

Text: Psalm 51:1-9, v.9

Title: The Great Penitential Psalm: Living under the eye of God II

Occasion: Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## **Introduction**

Psalm 51, is the greatest of the Penitential Psalms. These are statements, examples, of the heart drawing near to God, the conscience being made awakened and sensitive to sin, and seeking indeed pleading for forgiveness from God. We need not have a reaction to the use of the word *penitence*. This is *penitence* not *penance*. This is not *penance* the error of Roman Catholicism that you can and should by certain acts, gain merit, and thus are given God's mercy. The merit is in Christ alone and it is for His sake alone that we are pardoned. So what we are doing is studying Psalm 51, as a model of true penitence. We study the principles which David lived and experienced in true penitence in order that by the Spirit we may enter into true penitence. We do not want simply to become familiar with the words of Psalm 51, but to actually know experientially of the graces and work of the Spirit of God which is demonstrated for us here.

As the Spirit of God by the word sent to David, awakens his sleeping conscience, David acknowledges his great problem of sin. He acknowledges his legal guilt and personal defilement. His confession of sin acknowledges the fact, nature and fountain of sin. But then it is only after dealing with the matter of sin that we find David then addressing his loss of the joy of salvation. Contrary to contemporary movements to easy steps to immediate joy and gladness in the Christian life, David first deals with sin. David felt as if his every bone was crushed, but now pleads that he would be as one who is instantly healed. Sin has robbed him of his joy, peace, blessing, but if He who crushed would heal, then every former wound would become a new mouth of praise and gratitude. But now after dealing with joy, David returns to the basic issue, the great subject of the entire Psalm which is dealing with sin as sin. Not simply dealing with sin because it had robbed him of his joy, peace, and blessing, but because his sin was an affront to God. Because his sin was vile in God's sight. So while he indeed craves a return to the joy and gladness he formerly knew, yet he returns to the theme in Ps. 51:9.

Now just as we have been proceeding in the past so we want to clearly understand the meaning of the words and then draw out principles.

### **I. What do these forms of expression mean?**

#### **A. What does "Hide Your face from my sins" mean?**

Again we are *faced*, if you will excuse me, with obviously poetic language. Now when the Mormon's come to your door they will tell you - I guess if you ask them - that God has a body of flesh and bones like we do. They will point out that II Chron. 16:9, "For the eyes of the Lord turn to and

fro throughout the whole earth...” Or Ps. 33:18, “Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him...” Or I Pe. 3:12, “For the eyes of the lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the lord is against those who do evil.” Or Ps. 136:11,12, “And brought out Israel from among them..with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm.” These are called anthropomorphism - that is attributing human physical characteristics or characteristics which are applied to God. Similarly you will find in Ps. 91:3,4, “Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler.” Now obviously this does not mean that God is a great bird with wings to cover us and just as obviously God does not have eyes, a face, nor does He forget or repent or change (open theism). We know this not only from this use of language in Scripture, but from the direct statement of our Lord to the Woman at the Well in Jn. 4:24, “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” What is more nothing can be hidden from God: Heb. 4:12, tells us that He discerns thoughts and intents of the heart. And David was very much aware of this for he writes in Ps. 139:3, “You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, “You know it altogether.”

So what does this figure mean? What is being communicated by this prayer of David? If you have ever been in a scary movie or come upon a bad collision and you see something horrible, something hideous, you hide your face or turn away your face.

Now David knows his sin is horrible, hideous before God. He knows that God sees. He says, *O Lord God, my sin is so abhorrent and repulsive to You in Your holiness. It is in such an affront to your majesty ad glory. O hide Your face! Turn away from looking on my sin!* Yes, it is poetry, a figure of speech, but it brings into perfect focus: Jer. 16:17, “For My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from My face, nor is their iniquity hidden from My eyes.” And nothing is hid from God. He never needs LASIK eye surgery. So David pleads, *O God, don't look on my sin!*

### **B. What does “blot out all my iniquities” mean?**

*Blot out* is a very strong word meaning to obliterate, wipe out from memory, to erase, to strike from the record. In one of the imprecatory Psalms, Ps. 109:13, David prays, “Let his posterity be cut off, and in the generation following let their name be blotted out.” *Let them we wiped from living memory! Let every single remembrance be gone!* The reason for this language is found in the pictures of sin given to us in the Scriptures: (1) First, each of our sins against God's law causes an indictment to be written against us in the court of heaven. It is registered in the ledger book of heaven. The point is that it cries out for judgment. You know exactly what this is talking about. If you break the laws of the land, an indictment is entered against you and you are booked on that charge. If you get a traffic ticket the court will then decide your punishment. David says, *In the court of heaven, beside the name*

*David's records show adultery, murder, intrigue, hypocrisy, and all the other sins which flowed from these. As David thinks of these he pleads, Not only turn Your face, do not look upon these, turn away Your face, but now David's faith rises higher: When you turn your head again to look, dear Lord may it be that you have done something so that when Your face is turned again there will be nothing to see!* So you understand that to pray that God would hide His face is one thing, but then to pray that the record would be blotted out is an even higher act of faith for the sinner in this position. (2) Second, sin is represented to us as an unpaid debt. In the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer our Lord teaches us to pray, "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Why *forgive us our debts?* God's law demands that we should love the Lord our God and our neighbor. In the ledger books of heaven there our debts are recorded. Sin is a debt to the law and to God. So when David sees his sin he says, *Lord, I see my sin as a debt. Your law commands that I should love you, but I have not loved you. I loved myself. I loved what I wanted to do. I loved my desires, my passions. I have not loved my neighbor. I have a debt. O Lord God: Blot out that debt. Only You can write in the ledger books of heaven - Paid in full. Only you can blot out the debt incurred by my sin! Only God can record in the ledger of heaven that the debt is struck out and instead Paid in Full!*

So we grasp what the Psalmist is talking about: My sins are offensive and hideous before God. Hide Your face so that You do not look on my sin. What is more expunge from the record books the sin, the indictment, the debt that is mine.

## **II. What principles do we learn?**

### **A. Unblotted-out sin demands the judgment of God.**

David pleads that God would hide His face from his sins for if God does not hide His face from our sin and blot out our iniquities, then the judgment of God must fall upon us. This is a universal connection taught in the Scriptures.

Let us gain insight into this from a historical situation. Nehemiah faces Sanballat and the army of Samaria, and from Tobiah and the Ammonites who conspire against those rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. They harass them and try to cause as much confusion as possible. Nehemiah not only takes practical action, but prays in Neh. 4:4,5, for God to act: "Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders." Notice the same two capital matters: First, *Do not cover their iniquity/do not let their sin be blotted out from before You*. It stands in full sight and cognizance of God on the record books. What then? It is a provocation of God to judgment upon them. This too is an imprecatory prayer. What is that? Not that Nehemiah is self-centered. *God take from them and give to me; aggrandize me!* Neither is he simply asking God to help him get even! Rather this is a prayer for the vindication of God's cause and God's people against their enemies. For their sin against God, against His people, if it is not covered, not blotted out, then it cries out for God's

judgment. So today as we are about building the walls of the Church which consist of living stones (I Pe. 2:5) we understand that when we pray such prayers it is not about us, our little kingdoms, but about God's cause in the Gospel of Christ, which is so precious and so glorious and His people so precious to God, that nothing must stand in the way of their progress in grace and the use of God's appointed means.

Another historical situation giving us insight into this connection comes from Jeremiah. You will remember that Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet (Jer. 9:1, "Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!"). He wept over the very people who mistreated him and threw him in a pit. But there came a time when God's mercy and longsuffering gives way to judgment, so that when you find a man like Jeremiah the weeping prophet, no longer praying for mercy, but for judgment! -- then you know the people are in a terrible state. See Jer. 18:23, "Yet, Lord, You know all their counsel which is against me, to slay me. Provide no atonement for their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from Your sight; But let them be overthrown before You. Deal thus with them in the time of Your anger."

Now you see the joining of these two things in both Nehemiah and Jeremiah, right? They join, sin not being blotted out and the anger, judgment of God. This is just what is expressed by David in Ps. 51:9, *hide Your face, blot out*. David is in the most sincere, most serious expression, that if he should stand before God with unblotted out sin, then it would cry out for the judgment of God.

Now think about this: Un-blotted out sin demands the judgment of God. 1. What does that mean for the Non-Christian? What if you are still in your sins? What if you have not trusted in Christ and been joined to Him, having repented of your sins? Then your sins stand out before the eye of the Righteous Judge and the indictment demands justice. That is precisely what God will do in the day of judgment: Rev. 20:11-15, "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire." You get the picture. God does not need to recall from books for He knows all things. But imagery is to bring the very matter we have seen here before our minds, that the very same God who had written into His Word Jn. 3:16, is also the God who says that all the sins, all the indictments found in the books not blotted out, not expunged, shall be before His face as Judge, and that same Bible says these shall be cast into the

lake of fire, into hell. If you know nothing of this repentance, this faith in Christ, this grace shed into your heart, then you do not realize what David so earnestly realized. Why is that so many have never earnestly, fervently prayed that God would hide His face from their sins and blot out their iniquity? Because they do not realize, will not recognize, that unblotted out sin demands the judgment of God; That they have on the books of heaven indictments calling for their condemnation and judgment. *This sinner has broken your law. The indictment is clear.* For now, God is patient and longsuffering, but there will come a day when God will deal with sinners in righteousness.

But then, perhaps you are sitting here this evening and thinking, *Well, I am a Christian and there is now no condemnation for those in Christ (Ro. 8:1) - Thank you very much!* This has a lot to say to you! Who is this David who is praying this prayer of *hide Your face & blot out all my iniquities?* It is David the child of God who earnestly prays these petitions! David realizes that even for the child of God, unblotted-out sin calls for judgment. Now for the child of God it is the frown of the loving Father who will not continue to put up with disobedience in His children, but not the offended righteous Judge. What a huge difference this is! Thank the Lord for His grace that because of Christ and because of being in Christ, the retributive justice of God the righteous Judge will never come crashing down upon you. But as surely as that is true, it is also true because the Bible teaches it, that since we are in the household of God, whom the Lord loves He chastens. Every first Sunday of the month we come to the Lord's Table and we read from I Cor. 11, and in v. 30 the Apostle speaks of the consequences upon those in the Church who came unworthily and ill-prepared to the Table that "many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." Why? "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world." Is it possible for many a Christian to live in the fool's paradise of thinking all is well: *I can miss worship when I feel like it. I can leave off being in the Word when it is inconvenient. I can miss prayer when I have better things to do. I can fail to judge myself and confess sin* - Not retributive judgment condemned to hell, but certainly the judgment of the household of God brought to bear by the faithful heavenly Father. And if you understand as David did that sin unblotted cries out for judgment from God, then you will not be able to put your head to the pillow this evening without have dealing with God about it!

**B. There is no sin so black, so horrible, which God's grace cannot blot out.**

Now this is no casual, inch deep faith involved in David's praying. Remember what David is praying should be blotted out? Murder, adultery, deception, hypocrisy, all of this and more David was guilty of. Yet here is great faith, because here he is with this indictment against him, in the presence of God, and by faith he prays not only for God to turn His face from it, but that God would blot it out altogether! He opened with that general request and now very personally he pleads, "blot out *all my*

iniquities.” Because David knew that if even one sin should be left then he was exposed to God’s justice. William Cowper points the order and significance of this out clearly: “If we hold our sins in our eyes to pursue them, God will cast them behind His back to pardon them; If we remember them and repent, He will forget them and forgive.” Of course, “the sin from which man turns not, God looks to it; and if He look to it, sure He will punish it.”

I have said this is great faith. How could David or how can you and I dare to come into the presence of God and say *God don't look at my sins. Blot them out.* Are we seeking to bribe God as a wicked judge taking bribes? Is it simply religious fantasy? Is it proud presumption? There is only one basis: God can only hide His face from my sins because He hid His face from His Son upon the cross! When Christ who knew no sin was made sin for us, then the day became dark and the Son cried out *My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?* This is the reason for the Father being far from the groanings of Psalm 22! This is why this is not our bribing or presuming or religiously fantasizing, but rather as I Jn. 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and *just* to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God is ultimately reliable to do what He says - faithful. But what about that word *just*? How does justice become the friend of the sinner confessing his sins? Because the Father hid His face in justice from His Son. He punished sin, the indictment which cried out from the law and demanded holy, righteous, justice, at the cross. So when we cry, *blot out, hide Your face,* then in justice because God has punished our substitute, he can turn from our sins and blot them out. What an amazing incentive to repent! Christ was blotted out, God hid His face from His own dear Son, that my sin might be expunged, blotted out!

### **C. The great characteristic of the child of God is the concern of what I am before God: *Hide Your face...***

What are people of the world all wrapped up in? *What do others think of me?* There is no great concern about what God sees. There is no great concern about a future judgment. *Talk to me about right now - power, pleasure, peace.* But, Ps. 50:16f, describes those who take God’s name upon their lips, call themselves His people, but hate God’s instruction and like Ps. 10, lives in pride saying they will never be in adversity. Ps. 10:11, “God hides His face; He will never see.” “You will not require an account.” Ps. 50:21, “These things you have done, and I kept silent; You thought that I was altogether like you.” Men sin and they think God is like them. They forget. They see no indictment. So they think God does not see and the Great Judge has no indictment before Him. He must forget as well. But will not men be shocked in that day when “I set them in order before your eyes”? You see the unbeliever does not live as if this is true, but the believer does, the child of God does. The child of God lives his life as open before God and he wants it that way. It is comforting to know my fears and frustrations are known to God, yet convicting that He knows all as well. How do you live?