

DOES DAVID'S UNFAITHFULNESS NULLIFY THE
FAITHFULNESS OF GOD? BY NO MEANS!

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*I affirm the honor code.

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Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the names of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David (2 Sam 7:8-17).¹

Introduction

Does David's unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!² Even when “we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us,”³ Yahweh remains “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6). This is the point of Psalm 51.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations come from the ESV.

² Cf. Romans 3:3.

³ Jonathan Gibson, 128.

The Psalms

“The Psalms are a kind of literary sanctuary,” writes Tremper Longman, “the place where God meets his people in a special way.”⁴ As “the tabernacle and the temple were considered to be at the physical center of the people of God, so too is the book of Psalms in the middle of the Bible.”⁵ Yet so often, this inner sanctum is sadly reduced to an instruction manual. “Now there is in the Holy Scriptures a book,” declared Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “a book which is distinguished from all other books of the Bible by the fact that it contains only prayers. The book is the Psalms...given to us to this end, that we may learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁶ Do you have a boring prayer life? It has been diagnosed that “the problem is almost certainly not you; it’s your method.” The prescription? Pray the Bible.⁷ Do you need to repent? David Covington contends that the Psalms, the fifty-first psalm specifically, “serves as a guide to follow in forming our own prayers.”⁸ He says in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, “God intends Psalm 51, like the rest of the Psalter, to be a script for group prayer, words put into the mouths of God’s people, from David’s time to ours. It serves also as a pattern for our private prayers of repentance. In Psalm 51, David...shows us the form, content, and the purpose of repentant prayer.”⁹ But is this really the end of the Psalms? Are they given to us merely to teach us how to pray, to put a song in our mouths, to be a shot in the arm, a method, or a guide? No. That is not the end of the Psalms. That is not even the end of the Bible. “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” in God (Romans 15:4). This can’t be

⁴ Tremper Longman, 12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 13-15.

⁷ Donald Whitney, 15.

⁸ David Covington, 22.

⁹ Ibid, 23.

forgotten. If it is, one could easily miss the point of the Psalms and end up exchanging the glory of God (theology) for the glory of man (methodology).¹⁰

While it is true that the Psalms is a prayerbook, “songs for the road,”¹¹ “the hymnbook of the Second Temple,”¹² and has “functioned for two thousand years as the church’s official hymnbook.”¹³ While the Psalms can teach us and guide us to pray “words of spirit and life.”¹⁴ The Psalms are more importantly “doctrinal treatises...even sermons.”¹⁵ Their end, like the rest of the Bible, is to fundamentally help us know God the “Creator, sustainer, protector, Savior, judge, covenant maker and restorer...the God who rules.”¹⁶ Therefore, the “theological center” of the Bible’s center (the Psalms) is the same as the central focus of the Bible—the glory of God.¹⁷ Interestingly enough, “the Book of Psalms falls into five books, each ending with a doxology,” observes Hamilton. This makes it clear then, that “the book of Psalms celebrates the glory of God.”¹⁸ The Psalms, especially Psalm 51, instruct us and encourage us with the fact that Yahweh is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6).

Psalm 51 and Its Context

Psalm 51 was written after two occasions. The first affair was David’s adulterous sex with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11). The second was Nathan the prophet’s confrontation of David’s sin

¹⁰ Cf. Matt 6:5-7; Rom 1:23.

¹¹ Eugene Peterson, 13.

¹² William J. Dumbrell, 245.

¹³ David O. Taylor.

¹⁴ Whitney, 42.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, 2.

¹⁶ Paul House, 402.

¹⁷ Hamilton, 40.

¹⁸ James M. Hamilton Jr., 275.

(2 Sam 12:1-15).¹⁹ Prior to this, God made a covenant with David that he would establish for him an eternal kingdom (2 Sam 7:8-17). “Despite his favored status, David, like Israel, proves a fallible covenant partner.”²⁰ David’s unfaithfulness “was the devil’s nest-egg that caused many sins to be laid, one to, and upon another.”²¹ “The terrible incident with Bathsheba unleashes judgment upon David’s house.”²² This is a progressive judgment. God first promises through Nathan that “the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife” (2 Sam 12:10). This promise threatens to divide David’s house. Next, Yahweh pledges that he “will raise up evil against you out of your own house” (v. 11a), indicating the demise of David’s house. Because David took the wife of his neighbor, God then guarantees to take David’s wives “before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun” (v. 11b). Lastly, God predicts that “the child who is born to you shall die” (v. 12). This promise points to the death of David’s house. Hamilton writes:

The rest of 2 Samuel glorifies Yahweh by showing him *faithful*²³ to these promises. Even with David Yahweh plays no favorites. His justice is as exact with his chosen and anointed king as it is with anyone else. The child dies (12:18), and the sword is raised up against David from within his own house: David’s son Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam 13:14)....So Absalom, Tamar’s brother, kills Amnon (2 Sam 13:28-29). For this, Absalom deserves to die (Ex 21:12; Lev 24:17; Num 35:30; Deut 19:11-13). When Absalom returns to Jerusalem, he steals the hearts of the people (2 Sam 15:6), and David must flee when Absalom seizes the kingdom (15:10-14). David leaves ten concubines in Jerusalem (15:16), whom Absalom “went in to...in the sight of all Israel” (16:22)....Absalom dies (18:14-15).²⁴

It appears David’s eternal kingdom is in jeopardy. However, Yahweh is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod

¹⁹ Cf. Ps 51:1-2 (*BHS*).

²⁰ House, 228.

²¹ Charles Spurgeon, 457.

²² Hamilton, 168.

²³ Emphasis mine.

²⁴ Hamilton, ____ 173-174.

34:6). In spite of the evil that God says he will “raise up”²⁵ (קום) in David’s house, leading us to envisage the extinction of David’s house, God remains faithful to “raise up”²⁶ (קום) David’s offspring and establish his kingdom forever because his promise was according to his own heart.²⁷ “The Davidic Covenant is a covenant of grant rather than a treaty.”²⁸ Ergo, “the sword” (2 Sam 12:10) cannot shred the covenant that Yahweh has already cut. David’s unfaithfulness doesn’t nullify the faithfulness of God. The genre of David’s psalm also brings to the fore God’s faithfulness and mercy.

Its Genre

David’s prayer is a lament, “a prayer loaded with theology,” a plea that “stands in the gap between pain and promise.”²⁹ “David is asking for God to be who he is. He is asking God to act in a way that is consistent with himself. David knows he is a God of ‘abundant mercy’ (Ps 51:1), so he asks for mercy accordingly....He is the God of abundant mercy.”³⁰ Moreover, there are seven elements of a lament: an invocation, a request for God’s help, a complaint, a confession of sin or a declaration of innocence, imprecation, confidence in Yahweh’s response, and a hymn or benediction.³¹ Psalm 51 has four of these elements with one of the key features being David’s confidence in God’s response. Thus, the focus of Psalm 51 is not merely on a repentant person, but a kind God. Psalm 51 “comes from David’s blackest moment of self-

²⁵ 2 Sam 12:11.

²⁶ 2 Sam 7:12.

²⁷ 2 Sam 7:21.

²⁸ Tom Constable.

²⁹ Mark Vroegop, 26.

³⁰ Dane Ortlund, 144-145.

³¹ Tremper Longman, 27.

knowledge, yet it explores not only the depths of his guilt but some of the farthest reaches of salvation.”³² A focus on God’s mercy is also seen in the structure of the Psalm.

Its Structure

A close look at Psalm 51 reveals a chiastic structure with God’s mercy at the center.

This is shown in the figure below:

51:1-2, David’s Unfaithfulness

51:3-4, David’s Plea for Mercy

51:5-8, The Sinner’s Knowledge of David

51:9-14, God’s Mercy

51:15-17, The Sinners’ Knowledge of God

51:18-19, God’s Delight in Mercy

51:20-18, God’s Faithfulness

Figure 1. The chiastic structure of Psalm 51

Verse divisions from *BHS*

Additionally, the chiasm reveals that David’s unfaithfulness is matched with God’s faithfulness to be merciful, David’s plea for mercy links with God’s delight in mercy, and the sinner’s (David’s) knowledge of David joins with the sinners’ (Israel’s) knowledge of God who is merciful.³³ An exposition of Psalm 51, with this chiasm serving as its outline, will further demonstrate this.

³² Derek Kinder, 206-207.

³³ Deut 4:31.

Its Exposition

David's Unfaithfulness

“During his lifetime, King David did what had pleased the Lord, ‘except in the case of Uriah the Hittite’ (1 Kings 15:5 NASB).”³⁴ After David had “gone into” (בא) the wife of Uriah, Nathan the prophet “came into” (בוא) David (vv. 1-2 *BHS*).³⁵ A careful reading of 2 Samuel 11 and 12, will disclose that almost a whole year has gone by between the time that David impregnated Bathsheba, attempted to cover up his sin with the murder of her husband, to when Nathan came into David with a word from Yahweh concerning his actions. During this time, Bathsheba became his wife and carried their baby to term. At least nine to ten months have passed since David committed this sin against the Lord. Hence David has been concealing his sin for the same amount of time.

Still, God, in his steadfast love, faithfulness, grace, and mercy, sent Nathan his prophet to the king. Nathan asked, “Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.”³⁶ What Nathan said to David crushed David’s heart. The covers of his defiled marriage bed had been yanked off and his sin laid exposed. David confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord.”³⁷ As “by justice a king builds up the land,”³⁸ the king’s unfaithfulness will tear it down. That being so, “the terrible prospect of

³⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, 183.

³⁵ “In defense of interpreting the Psalms in light of their superscriptions,” writes Hamilton, “I would observe that we have no manuscript evidence that indicates that these superscriptions do not belong to the canonical form of the Psalter....Disregarding them is, in my view, as dangerous as disregarding the salutations in Paul’s letters.” (Hamilton, James M. Jr. *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgement: A Biblical Theology*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2010.)

³⁶ 2 Sam 12:9.

³⁷ 2 Sam 12:13.

³⁸ Prov 29:4.

judgement crushes David's rebellion and puts him on his knees...crying out for mercy from the one whose righteousness his sin offended."³⁹

David's Plea for Mercy

In verses 3-4 (*BHS*), David approaches a God without sin,⁴⁰ but abundant in mercy. "For all his unworthiness," like a dirty prodigal, "David knows that he still belongs."⁴¹ According to God's "steadfast love," or "covenant-love,"⁴² David pleads for mercy and for God to wash away his sin. Hamilton writes:

David makes two requests...each grounded in an appeal for God to act in accordance with his own self-description in Exod 34:6-7....He does not appeal to anything in himself, whether his inherent worth or diligent effort, but to something in God. David appeals to God's lovingkindness (חסד) and mercy (רחם), for Yahweh describes himself as a God *merciful* (רחם) and *gracious* (חנן), abounding in *lovingkindness* (חסד) and *truth* (אמת).⁴³

The Sinner's Knowledge of David

David says in Psalm 32 that he acknowledged his sin to God and did not cover his iniquity. We see the replay in verses 5-8 (*BHS*). After approaching a God without sin, David admits his surplus of sin to an already-knowing God. He claims his sin so that he would be true and so that God would not be found to be a liar.⁴⁴ Notice the "fivefold my"⁴⁵ in these verses. David owns *his* iniquity, *his* sin, and *his* transgressions. He now knows his sin. He now knows himself. It was now always before him. Hamilton comments, "This statement reflects an acute awareness of sins large and small. It may also speak to the way that...Bathsheba's presence

³⁹ Hamilton, 506.

⁴⁰ Cf. 1 John 3:5; 1 Pet 2:22;

⁴¹ Kidner, 207.

⁴² Donald M. Williams, 363

⁴³ Hamilton, 507.

⁴⁴ Cf. 1 John 1:10.

⁴⁵ Kidner, 208.

would be for David a constant reminder of it.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, he knows his treason⁴⁷ is against God and God alone. “David had certainly sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, but his greatest responsibility was to the Lord who had given the law to His people (2 Sam 12:13; Ex 20:13-14).”⁴⁸ David made a clean breast of the fact that he has been sinful since even before he nursed at his mother’s breast. This is the grace of God. This is loving of God. For God, who abounds in truth (אמת), and delights in “truth (אמת) in the inward being” (v. 8 *BHS*) teaches David “wisdom in the secret heart” (v. 8 *BHS*). “Wisdom is God’s gift to us”⁴⁹ (cf. Jas 1:5). It is, therefore, God’s gift of wisdom and of revelation that causes David to reveal his inner man. It is God’s grace that causes David to profess that he has even been sinful since residing in his mother’s inner parts. This is pure truth. This is pure mercy. God delights in such truth. He delights in such mercy.

God’s Mercy

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”⁵⁰ God’s wisdom has also taught David this. Therefore, in verses 9-14 (*BHS*), David then puts his confidence in his merciful, gracious, lovingly-kind, faithful, and all-powerful God. While Kidner claims that David speaks “a series of futures, not imperatives.”⁵¹ David asks for cleansing and joy, the opposite of the filth and misery his sin has brought thus far. David first asks God to “purge him with hyssop” (v. 9 *BHS*) Chad Byrd writes:

Hyssop is a plant with a Gospel history. *Ezov* was used to paint the blood of the Passover lamb over the Israelites’ door in Egypt (Exod 12:12), to sprinkle a cleansing concoction over a leper (Lev 14), and to purify a person who had come into contact with a corpse (Num 19). Captivity, leprosy, and death—all three summarize what David did with his life. He impregnated the wife of one of his trusted warriors and then murdered him in a perfect storm of depravity, abuse, and egotism. He needed God to take hyssop in hand and sprinkle

⁴⁶ Hamilton, 507.

⁴⁷ Kidner, 208. “Transgressions” and “sin” are mentioned twice each.

⁴⁸ Wiersbe, 184.

⁴⁹ Williams, 365.

⁵⁰ 1 John 1:9

⁵¹ Kidner, 209.

him with atoning blood. His soiled soul, black as midnight, needed to be made white as wool.⁵²

“Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed (דָּכָה) rejoice” (v. 10). “The request that bones God has crushed might rejoice reveals that God’s heavy hand of discipline has come down on him....But again, David believes that repentance and confession and petition can result in mercy that cleanses, heals, restores, and rejoices.”⁵³ For notice David’s confidence in the efficacy of God’s work. He says, “Purge me...and I shall be clean (v. 9). Wash me...and I shall be white” (v. 10). This is because his “steadfast love is great to the heavens,” his “faithfulness to the clouds” (Ps 57:10). What’s more, David asks that Yahweh would “take his *face* away from his sin, and David’s sin away from his face.”⁵⁴ He asks that his “*iniquities*” would be stricken from the record.”⁵⁵

David then moves to ask God to do what only he can do—create. He asks God to “create” (בָּרָא) in him a clean heart (v. 12 *BHS*). This is “nothing less than a miracle”⁵⁶ and this is something only Yahweh can do. For this is the same word used in Genesis 1:1 where “Yahweh alone is the subject.”⁵⁷ It is not a one-time event that David is asking for. He asks for “a sustained process as well as an instantaneous act (cf. Gen 2:3).”⁵⁸ One that “covers, so to speak, all seven days of creation, not simply the first.”⁵⁹ He asks that Yahweh would, at the same time, cast him not away from his presence, *and* to take not his presence from him (v. 13 *BHS*). “Take not your Spirit (רוּחַ) from me” (v. 13 *BHS*), David prays. This again takes us back to the Genesis account where God’s רוּחַ “was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2). David has

⁵² Chad Byrd, 275.

⁵³ Hamilton, 509.

⁵⁴ Williams, 367.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kidner, 209.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, 509.

⁵⁸ Kidner, 210.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

become like his predecessor, but he does not want to end up like him (cf. 1 Sam 16:14; 2 Sam 7:15). Instead of depression, he wants joy. Rather than rejection he wants salvation. Instead of falling he wants to be upheld. “David asks God to create something fresh and new in him: a heart that loves God and obeys and obeys his commandments.”⁶⁰ He asks for a steadfast רִוּחַ, “the power of life itself”⁶¹ by which “we are animated.”⁶² He asks “for a new heart and a firm spirit that will continue in willing obedience and holiness.”⁶³ “Let it be your will,” David prays, “to let your Spirit remain with me, so that I may remain eager in spirit to do your will.” God will grant his request because he is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6). He delights in being known this way. For this reason, after this sifting, David will then strengthen his brothers (cf. Luke 22:32).

The Sinners’ Knowledge of God

“David’s sin had affected his whole person: his eyes (v. 3), mind (v. 6), ears and bones (v. 8; see 32:3-4; 35:9-10; 38:8), heart and spirit (v. 10), hands (v. 14), and lips (vv. 13-15).”⁶⁴ Now he wants to give his whole person to God’s service, to gladly and gratefully serve Yahweh as his messenger of his saving mercy. Hamilton writes:

Those who do not know God would expect his righteousness to demand David’s bloodguilt. Those who know God’s character as he himself related it in Exod 34:6-7, however, know that God righteously forgives those who repent and seek his mercy. This is a righteousness unique to the God of the Bible, a righteousness that upholds the standard of truth while forgiving those who transgress but turn. This is a righteousness that is not bad news to sinners but good news.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Hamilton, 509-510.

⁶¹ Williams, 367.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Hamilton, 510.

⁶⁴ Wiersbe, 184.

⁶⁵ Hamilton, 510-511.

David wants his fellow Israelites and fellow sinners to know Yahweh. He wants to teach transgressors of his merciful ways (v. 15 *BHT*). He desires to recite his rectitude (v. 16 *BHT*). He yearns to preach his praise (v. 17 *BHT*). David's knowledge of himself plus God's mercy has created an aspiration for David to make God known. He keeps "steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod 34:7). This is what Psalm 51 is about.

God's Delight in Mercy

Rather than sacrifice, verses 18-19 tell us, God delights in such mercy. "David was wealthy enough to bring many sacrifices to the Lord,"⁶⁶ but here he admits his inability to do anything to pardon himself. This is a striking statement, especially for a devout Jew. "He knew that this would not please the Lord (50:8-15; see 1 Sam 15:22) and that their blood could not wash away his sins....God could not receive broken animals as sacrifices (Mal 1:6-8), but he would receive a broken heart!"⁶⁷ Furthermore, God wants what he provides: repentance.⁶⁸ An acceptable sacrifice to God then would be a broken spirit (רוח), and a crushed (דכה) heart (v. 19 *BHT*). Spurgeon says, "When the heart mourns for sin, [God is] better pleased than when the [bull] bleeds....A crushed heart is a fragrant heart."⁶⁹ Like herbs in a mortar and pestle is a crushed heart before God. For when you break the fibers of herbs by using a mortar and pestle, as opposed to just cutting them, you set free the full range of oils and flavors and fragrances within them. You reveal the truth in *their* inner being so to speak and its delightful. God's mercy is even more delightful.

⁶⁶ Wiersbe, 186.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Hamilton, 511.

⁶⁹ Spurgeon, 457.

God's Faithfulness

As we come to the end of this Psalm, we see mercy triumphing over judgment, we see God's faithfulness enveloping David's unfaithfulness. David's sin, writes Wiersbe, "affected the welfare of Jerusalem and the kingdom, and he knew that his sins had weakened Israel's position among the nations (2 Sam 12:14)."⁷⁰ Therefore, one cannot help but think that David was concerned that his sin would make God want to renege his covenant. Yet when we listen to the undertones of 2 Sam 7:8-17 in the last two verses of this song, we see that just as sure as David asks God in his good pleasure to "build (בנה) the walls of Jerusalem" (v. 20 *BHT*), God has surely told David that his son would "build (בנה) a house for my name" (2 Sam 7:13). God then said, "And I will establish his kingdom forever" (v. 14). God will remain faithful to his promise. "David's sin could result in wrath on God's people and place....But if David experiences God's favor, all Israel will enjoy the good pleasure of God. They will offer right sacrifices and public worship will replace a public wrong. They will "offer right sacrifices and put [their] trust in Yahweh" (Ps 4:5).

Conclusion

Did David's unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! For God said concerning him:

I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter the word that went forth from my lips. Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established forever, a faithful witness in the skies.⁷¹

God granted David a prophet, mercy, wisdom, renewal, repentance, and a house that will endure forever. Let God be true though everyone were found to be a liar, an adulterer, or even a murderer. This is the focus of Psalm 51.

⁷⁰ Wiersbe, 186.

⁷¹ Ps 89:33-37.

*Honor Code: I have written this paper exclusively for 20220. If I received any editing or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals.

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