

Psalms 51:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness:
according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out
my transgressions.

Analysis

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. This opening of Scripture's most famous penitential psalm reveals the theological foundations of genuine repentance. David, confronted by Nathan after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 11-12), cries not for justice but mercy, appealing to God's character rather than his own merit.

"Have mercy upon me" (חִנְנֵנִי/chonneni) uses chanan, meaning to be gracious, show favor, have compassion. This is the first word after addressing God—before confession, before explanation, David pleads for mercy. He knows he deserves judgment; his only hope is undeserved grace. The imperative form urgently appeals: 'be gracious to me!' This isn't casual request but desperate plea from one who knows his guilt.

"O God" (אֱלֹהִים/Elohim) addresses God by His name emphasizing power and deity. Later (v.14) David will use Yahweh, the covenant name, but he begins with Elohim—acknowledging he approaches the sovereign Creator, the holy Judge, the infinite God before whom he stands guilty.

"According to thy lovingkindness" (כְּחֵסֶד/kechasdekha) appeals to chesed—one of the Old Testament's richest words, meaning steadfast love, loyal love, covenant faithfulness, unfailing mercy. This isn't sentimental emotion but committed

covenant loyalty. God's chesed endures forever (Psalm 136), doesn't fail despite human failure, and forms the basis for forgiveness. David appeals to God's character, not his own worthiness.

"According unto the multitude of thy tender mercies" (רַחֲמֵיךְ/kerov rachamekha) intensifies the appeal. Racham (compassion, tender mercy) comes from the root meaning 'womb,' suggesting motherly compassion—deep, instinctive, tender care. The plural form and 'multitude' (rov—abundance) emphasize: God's mercies are abundant, multiple, overflowing. David needs abundant mercy because his sin is grievous; thankfully, God's mercies match—exceed—his need.

"Blot out my transgressions" (פְשָׁעִי/mechah fesha'ai) makes the specific request. Machah (blot out, wipe away, erase) pictures erasing writing from a scroll or wiping clean a surface. David asks God to erase his sin completely, removing all record, wiping the slate clean. Pesha (transgressions) means rebellion, revolt—willful violation of God's authority. David knows his sin wasn't mere weakness but deliberate rebellion requiring divine forgiveness.

Historical Context

The superscription identifies the context: 'A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.' 2 Samuel 11-12 records the full story: David saw Bathsheba bathing, committed adultery, orchestrated Uriah's death to cover his sin, then married Bathsheba. God sent Nathan with a parable exposing David's crime. When David declared the guilty man deserved death, Nathan proclaimed, 'Thou art the man' (2 Samuel 12:7).

David's immediate response was confession: 'I have sinned against the LORD' (2 Samuel 12:13). Nathan announced forgiveness: 'The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.' However, consequences followed—the child born from adultery died, violence plagued David's house, Absalom rebelled. Forgiveness doesn't erase all temporal consequences, though it removes eternal guilt.

This psalm demonstrates several crucial truths about sin and repentance. First, sin against humans is ultimately sin against God (v.4). Second, genuine repentance

takes full responsibility without excuse or minimization. Third, forgiveness depends entirely on God's grace, not human merit. Fourth, repentance seeks not merely relief from consequences but restoration of relationship with God.

Throughout Scripture, this psalm has modeled penitential prayer. Israel prayed it during exile, acknowledging national sin. Individuals pray it in personal repentance. The church uses it liturgically, particularly during Lent. It appears in Catholic and Orthodox liturgies, Reformed services, and personal devotions. Its language has shaped Christian understanding of sin, guilt, and divine forgiveness.

Church history's greatest saints confessed deep sin and claimed God's mercy. Augustine's 'Confessions' details his moral failures and God's transforming grace. Luther's discovery of justification by faith freed him from impossible attempts to earn forgiveness. The Reformers emphasized that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone—we contribute nothing; God's mercy is all. This psalm's theology underlies these convictions.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How does David's immediate appeal to mercy (rather than attempting to justify himself) model genuine repentance?
2. What is the significance of appealing to God's 'lovingkindness' and 'tender mercies' rather than claiming any personal righteousness?
3. How does the image of 'blotting out' transgressions give assurance of complete forgiveness when we repent?
4. What does this psalm teach about the relationship between confession, forgiveness, and consequences of sin?

Interlinear Text

חַנְכָּנִי אֱלֹהִים כְּפָסַךְ בָּנִי
Have mercy upon me O God according to thy lovingkindness

H2603

H430

H2617

כִּרְבָּנִי מִן הַמְּלָאָכִים פָּשָׁעִים
according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions

H7230

H7356

H4229

H6588

Additional Cross-References

Acts 3:19 (Sin): Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;

Isaiah 44:22 (Sin): I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.

Isaiah 43:25 (Sin): I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.

Psalms 51:9 (Sin): Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

Colossians 2:14 (Parallel theme): Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;

Psalms 69:16 (Parallel theme): Hear me, O LORD; for thy lovingkindness is good: turn unto me according to the multitude of thy tender mercies.

Psalms 106:45 (Parallel theme): And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies.

Psalms 4:1 (Grace): Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: thou hast enlarged me when I was in distress; have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer.

Psalms 119:124 (Grace): Deal with thy servant according unto thy mercy, and teach me thy statutes.

Lamentations 3:32 (Parallel theme): But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies.

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