with us through Christ.

3. Avoid defensiveness and see God rightly.

David's sin hurt multiple people. He committed adultery, orchestrated a murder, and tried to cover it all up. And yet he says to God, "against you, you only, have I sinned" (v. 4). How can that be? Sin is missing the mark—God's mark. Our sin does hurt others, and we must seek forgiveness from them, but all sin is ultimately against God.

4. Look to Jesus.

David writes, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean" (v. 7). He knows hyssop signifies purification with blood (see Ex. 24), and he knows that blood alone can make him clean. What he doesn't know is exactly

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/steps-repentance-psalm-51/>

FORGIVE

RESOURCE:

8 STEPS FOR REAL REPENTANCE FROM PSALM 51

CONTINUED

how this will be done. But we do. We have the full revelation of Jesus, who “has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26).

5. Ask God to break and heal you.

David prays, “Let the bones you have crushed rejoice” (v. 8). When God reveals our sin to us, it’s painful. It’s never pleasant to confront just how unholy we are. But like a doctor resetting a fractured bone, it is God who breaks, God who sets, and God who heals.

6. Be comforted by the Spirit.

Next David prays, “Do not . . . take your Holy Spirit from me” (v. 11). But the fact that David is grieved over his sin is a sign that the Spirit is at work in him. Have you ever been so discouraged by your sin that you’ve wondered, *How can God love me? Surely I’m not really a Christian*. Take comfort in knowing that the grief you’re experiencing is a sign that you have the Holy Spirit working in you, causing you to hate what God hates.

7. Rejoice and proclaim truth.

In verses 12–15, David asks God to make him so joyful about his salvation that he can’t help but proclaim the gospel to others: “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.” This is important, because so often we do the opposite—we wallow in our sin and draw back from serving others because we think we’re unworthy. But the joy of forgiveness should compel us to share the good news with friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors.

8. Resolve to obey.

We can do all the steps above, but if we’re planning to sin in the same way again, then grace isn’t truly taking root. What God desires is the mark of true repentance—a heart that is “broken” by sin and truly “contrite.”

As Puritan pastor Thomas Watson wrote, “‘Til sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” If we come to God with a heart set on obedience, he “will not despise” it because of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf (v. 17).

Unlike my childhood bedtime apologies, practicing this kind of repentance has led to deep joy as I learn to hate my sin and love my Savior more. It has also led me to open up with others, not seeking to hide my sin, but enlisting others in praying for me and building a community of women who fight our sin together. Like David, it’s my joy to tell others of God’s grace and forgiveness, depending on Christ each step of the way.