



MATTHEW BOSWELL

Foreword by Alistair Begg

CREATE
in ME a
CLEAN
HEART

**EXPERIENCING GOD'S ABUNDANT
MERCY *in* PSALM 51**

“There are unavoidable principles and patterns embedded in both the theology and the psychology of the gospel, such as the relationship between consciousness of our sinfulness and our need for the pardoning grace of Christ, the connection between how much we have been forgiven and how much we love Christ, and the combination of demolition and reconstruction essential for our growth in Christlikeness. Dr. Matt Boswell is a spiritual physician who understands these biblical principles. In *Create in Me a Clean Heart*, he guides us through Psalm 51 and illuminates King David’s profound experience of sin and forgiveness and of grace and new life. He does so firmly but also lovingly; he writes wisely but also with personal warmth. Amid the cacophony of misleading self-help, self-esteem, and self-forgiveness books, Matt Boswell points us to the help we really need. He is a skilled soul physician worth consulting.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier
Ministries

“Fresh, insightful, touchingly illustrated, and filled with the gospel, this book is a treasure. I was deeply moved. If you are grieving over your sin—or praying for someone who needs to grieve over his or her sin—this exposition of Psalm 51 will flood you with hope. What Dane Ortlund’s *Gentle and Lowly* is to Matthew 11:28–30, Matt Boswell’s *Create in Me a Clean Heart* is to Psalm 51. Read this book with an open Bible and an open heart, and you will be richly blessed.”

Donald S. Whitney, Professor of Biblical Spirituality and John
H. Powell Professor of Pastoral Ministry, Midwestern Baptist
Theological Seminary; Director, Center for Biblical Spirituality;
author, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, *Praying the Bible*,
and *Family Worship*

“Create in Me a Clean Heart is a model meditation on Psalm 51. This accessible exposition will equip readers to experience the joy of repentance as it walks them through Psalm 51, interacting with the works of the Puritans and other theologians along the way. It is a great resource for those who long to know more of the joy of repentance.”

Chris Brauns, Pastor, The Red Brick Church, Stillman Valley, Illinois; author, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, *Bound Together*, and *The Way of Repentance*

Create in Me a Clean Heart

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Experiencing God's Abundant Mercy in Psalm 51

Matthew Boswell

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Create in Me a Clean Heart: Experiencing God's Abundant Mercy in Psalm 51

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To all who sin and need a Savior

*Depth of mercy! Can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God His wrath forbear?
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?*

CHARLES WESLEY

“Depth of Mercy”

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Foreword

YOU HAVE IN YOUR HANDS a book that, by examining the disintegration of one man's life and its subsequent dramatic transformation, unfolds for us the extent of our sinful condition and the amazing restoration that grace provides. We will never understand the need for divine mercy until first we have been confronted by the exceeding sinfulness of sin. It is not uncommon to hear people speak of grace as if it had its origin in God's indifference to sin, but this cannot be. Horatius Bonar described God's hatred of sin as being so great that the only way it could be pardoned was by him taking the treatment of it entirely into his own hands—hands that, in Jesus, bore the nails as he died in the place of sinners.¹ Remember that Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

Psalm 51, penned by David, is the fourth of seven penitential psalms. *Penance* is, for many of us, an unusual and often unused word. It derives from Old French and the Latin word *paenitentia*, which means "repentance." Those of us who regularly repeat

1 Horatius Bonar, *The Story of Grace* (London, 1847), 91.

the General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer will be familiar with these words: “O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent, According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.”²

The related term *penitentiary* describes a certain type of prison where inmates are held, and these offenders are often encouraged to reflect on their wrongdoing and endeavor to mend their ways. In many ways, David was imprisoned by his sinful passions. His rap sheet was substantial: covetousness, lies, theft, adultery, and murder. He knew the Ten Commandments and was aware that he had despised God and offended against his love, but still he lived in denial of his wrongdoing. The arrival and intervention of the prophet Nathan signaled the end of David’s cover-up. Until then, he wouldn’t admit that he was a sinner, and his dishonesty made him miserable. The more he tried to hide, the more he found himself crushed by God’s merciful hand, and his strength evaporated like water on a sunny day. He was paying a price for living in self-deception.

The encounter between Nathan and David as described in 2 Samuel 12 is the backdrop to the meditation of Psalm 51. As a result of the rebuke, “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die” (2 Sam. 12:13).

A new day dawned. And just as with the dawning of creation, the God who created the heavens and the earth was the only one who could create in David a clean heart and a clean conscience and turn his penitence into praise.

2 Samuel L. Bray and Drew Nathaniel Keane, eds., *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer: International Edition* (IVP Academic, 2021), 3.

We have the benefit of reading the Old Testament in light of the New. As B. B. Warfield observed, “The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted.”³ The prophet Zechariah looked forward to the day when “there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David . . . to cleanse them from sin” (Zech. 13:1). In light of that promise, William Cowper wrote,

There is a fountain filled with blood
 Drawn from Immanuel’s veins;
 And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
 Lose all their guilty stains.⁴

David understood that the only way to lose all his guilty stains was to turn to God in faith for cleansing. He had the choirmaster in view when he penned Psalm 51 so that, with his transgressions blotted out and his heart made clean, he could sing the song of salvation. May this book help you turn to God in repentance so that you too can join in David’s song.

Alistair Begg

TRUTH FOR LIFE

3 Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (Oxford University Press, 1929), 141.

4 William Cowper, “There Is a Fountain” (1772), <https://hymnary.org/>.

Psalm 51

TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN NATHAN THE
PROPHET WENT TO HIM, AFTER HE HAD GONE IN TO BATHSHEBA.

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.
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.

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.

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.

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.

Introduction

IN THE FOOTHILLS of the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains is an elevated point where people travel to take in the sunset. On every clear evening the sky tells the same story: The heavens above are set ablaze with hues of orange, pink, and purple, and the sun is slowly tucked to rest after another day. In the foreground of this view is what I believe to be the most stunning mountain range in North America.

The entire horizon is a span of mountains standing shoulder to shoulder. Stretching their necks above the rest are a number of awe-inspiring fourteeners, summits that rise over fourteen thousand feet in elevation, demanding additional attention. People grope for their cameras to memorialize the moment, but after snapping a picture or two they look up with disappointment, realizing that it simply isn't possible to capture the beauty of their firsthand experience. To see the view in all its splendor, you must see it for yourself.

In the same way that this stunning range of peaks prompts admiration and marvel, the 150 songs within the book of Psalms prompt hearts to fill with wonder and awe. Each chapter lifts its

voice, resounding with truths that reveal who God is: the true and rightful King (Ps. 2), the good shepherd (Ps. 23), a constant refuge (Ps. 46), the source of steadfast love and faithfulness (Ps. 57), the God who hears our prayers and saves us (Ps. 145), and more. The Psalms are also a manual for the Christian life, teaching us how to walk by faith, sing through suffering, and trust in the Lord through every season of the soul. Additionally, this timeless collection is a prayer book that lends us language to communicate with the Almighty. Whether we are beaming with joy or shot through with sorrow, the Psalms echo the depths of the human experience.

Several years ago, when I and a small group of faithful Christians planted the Trails Church, the first sermon I preached was on Psalm 1. I expressed to the congregation my desire to keep exploring the Psalms together and prayed that we would keep this book close to our hearts. Every summer since, we have continued to journey through what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the prayerbook of the Bible.”¹

Firsthand Exploration

Just as it is impossible to understand the tremendous beauty of the Rocky Mountains without seeing them firsthand, it is impossible to understand the beauty and the impact of Scripture without exploring it firsthand. To see it for all that it is, you must see it for yourself. Scottish minister Horatius Bonar presented this vital truth this way:

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, in *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelley, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Fortress, 1996), 141.

The word must be studied . . . not from the report of others, but from our own experience and vision, else will our life be but an imitation, our religion second-hand, and therefore second-rate. Another cannot breathe the air for us, nor eat for us, nor drink for us. We must do these for ourselves. So no one can do our religion for us. . . . Out of the book of God and by the Spirit of God must each one of us be taught, else we learn in vain.²

This book invites you to a firsthand exploration of Scripture with your sights set on one specific summit: Psalm 51. The timeless path and rugged handholds of this chapter have been traversed by many people in need of hope and restoration. Its vistas have been a balm of healing and help to many in need of forgiveness.

Typically I preach through the Psalms one at a time, dedicating a single sermon to each, as each song stands beautifully on its own. But occasionally a psalm resonates with such profound importance that it seems to merit additional attention and contemplation. Psalm 51 is one of those chapters. When I reached it in the Psalms series at my church, I extended my sermons to cover it in four parts. Even then I felt as though I was merely scratching the surface.

The more time I spent in Psalm 51, the more I realized how much I needed its truths—and how much I still longed to grow in cultivating humility, practicing confession of sin, and experiencing God’s mercy in my life. I also realized how many of the people around me also needed to live in this chapter for a while. I came to see Psalm 51 as not just a song but also a manual for personal repentance—a path to spiritual growth, renewal, and revival.

2 Horatius Bonar, *God’s Way of Holiness* (London, 1883), 144–45.

Perhaps you picked up this book because there is sin in your life that you need to repent of, but you're unsure of how to begin. Maybe you decided to read it because you feel crushed beneath the weight of a specific sin that you return to again and again, and you desperately long to be set free. It could be that you feel distant from God because you have wrongly pursued other paths or priorities, leaving your spiritual life in the shadows. Or maybe you haven't yet come face-to-face with the reality of your sin and called on Christ for salvation. Regardless of the state of your soul in this moment, the gospel call of Psalm 51 is intended for you—for in it is an open-armed invitation to all who desire mercy, seek forgiveness, need cleansing, and long for restoration from within. Through this invitation you can come to know true fellowship with the living God.

Good News for Sinners

Psalm 51 is a healing balm for the sin-sick soul. It is an evergreen prayer that welcomes sinners and teaches them to humbly and honestly repent before the Holy God. It is a song to sing through the ages, especially when we have completely blown it, have made a mess of our lives, and have come to the end of ourselves. This song reminds us that no matter how far we have strayed, there is a sure path back to God's open arms.

When King David wrote this song, he was at the lowest point of his life. He had betrayed his wives, his friend, his friend's wife, his nation, and, above all, the God of steadfast love and mercy from whom he had received every blessing. David's transgressions struck a deadly match, setting ablaze the life he had built and leaving it in ruins at his feet. And in his utter despair, he began to sing.

David sang of the mercy of God, expressed the sorrow of his soul, and pleaded with his Maker for cleansing and renewal. Just when it seemed his song would turn to silence, the extravagant grace of God met him at his deepest point of need, tuning his heart to sing anew. At David's darkest, God's love shone brightest, bringing him to the end of himself so that he might fully experience God's mercy. David's experience serves as a steady reminder that even in our worst moments, God's unwavering grace is always within reach.

A Burning Bush Experience

For centuries David's song has resonated in the hearts of God's people, proving to be both incredibly helpful and personally challenging. When Charles Spurgeon was working on his commentary through the Psalms, Psalm 51 stopped him in his tracks. He told of how he postponed writing anything on it week after week because he felt unable to do the task justice (much like this writer). When he finally picked up his pen, he conveyed how significant this psalm is:

It is a bush burning with fire yet not consumed, and out of it a voice seemed to cry to me, "Draw not nigh hither, put off thy shoes from off thy feet." The Psalm is very human, its cries and sobs are of one born of woman; but it is freighted with an inspiration all divine, as if the Great Father were putting words into his child's mouth. Such a Psalm may be wept over, absorbed into the soul, and exhaled again in devotion.³

3 C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 2, *Psalms 27–51* (London, 1871), v.

Many others, before and after Spurgeon, have also marveled at the burning bush of Psalm 51. And room remains before its healing flames. My hope is that God would speak powerfully to you through it too as we explore this ancient psalm together.

Renewal Through Repentance

Psalm 51 captures the story of a transformative journey of renewal through repentance. Martyn Lloyd-Jones claimed that this chapter was “the classic statement in the Old Testament on the question of repentance.”⁴ I heartily agree. It opens in anguish and closes with joy. It starts with misery and crescendos with mercy. David moves from confession to cleansing, from guilt to grace, from despair to hope, and from brokenness to restoration, and as he does so, he finds the way back into deep and abiding fellowship with God. Much can happen in the span of nineteen verses. Much can happen in prayer.

We must understand that this psalm is not merely a statement tucked in the pages of the Old Testament but a prayer meant to renew Christians through the ages. We live in a day far removed from that of King David. We have far different occupations than he did and perhaps very different sin struggles. Yet each of us has the same need for renewal. We would do well to commit Psalm 51 to memory, but we would do better to commit it to our hearts.

If you trace major spiritual awakenings, times of gospel renewal, and genuine revival through church history, you’ll discover that the times when God moved in powerful ways were marked by repentance from the people of God. I wonder what God might do

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Out of the Depths: Restoring Fellowship with God* (Crossway, 1995), 13.

in us, in our families, and in our churches if we humble ourselves before him and plead for his mercy.

Now that we have our footing, allow me to shine the light of these searching questions into your heart: When was the last time you openly and honestly repented of your sin before God? When was the last time you rejoiced in experiencing the mercy of Christ?

As we begin our journey into Psalm 51, I pray that the hard-hearted would be brought to genuine repentance and that these words from Scripture would be wept over. I pray that those who are brokenhearted over their sin would absorb this passage into their souls, giving them words to speak to God. I pray that those who do not yet know the mercies of God in Christ might come to know them firsthand. I pray that all of us who know our need for mercy would deeply breathe in God's revelation and exhale again with great devotion and worship. My aim in writing is to show you that at the heart of Psalm 51 we find a heart of genuine repentance, and where we find a heart of genuine repentance, we find the very heart of God.

PART 1

A REPENTANT HEART

Psalms 51:1–4

The Story Behind the Song

TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID,
WHEN NATHAN THE PROPHET WENT TO HIM,
AFTER HE HAD GONE IN TO BATHSHEBA.

THERE'S OFTEN A STORY behind a song. As a songwriter and student of hymnody, I'm always interested in learning what inspired the hymns that have become such a vital part of our lives. One of my favorite pastor-hymn writers in church history is John Newton, author of the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace." The story behind the song is quite amazing, and so is the story behind the man who wrote it.

Newton was raised in a Christian home, but his heart could not find rest in the gospel of grace. He described himself in his teenage years as a pharisee, trying everything possible to make himself righteous on his own. Later he reflected, "It was a poor religion; it left me, in many respects, under the power of sin."¹

1 John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, typeset ed. (Banner of Truth, 2015), 1:14.

Newton left home at a young age to work at sea and eventually became involved in the transatlantic slave trade, heartlessly hauling men, women, and children across threatening waters in cruel conditions. Still, as hard as he ran, he could not outrun the mercy of God. Newton was awakened to both the depth of his sin and the glory of Jesus after surviving a near-fatal storm at sea. He eventually left the slave trade, became a minister of the gospel, and devoted the rest of his life to proclaiming the grace of Christ that had transformed him from within.

Newton wrote “Amazing Grace” in 1773 while preparing a sermon on 1 Chronicles 17:16–17. That chapter recounts how the prophet Nathan brought a word from the Lord to King David, just as he did again in 2 Samuel 12, which prompted David to write Psalm 51. “Amazing Grace” paints a contrast between two worlds: one of sin and the other of salvation.² Words such as *wretch*, *lost*, *blind*, *dangers*, *toils*, and *snare*s tell the story of sin that both Newton and David endured. Yet words such as *grace*, *found*, *good*, *joy*, and *peace* speak of the abundant mercy that they both experienced. “Amazing Grace” is more than a song of personal testimony; it is a hymn that lifts our eyes to behold the sovereign God who rescues and redeems sinners.

Stories Behind the Songs of Scripture

The stories behind some of Scripture’s most beloved songs are also quite amazing. The Song of Moses, the first recorded song in Scripture (Ex. 15:1–18), tells the story of how God miraculously delivered his people from the chains of slavery in Egypt. On the

2 Leland Ryken, *40 Favorite Hymns on the Christian Life: A Closer Look at Their Spiritual and Poetic Meaning* (P&R, 2019), 22.

other side of the Red Sea, with their enemies defeated and their freedom won, God's people lifted their voices in praise. Behind Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) is the story of an angelic announcement of the child to be born to her—God's Son. Overjoyed by the promise of this child, Mary's heart overflowed in song. And behind the heart-wrenching cry of Psalm 51 lies the story of David, who did "what [was] evil in [God's] sight" (2 Sam. 12:9). With sin in his heart and blood on his hands, David lifted his voice to his Maker.

For those who are in Christ, we too have songs of praise like Moses, for we have been redeemed from the slavery of sin by "grace that is greater than all our sin."³ Like Mary, we marvel with joy, for we know that the promised child was born for our salvation. And like David, we all have a story of sin that should cause us to cry out in song.

So as we prepare to dive into the story behind David's song, let me ask you: What is the story behind your song?

The Title of the Song

The story behind Psalm 51 is mentioned in the superscription at the beginning of the chapter. The superscription refers to the words placed just above the first verse of a psalm. Superscriptions are part of the original Hebrew manuscript. They often include helpful context, such as the psalmist's name or some musical direction, and occasionally they offer a glimpse into the story behind the song. This is one of those rare windows.

The first thing we learn from Psalm 51's superscription is that this psalm is "to the choirmaster." That simple detail tells us that

3 Julia H. Johnston, "Grace Greater Than Our Sin" (1910), in *The King's Message: A Collection of Sunday School Songs*, ed. E. S. Lorenz and Ira B. Wilson (Lorenz, 1910), 81.

this song was intended for more than a private meditation or a solo performance. It was written for the whole congregation of God's people to sing together in worship. Singing was a vital practice in the lives of the Israelites. The songs they sang shaped their understanding of God, their identity as his people, and their view of the world.

The next feature we notice is that the psalm bears the name of David, placing it among the seventy-three psalms attributed to him. As part of Scripture these words were inspired by the Spirit of God through the pen of the king.

Finally, the title reveals the occasion in David's life when this psalm was written: "when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." These words open the door to one of the darkest times in David's history, referring to when his sin was pulled from the shadows and thrown into the light.

Let me warn you: This is not a comfortable story. It is not the kind of passage people turn to for inspiration. Some parts may even disturb you. But there is no way to rightly understand the weight of this psalm without knowing its backstory, so let me share it with you.

A Royal Transgression

The sinful offense that eventually gave rise to Psalm 51 was not only committed by Israel's royalty but also stands as a transgression of the highest order. A royal transgression indeed.

David's life began in humble obscurity as an overlooked shepherd boy from the tribe of Judah. He was skilled at tending sheep, protecting the flock, and providing for their needs. Still, God had greater plans for his life.

The prophet Samuel was led by the Lord to anoint this young shepherd to be the future king of Israel. David went on to slay Goliath, serve valiantly under King Saul, and eventually ascend the throne after Saul died. At the time of 2 Samuel 11, which records the story of David and Bathsheba that Psalm 51's superscription refers to, David was reigning over a united Israel. Everything in his life was going incredibly well. Yet it was at this height that David fell so low.

The Occasion of Sin

The story in 2 Samuel 11 begins in the spring of the year, when kings went out to battle, though David stayed behind in Jerusalem. Already, something feels off. Why would a king send his men into war while he remained in comfort at home? Why would he choose not to go with them? The text hints at the reality that David was neither where he should be nor doing what he ought to do, which opened the door for what followed.

One evening David stepped out onto the rooftop of his home overlooking the city and saw a woman bathing. Her name was Bathsheba, and she was very beautiful. David not only saw her; he fixed his eyes on her as lust flooded his heart. He asked about her and was told that she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's own mighty men, who was away at war. David didn't care. In fact, his growing hunger for sin is seen in the verbs used to describe David's actions: he saw, he sent, he took, and he lay with her (2 Sam. 11:2, 4). It is no accident that these words are similar to the words used to describe Eve's actions when she was tempted by the serpent to eat of the fruit of the tree: she saw and she took (Gen. 3:6). And like his first parents, David convinced himself that no one would ever know what he had done, including God.

But weeks later word came that Bathsheba was pregnant and that David was the father. In an attempt to cover up his sin, David summoned Uriah home from the battlefield, hoping he would go to his house and lie with Bathsheba so that the child might be passed off as his own. But noble Uriah refused to enjoy his wife while his fellow soldiers were away in combat. David's anxiety rose, but he still had one more deceptive arrow in his quiver. He invited Uriah to a feast and intentionally made him drunk, hoping that he would stagger home in a stupor and that a window of opportunity would open for the husband and wife to lay together. But even while intoxicated, Uriah showed what a loyal and trustworthy man he was. He still refused to go home to be with his wife.

Finally, in a mixture of desperation and calculation, David sent a letter, carried by the hand of Uriah himself, to his commander Joab. The message gave orders to place Uriah on the front line and then to withdraw the troops in the heat of battle, making him a defenseless target. By nightfall this tragic story of lust, adultery, and deception grew darker still, culminating in murder. Dale Ralph Davis summarizes David's great fall with these poignant words: "The man after God's own heart took the sword after God's own people."⁴

Noble Uriah lay dead in the dust. Bathsheba lay awake, worried, widowed, and pregnant. King David slept soundly, certain that no one would ever know his secret sin.

After Bathsheba mourned her husband's death, David took her as his wife. For a moment it seemed as if life had simply moved

4 Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity* (1999; repr., Christian Focus, 2010), 145.

on. But then comes the final verse of the chapter that sends chills up the spine: “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD” (2 Sam. 11:27).

No one else may have known about David’s sin, but God did.

Wasting Away in Secret Sin

In Psalm 32 we find what some scholars believe to be David’s reflection on the state of his soul during the nearly yearlong silence before the next part of the story unfolds. Looking back on that season, he wrote,

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
 through my groaning all day long.
 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
 my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
 (Ps. 32:3–4)

Most of us know what it is like to sin and then to try to move on as if nothing happened. Like David, we may keep silent, avoiding God and withdrawing from those who care for our spiritual well-being. Perhaps we try to cover up our transgressions by doing good works, by pretending nothing is wrong, or even by spiraling further into sin. But when we commit a royal transgression against the all-knowing God, we cannot escape the inward groaning. We feel the weight of his hand pressing on us. Our strength fades. Our souls dry up.

Although thinking about our transgressions can be uncomfortable, the question demands to be asked: Are there sins in your life that you pretend God hasn’t seen?

Perhaps you feel shame even now because of a sin you have committed. Let me pause here to say that this is not the end of David's story, and it is not the end of yours either. If you have stayed silent in your sin, have avoided God because of shame, or have committed some royal transgression *again*—there is mercy enough for you. The God of grace patiently waits. David's song hasn't even yet begun, and perhaps yours hasn't either.

A Loyal Confrontation

In the next scene of our story, God's prophet confronts David out of care for the king's soul and out of loyalty to God. As we turn from 2 Samuel 11 to 2 Samuel 12, everything begins to shift. In chapter 11 God isn't mentioned until the very last word of the very last verse, but he is named in nearly half the verses in chapter 12. Another striking detail: The verb "sent" appears six times in chapter 11 to refer to David's actions, animating his hungry pursuit of sin, but in chapter 12 it is the Lord who sends.⁵ Specifically, the Lord sends his prophet Nathan to confront David in a unique and even creative way. Though sin had hardened David's heart, the Lord would begin to soften it through the faithful and loving confrontation of his word.

A Surprising Story

As it turns out, sin has a way of not staying hidden. In David's case, God revealed everything that he had done in secret to Nathan. The prophet Samuel may have been the one to anoint the shepherd boy as king, but the prophet Nathan was charged by God to rebuke the

5 Dale Ralph Davis, *My Exceeding Joy: An Exposition of Psalms 38–51* (Christian Focus, 2023), 149.

king. But rather than confronting him with plain language, Nathan spoke to David in a parable. The story unfolds in 2 Samuel 12:1–7:

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “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. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

The rebuke shot through the air in Jerusalem that day and went straight through David as well. Immediately his heart sank to the floor. He may have fooled another man’s young wife, his army, his friends, and the family of Uriah, but his God had seen his sin. He was the heartless man who stole the little ewe lamb. He was “the man who [had] done this” and “[deserved] to die” (2 Sam. 12:5).

Once the Lord had David’s attention, he pressed into him out of love, wanting David to see the great grace God had given him. Nathan continued his address, proclaiming,

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, “I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight?” (2 Sam. 12:7–9)

These words traced the goodness poured out on David’s life back to the source itself. It was the Lord who anointed him king, delivered him from Saul, and gave him the kingdom. David’s life was overflowing with blessings given by the gracious hand of God. Yet instead of giving thanks to the Lord and walking in obedient trust, he turned away, believing the ancient lie that God was somehow withholding good from him.

The heart-piercing question “Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight?” (2 Sam. 12:9) was both a confrontation and an invitation. It forced David to think about just how deeply he had despised not only the word of the Lord but also the Lord himself, and it invited him to return to the Lord in repentance and faith.

David’s response comes in 2 Samuel 12:13: “I have sinned against the LORD.” This sentence is only two words in the original Hebrew. It is an ocean of sorrow held in a thimble.

As a result of his repentance, David would experience forgiveness, but he would not escape consequences. Because of his adultery, his wives would be given to other men, and what he did in the darkness would be done in the light of day. Because of his unjust murder of noble Uriah, the sword would not depart

from his house. While Nathan assured David, “You shall not die” (2 Sam. 12:13), a death would still occur. The child conceived in sin would die in his place.⁶ And in the years to come, three more sons of David would fall by the sword: Amnon (2 Sam. 13:28–29), Absalom (2 Sam. 18:9–15), and Adonijah (1 Kings 2:23–25).

If we look further down the line, still another son of David would die too, this time as his once-and-for-all substitute. Great David’s greater Son, Jesus Christ, would be the final sacrifice and would pay the ultimate price for the trespass of King David—and not only for David but also for all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus by faith. Through Jesus’s death, the consequences of sin were paid in full. This is the greatest evidence of grace ever given to man.

Evidence of Grace

One of the most helpful and humbling practices of the Christian life is learning to look for evidence of grace. Sometimes it is easy to see: answer to prayer, physical health, financial provision, God’s blessing on our work or family, or even a sense of God’s nearness. At other times this evidence of grace is harder to trace: being caught in sin by a friend, feeling conviction, or enduring the consequences of our actions. But sometimes grace expresses itself in painful ways. Nathan’s confrontation of David was an expression like this. It was not condemnation; it was mercy. God could have allowed David to continue in his sin, but he loved him too much to let him do so.

Scripture teaches that God disciplines the ones he loves (Heb. 12:6). His discipline is an expression of grace to us. Sometimes our conscience bends under the burden of sin, and we come clean

⁶ Davis, *2 Samuel*, 157.

on our own. Other times God works through a faithful friend or family member who lovingly calls us back to the truth. And yet other times our sin is revealed unexpectedly, when someone “accidentally” stumbles on something we have done and brings it to light. In all these ways, when God exposes our sin, it is because he loves us too much to let us remain in it. This expression of grace is a clear sign that the Lord is at work in us, calling us to repentance and inviting us to experience full forgiveness.

One ironic part of this story is how desperate David was to cover up his sin, yet here we are three thousand years later reading of what he did. It is “as if God had printed the diary of David, and, in order to humble him, handed it to the ‘Chief musician,’ that all Israel might know his bitter repentance.”⁷

Think about the greatest sin that you have ever committed, the thing you pray that no one else ever finds out about, the offense that is your most hidden secret. Now picture it printed in black and white above the fold of the newspaper, broadcast to the world. Imagine that it is the headline of the day in the media and the topic of discussion at every watercooler and around every dinner table. Now take that thought even further and think about your sin being recorded in the pages of the Bible for people to read and know about as long as time endures.

This is what happened to David. Yet the song that rose from his story “was written not to memorialize that moment, but to serve as a model prayer for others coming later who find themselves in similar, though not identical, circumstances.”⁸ David’s song now

7 Andrew Bonar, *Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms* (New York, 1860), 161.

8 Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (InterVarsity Press, 2014), 218.

offers us help in our circumstances, aiding us in our fight with sin and paving the way back to fellowship with God.

A Great Sinner and a Great Savior

The opening lyrics of “Amazing Grace” fit as well on the lips of King David as they did on old John Newton’s. Their sins were different. Their circumstances were not the same. And yet both could say,

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav’d a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.⁹

Newton was gripped by the grace of Jesus, and his life was never the same. He lived his days in service to the Lord as a worshiper, a disciple, and a pastor. Near the end of his life, when his memory began to fade, he declared, “I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.”¹⁰ That is the heart of “Amazing Grace.”

David was also arrested by the grace of God, and after these events he spent the rest of his life seeking to know God and make him known. His story reminds us that no one is beyond the saving reach of Christ. Ultimately, the psalm that David penned in response to God’s grace reveals that though he was a great sinner, his God is a great Savior.

⁹ John Newton, “Hymn XLI” (1779), in *Olney Hymns: In Three Books* (London, 1779), 53. Today we know this hymn by the title “Amazing Grace.”

¹⁰ Tony Reinke, *Newton on the Christian Life: To Live Is Christ*, Theologians on the Christian Life (Crossway, 2015), 49.

Now that we understand the story behind the song, we can look at its opening verses. If you're feeling anxious after reading David's story or panicking a little at the truth that God knows your sin, simply keep reading. There is good reason not to throw down this book but to continue the journey, collapsing into the arms of a loving God.

And this is exactly what David did.