

# *Ponderings in the Psalms*

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The following is a Messianic Study on

## *Psalm 51*

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# Psalm 51 Wash Away My Sins

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## Introduction

The background for this psalm, as well as Psalm 32, is 2 Samuel chapters 11&12. In a nutshell: David lusted after his neighbour's wife, something prohibited by God in the Torah (Exodus 20:17; Leviticus 18:20; Deuteronomy 5:21). David then committed adultery, which is also prohibited (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:18). David then tried to conceal his adultery by making Uriah, Bath-Sheba's husband, drunk and sent him home to sleep with his wife. While there was no explicit Torah command about *concealing sin*, there were, at the time, sayings that the person that concealed sin would not prosper (Proverbs 28:13) and that it would cause iniquity to reside in the heart (Job 31:33). There were Biblical examples that David could and should have known, like Adam trying to cover up his sin in Genesis 3:12 and Cain trying to cover up his sin Genesis 4:9. But David compounded all of this by having Bath-Sheba's husband killed, something explicitly prohibited in Torah (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). He thought he had got away with it, and had covered up the whole affair for some seven-months, *then* God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David.

We need to remember that David had been king for some time, and that he had a number of other wives. David was not a young testosterone driven teenager when he fell into these sins. After being confronted by Nathan, David wrote Psalm 51 as a public *prayer of confession*. We see some of that same language in Psalm 32, which is his *song of forgiveness*.

## A note on the name Bath-Sheba בַּת-שֶׁבַע

Throughout this study I have consistently used Bath-Sheba, and not Bathsheba, as it is two words. Bath/Bat meaning *daughter* and Sheba/Sheva comes from the word *oath*. Some translations make it one word, while others have split the name. Bath-Sheba was the daughter of Eliam (2 Samuel 11:3), although his name was inverted to Ammiel (1 Chronicles 3:5); both of these names carry a similar meaning (*God of the people* and the *people of God*). Bath-Sheba was the granddaughter of Ahithophel, an influential counsellor in the kingdom of David (2 Samuel 23:34). Her name is listed as Bath-shua בַּת-שׁוּא in 1 Chronicles 3:5, which is either a scribal error or a play on her name, indicating that she was the *daughter of wealth*, that is, she came from a wealthy / powerful family.

## 2 Samuel 11

**2 Samuel 11:1** Kings in the Ancient Near East led their armies to war in the spring time (1 Samuel 8:20, 11:1; 1 Chronicles 20:1), to conquer new lands or defend their territory, but that year David chose not to do this.

**2 Samuel 11:2** He happens to see a beautiful woman bathing, although a better word would be washing רָחַץ (*rachatz*). This was to purify herself from ceremonial uncleanness (Leviticus 15:19-23). Most likely this indicated that she had her period, and was washing herself to be *ritually clean* for worship,<sup>1</sup> although some take it to mean that she was just having a bath, and

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi David Kimchi (1160–1235), a.k.a. Radak as quoted in the footnotes on II Samuel 11:2 of the *Tanach Stone*; student size edition page 747.

nothing more. Sadly, many of the commentaries have placed at least some blame on her,<sup>2</sup> and as a result Bath-Sheba has even been called a “*femme fatale*” or the “*seductress Bath-Sheba*.” I wonder if these people have ever been to Israel, or to Jerusalem and seen the City of David. We need to figure out where David’s palace was, and where Uriah and Bath-Sheba lived, because the geographical context matters. And while we know that David was on the roof, where was Bath-Sheba? From archaeology we know that David’s palace was the highest point in the city, so he was higher than Uriah’s house.

**2 Samuel 11:3** David saw her, and he continued to look and observe her. It is at this time that he should have remembered the words from Job, “*I made a covenant with my eyes, and I will not **think** upon a young woman*” (Job 31:1), meaning I will not let the lust of the eye control me.

David inquired, who is she? He is then told, she is off-limits as she is married, and she is married to one of your friends, one of the mighty men, namely *Uriah the Hittite* (2 Samuel 23:39)!

*Uriah the Hittite* that was not his birth name, his name means Light of Yahweh. He used to be a pagan, who had come to faith in the God of Israel, and had joined the people of God. He had fought with them, possibly against his own people. This man had made huge sacrifices and through his ability he had become one of the mighty men of David (2 Samuel 23:39, 1 Chronicles 11:41). He was amongst a very exclusive group of military leaders; Uriah was a significant commander in David’s army.

**2 Samuel 11:4** David sent messengers to Bath-Sheba! The king issued the command, so this was not a request. David then takes her; the Hebrew word here is ‘taken’ *לָקַח* (*la’qach*). This word also means to *take captive* and to *seize*, so it could be read as by force. Note that it is *he* who takes the lead role.

The first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote “*BUT David fell now into a very grievous sin, though he were otherwise naturally a righteous and a religious man, and one that firmly observed the laws of our fathers; for when late in an evening he took a view round him from the roof of his royal palace, where he used to walk at that hour, he saw a woman washing herself in her own house: she was one of extraordinary beauty, and therein surpassed all other women; her name was Bath-Sheba. So he was overcome by that woman’s beauty, and (he) was not able to restrain his desires, but (he) sent for her, and (he) lay with her.* (Antiquities of the Jews 7.7.1.)<sup>3</sup>. David is seen by Josephus as the peeping Tom, who stared from his roof through her window. It also paints a very different picture of Bath-Sheba, in contrast to those who have imagined her as a promiscuous woman, bathing in the nude on her roof. She was not the beguiling temptress or a seductress who snared king David with her beauty.

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<sup>2</sup> Both John Gill, *Exposition of the Bible* and Joseph Benson *Commentary on the Old and New Covenants*, give a description of public nudity “*In a bath, which was in her garden.*” Keil and Delitzsch *Commentary on the Old Testament*: “*in the uncovered court of a neighbouring house*”. David Guzik writes: “*there is little doubt that this woman acted immodestly.*” And yet the Biblical text does not tell us where this woman is bathing, nor that she was acting immodestly, all we do know is that she is within sight of David’s rooftop.

<sup>3</sup> Antiquities of the Jews 7.7.1. translation by William Whiston, 1737, an electronic edition can be found here: <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/>.

As we read 1 Samuel 11 or Psalm 51, we note that no blame is ascribed to her. In fact, David says: I, me, mine and my; he acknowledges the blame is his, again in contrast to some commentaries which also place blame with Bath-Sheba.

David should have stopped upon receiving the news of Bath-Sheba's identity, yet he allowed lust to control him and committed adultery. After receiving news from Bath-Sheba that she is pregnant, he called Urijah back (**2 Samuel 11:6**), and a tangled web of deceit is built by David to cover up his sin, which eventually led to David planning Uriah's murder.

Harking back to her ritual purity, note that in verse 4 she purifies herself from what happened to her, she *mit'qaddeshet* (מִתְקַדְּשֶׁת) made herself ritually pure again, from the word *kadosh* – holy or sanctified.

**2 Samuel 11:14-17** David wrote a letter to Joab, his general at the front-line, and sent it via Uriah. He asked for Uriah to be put in the front line of battle and that he should withdraw from him, so that Uriah may be struck down and die. Joab obeyed and Uriah died in battle, just as David had planned.

**2 Samuel 11:26-27a** Bath-Sheba mourns the death of her husband, and after the time of mourning was over, David sent for her and she became his wife. Note again that he takes the active lead. It is then that their son is born.

**2 Samuel 11:26-27b** Here we see the summary from God's perspective "*But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord.*" And that is why he sent Nathan, the prophet (2 Samuel 12).

**2 Samuel 12** It is some seven months later that the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to king David, who thought he had got away with it all. Nathan confronted him with a story of *the rich man who had very many flocks and herds* (2 Samuel 12), yet the rich man took the only lamb from a poor neighbour. The word for *took* here is the verb that comes from the same root as *laqach*, meaning seized. David responds beautifully to the story and declares in his great anger "*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*" (2 Samuel 12:5b-6). Nathan then pointed to David and uttered those chilling words, "*You are the man!*" (2 Samuel 12:7).

**2 Samuel 12:8-10** Nathan then revealed it was an illustration, but that David was the rich man who took his only lamb (wife) from Uriah, the poor man. The punishment is that "*the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken (laqach) the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.*"

Read 2 Samuel 12 closely. The parable told by Nathan the Prophet, is that an ewe lamb was stolen from a poor man by a rich man, so, in this parable who is Bath-Sheba? Well Bath-Sheba is that ewe lamb. In other words, the Prophet Nathan pictures Bath-Sheba as innocent.

**2 Samuel 12:13-14** At this point David realised he had been caught, and repented after his confession. Nathan declares that "*The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the Lord, the son born to you will die.*" The child did die a week later, and if we remember how David had responded

by saying that “*the man who did this shall restore fourfold.*” we later see that four of David’s sons suffered untimely deaths. It was the judgment that David had pronounced upon himself.

These four sons of David were his firstborn of Bath-Sheba in 2 Samuel 12:15; the second son was Amnon who was killed by the hand of Absalom in 2 Samuel 13:23-33; thirdly, there was Absalom who was killed by Joab in 2 Samuel 18 & 1 Chronicles 3:1-2; and finally, Adonijah who also attempted to usurp the throne during the life of David (1 Kings 1:5-10), and was killed when he tried again under Solomon (1 Kings 2:22-25).

David was the one guilty of these sins, and the judgment was upon him but the consequences would also visit his house in the form of ongoing violence. The chapters that follow 2 Samuel 12 tell us some of the details of that judgement.

### David’s honesty in this prayer of Confession

In this Psalm David acknowledges his sin, and note how often David uses “me” and “my sin” in this psalm. His honesty is almost painful and he doesn’t blame anyone else; no, this is between him and the Lord, “*my sin is ever before me.*” In the related Psalm, Psalm 32, he says “**I** acknowledged **my sin** to you, and **I** did not cover **my iniquity**; I said, “**I** will confess **my transgressions** to the LORD,” and You (*o Lord*) forgave the iniquity of **my sin**. Selah” (Psalm 32:5).

### Psalm 51

<sup>1</sup> For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bath-Sheba.

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin. <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me.

<sup>4</sup> Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge. <sup>5</sup> Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. <sup>6</sup> Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom. <sup>7</sup> Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. <sup>8</sup> Make me to hear joy and gladness, Let the bones which You have broken rejoice. <sup>9</sup> Hide Your face from my sins And blot out all my iniquities.

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from Your presence And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of Your salvation And sustain me with a willing spirit.

<sup>13</sup> *Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners will be converted to You. <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; *Then* my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. <sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise. <sup>16</sup> For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. <sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

<sup>18</sup> By Your favour do good to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem. <sup>19</sup> Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, In burnt offering and whole burnt offering; Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.

## Psalm 51 Comments

**Verse 1 (superscript)** This is dealt with in the historical overview of 1 Samuel 11-12, and David taught this to his people by having it included in the songbook. He not only taught his generation, but every generation since then, including you and me.

### **Verse 1 Three requests for mercies**

There are three key words that are translated slightly differently in various translations:

1. Gracious ... חנן (*chanan*) to show mercy or favour.
2. Mercy חסד (*chesed*) lovingkindness, goodness, kindness, faithfulness
3. Compassions רחם (*racham*) mercies

Whatever the translation, one thing is clear. David appeals to God's mercies (Exodus 34:6-7), not justice. Mercy is not getting what you deserve, justice is getting what you deserve, so David's appeal is to God in His mercy.

**Verses 2 and 3 Three descriptions of sin** All three basic Hebrew words for sin are used

1. חַטָּאָה (*chattaah*), meaning to sin, literally miss the mark;
2. פְּשָׁע (*pe-sha*) meaning to rebel, transgress;
3. עֲוֹן (*avon*), iniquity or guilt.

All of these words imply the multitude and severity of the sins committed by David.

More on these words: **Sin** means missing the mark, failing to meet God's standard;

**Transgressions** David describes his acts of rebellion, defying God by crossing over the line God has drawn; **Iniquity** means inward crookedness or perversity.

We too will miss the mark because of our frailties, we too may revolt against God's standard, and we too may twist the truth in an attempt to avoid acknowledging guilt. In fact, all we like sheep have gone astray and like David we too have sinned.

We saw in 2 Samuel 11 how quickly David fell; so too for us, we too can fall quickly into sin. Although there were many steps down, there was and is only one step back to God – repentance. This is not feeling sorrow, but acknowledging that we have sinned against the Holy God, and we have failed to keep God's righteous standard.

In Psalm 32 David relates to us the price he paid for his sins physically, as he became sick "my bones wasted away," and spiritually, for he lost his right-standing before God (vv. 1-2). He therefore needed to be washed and cleansed.

The word clean and cleansed is used over and over again in Leviticus 13-16. There was a significant understanding of restoration. David saw his heart as defiled by his sins (v. 3). He asked God to thoroughly wash him; literally it indicates many or a great washing. Like David, we should not justify our actions, and we need to acknowledge that we cannot hide our guilt before God.

**Verse 4** Against YOU, YOU ALONE have I sinned. David is not whitewashing his guilt against Bath-Sheba or Uriah, but he is saying that all sin ultimately is against God. David understood his sins and he had not been able to meet the standard of the LORD.

**In verse 5** David understands that he sinned and was born a sinner. It is a raw reflection that even before his birth his ancestors were sinners, and he came from them. Note that David is not raising this as a defence, as if to say it was their fault; no, David owns his sin, you get a sense that he stands in court before the Holy One, the Judge of all the earth.

**Verse 6** I should have spoken the truth, for the inner witness the Spirit within me testified, I was wrong, and you made that known to me. The wisdom addressed here is an understanding that God requires absolute truth and honest confession before we can be restored to Him.

**Verse 7** Purge me with hyssop. The herb hyssop was used in the cleansing ceremony in Leviticus 14, a chapter that talks about cleansing; whiter than snow (Isaiah 1:18, come let us reason together...). By becoming “whiter than snow” David expressed the hope of a clean slate, of total forgiveness.

**Verse 8** David says he had lost fellowship with God because of unconfessed sins, and this was expressed in the missing sounds of joy (*sason*), gladness (*simchah*) and rejoicing (*gil*). How hard this must have been for the greatest Psalmist of all time, no longer singing God’s praises. Unconfessed sin can rob the believer, you and me, of the joy and gladness we have in Messiah.

**Verse 9** Hide not, this is a request from David for a reversal of the curse that God said He would do to His people. Deuteronomy 21:17-18 says “He would hide His hidden face.” ‘Blot out’ the only way for our sins to be blotted out, and for our names to be in the Book of Life, is to make confession and acknowledge that God is the only saviour. May we never forget our God, the Saviour, who has and is doing great things, then our spirit can rejoice in God.

**Verse 10** In Biblical Hebrew only God can create. We can make, shape and form but not create, so David asks God to create in Him a new clean heart, the seat of Biblical thinking. We would say the mind, or reason. David asks God not for an emotional response but for a transformed renewal of his mind (Romans 12:2). He also asks for a spirit that would steadfastly follow after God.

**Verse 11-12** cast me not away as a broken vessel in which you had no pleasure; Lord “take not Your Holy Spirit from me.” David had seen what had happened when God took His Holy Spirit from Saul: “Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD *terrified* him” (1 Samuel 16:14).

Lord “take not Your Holy Spirit from me.” This is not a fear for the believer in Yeshua: God does not take away the Holy Spirit when we sin (John 14:16), but we do grieve the Spirit when we sin and we DO lose His fellowship (Ephesians 4:30) which then needs to be restored.

David knew the Spirit of God. We see this in 2 Samuel 23:1-2 “Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on

high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel: 2 “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.”

Restore unto me the joy of Your salvation, salvation in the Tanach usually means physical deliverance, not a spiritual deliverance. David’s sins had been removed but the consequences of his sin had not, note the words of Nathan the prophet: 1) the sword would never depart from David’s house (2 Samuel 12:10), 2) David’s wives would be taken by a family member (2 Samuel 12:11) and the child would die (2 Samuel 12:13-14). Keeping in mind the normal usage of the word in the Hebrew Bible, the context of the Psalm and the prophecy of Nathan (2 Samuel 12) David essentially asks that God would be merciful and remove the sword from his house. Based on that we can see that this psalm was written after the death of the child (2 Samuel 12:18) and Absalom sleeping with David’s concubines (2 Samuel 16:22).

**Verse 13** Then will I teach transgressors Your ways. David was a prophet as well as a king (Acts 2:30); and he taught men the fear of the Lord (Psalm 34:11), and instructed them in His ways. He not only taught his own generation, but every generation since have been taught about sin and repentance, about the forgiveness of sins and the cleansing that comes from turning to God. God wants transgressors to know His ways, by turning away from our stinking thinking and stinking ways, and turning towards God’s cleansing.

**Verse 14** This is not a general reference to ALL the blood that David had shed, but refers specifically to the murder of Uriah.

**Verse 15** O Lord, open my lips; then my mouth will declare Your praise. The guilt that David had felt had kept his lips shut. David the most prolific psalmist as the Lord to anoint him again so that praise and thanksgiving would flow from his mouth.

**Verses 16-17** Good works never cleansed sin, not then and not today. Not even religious works can cleanse us and David says as much when referring to sacrifices. It was and is only God’s grace; David cannot know about the final sacrifice for sin, but 300 years later Isaiah refers to the Sacrifice in Isaiah 53 “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” This fulfilment was made on Calvary, for only through the blood of the Messiah Jesus can sins be washed away (Hebrews 10:1-18; 1 John 1:7-2:2).

David understood that forgiveness was not cheap, but after the cross we have come to realise that the cost was far greater than any Older Testament Saint could have fully understood. God’s Son, Messiah Yeshua, gave His life as an atonement for sins. We receive forgiveness because of what He has done, not because of our prayers or tears. God is willing to blot out sins (vv. 1, 9; see Isaiah 43:25 “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins”). Only Yeshua can purge us completely. When we become believers in Yeshua we know the high price He paid for our cleansing. This fact alone should make us hate sin and want to run from it. Yet like David, the man after God’s heart, we too may fall. Knowing that Yeshua paid the price for us, and knowing how repugnant sin is to God, we must remember God is only one step away, the step of repentance.

**Verse 18 “Do good to Zion”** This seems to be a disjointed, perhaps oddly placed verse, as if it has been added as an after-thought from another song of Zion, or somehow attached by

Nehemiah, or some editor. It seems as if it has been placed here incorrectly, and doesn't fit in this psalm of repentance.

But this is not so. David, as the king, is the head of Israel, and Jerusalem is not only his capital, but it is also the chosen dwelling place of the LORD. 2 Chronicles 6:6 *"I have chosen Jerusalem, that my Name might be there; and have chosen David to be over my people Israel."* By his actions David had defiled the city, so David humbly asks God to restore Jerusalem and do good to her, build her walls, for as we come with a *broken and contrite heart*, O God, then *you will not despise* the sacrifices that we make.

**Verse 19** When David was right with God He delighted in righteous sacrifices, but repentance must come before the offering. Remember the tabernacle, where your sins were confessed at the gate, and then you could go in and take a sacrifice. So too for us, we can sing and dance and shout and carry on, but all our programs, our praising and shouting of Hallelujahs will not make a difference if there is no repentance or acknowledgement. David concludes then with sacrifices, burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings. These would consist of young bulls being offered up in their entirety. What a day of rejoicing that would have been.

### Supplementary note:

We note an unusual thing when we come to the genealogy of Messiah. Matthew departs from Jewish tradition and mentions five women, four by name (Matthew 1): Tamar (3), Rahab (5), Ruth (5) and Mary (16). Bath-Sheba, who is also in the line of Yeshua, is not mentioned by name, but is referred to in the Greek as *"her of Uriah"* (6), meaning the wife of Uriah. All these women were either directly involved in sexual sin; Tamar and Rahab and Bath-Sheba while Ruth was the offspring of an incestuous relationship and Mary was accused of sexual sin. Not mentioning Bath-Sheba<sup>4</sup> by her name seems to be a reminder of David's sin, rather than hers (1 Kings 15:5).

### Summary

In Psalm 51 David appealed to the merciful and compassionate God for the forgiveness of his sins and he asks that God would restore the Holy Spirit and the joy of his salvation to him.

There is a lesson for us: be quick to confess, and be quick to forgive others so that your relationship with God can be restored. Like David, we appeal to God on the basis of grace through repentance (*a broken and contrite heart*). David would have offered sacrifices; we as New Covenant believers come and receive forgiveness on the same principles, grace through repentance based on a sacrifice, the sacrifice of Messiah Yeshua who gave His life for us.

*Selah*

*Blessings in Messiah*

*Sue and Paul*

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<sup>4</sup> NASB does add her name, though no Greek manuscript has her name.