

### Martin Luther (1483-1546), *Exposition of Psalm 51*

Now let us come to the psalm. Here the doctrine of true repentance is set forth before us. There are two elements in true repentance: recognition of sin and recognition of grace; or, to use the more familiar terms, the fear of God and trust in mercy. These two parts David sets forth before us in this prayer as in a beautiful picture for us to look at.

The fact that such a great man—filled with the Holy Spirit, with the highest good works and divine wisdom, and famous above all for his outstanding gift of divine prophecy—should have fallen so miserably is an example to us, to comfort us when we are beset by sin and fall, or when our consciences are touched by a sense of the wrath and judgment of God. Here in a glorious example there shines the goodness and mercy of God, who is ready to forgive sins and to justify us, just as long as we do not add to our sin a denial that we have sinned.

This knowledge of sin, moreover, is not some sort of speculation or an idea which the mind thinks up for itself. It is a true feeling, a true experience, and a very serious struggle of the heart, as he testifies when he says (v. 3), “I know (that is, I feel or experience) my transgressions.” This is what the Hebrew word really means. . . . The knowledge of sin is itself the feeling of sin, and the sinful man is the one who is oppressed by his conscience and tossed to and fro, not knowing where to turn. . . . Therefore, this theological knowledge is necessary: a man should know himself, should know, feel, and experience that he is guilty of sin and subject to death; but he should also know the opposite, that God is the Justifier and Redeemer of a man who knows himself this way.

Now we must consider whether it is appropriate for him to say, “Have mercy on me.” If you look at the persons dealing with each other here, God and the sinner David, their great dissimilarity and an insoluble contradiction will appear. Is it not the feeling of nature and a judgment of all men that God hates sin? As the blind man says (John 9:31), “We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.” . . . All men judge this way: “You are a sinner, but God is righteous. Therefore He hates you, therefore He inflicts punishments on you, therefore He does not hear you.” Nothing in our nature can deny this conclusion. . . . So it happened to me as a young man that I hated this name for God, and from this deep habit I still shudder today when I hear someone say, “the righteous God.”

Nature always thinks this way, and it says to itself: “I dare not lift my eyes to heaven; I am afraid of the sight of God. I know both that I am a sinner and that God hates sin. So what shall I pray?” Here a very hard battle begins. Either the mind is confused within itself by the consciousness of sin and believes that it should delay praying until it finds some worthiness within itself, so to speak, or it looks around at human counsels and sophistic consolations so that it first thinks about satisfactions that will enable it to come before God with some confidence in its own worthiness and say, “Have mercy on me, O God.” This is the constant belief of our nature, but it is highly dangerous. . . . Since we are born in sins, it follows that we shall never pray unless we pray before we feel that we are pure of all sins.

Therefore we must drive away this blasphemous notion. In the very midst of our sins, or to put it more meaningfully, in the very sea of our sins, we must use the means David uses here, so that

we do not put off praying. What does the word “have mercy” accomplish if those who pray are pure and do not need mercy? As I have said, this is a very bitter battle, that in the very feeling of sin a mind can be aroused to cry to God, “Have mercy on me.” From my own example I have sometimes learned that prayer is the most difficult of almost all works, I who teach and command others! . . . Still, the Holy Spirit won out by telling me: “Whatever you may be, surely you must pray! God wants you to pray and to be heard because of His mercy, not because of your worthiness.”

Look at David here. With his mouth open he breaks out in the words “Have mercy on me, O God.” Thus he combines things that by nature are dissimilar, God and himself the sinner, the Righteous and the unrighteous. This gigantic mountain of divine wrath that so separates God and David, he crosses by trust in mercy and joins himself to God.

To call on God and say, “Have mercy,” is not a great deal of work. But to add the particle “on me”—this is really what the Gospel inculcates so earnestly, and yet we experience how hard it is for us to do this. This “on me” hinders almost all our prayers, when it ought to be the only reason and highest occasion for praying.

In ourselves we experience this crowd of thoughts upbraiding us: “Why do you want to pray? Do you not know what you are and what God is?” This crowd of thoughts is very burdensome for the spirit, and it hinders very many. We must despise it and pray for the very reason that seems to call us away from prayer, so that somehow we break through that crowd to Christ and ask for mercy. Those who do this pray rightly, but a truly great struggle of spirit is necessary. I have learned from my experience that these thoughts often drove prayer away from me. . . . “But I see that I must pray most of all because of this one reason, that I am a very great sinner and have need of mercy.” . . . Just because our hearts really feel sin, we ought to come to God through prayer all the more.

If we considered it more carefully, we should have to declare that our whole life is enclosed and established in the bosom of the mercy of God. Since we are all the “me” here, that is, sinners, the conclusion follows clearly and necessarily that whatever we are and live is all by sheer grace, not by our righteousness and merit. . . . Thus mercy is our whole life even until death.

Here, too, we experience that it is a great and difficult art to combine these two things, and to fix our eyes only on the steadfast love of God and His abundant mercy. For these words are not born in our house, but are brought down from heaven by the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, these thorns are born in our hearts: “I am a sinner, and God is righteous and angry at me the sinner.” The conscience cannot pluck out these thorns; it cannot put the sinner before a gracious and forgiving God. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit, not of our free will or strength.

Unless the Holy Spirit pours this wisdom [that God loves the afflicted] into the heart, even though it is heard, it is heard without fruit. Hearts cannot grasp this spiritual wisdom, but when they are crushed by bitterness and sadness, they do not even dare to pray. Even though I have no great experience in this danger, still I have learned now and again how difficult it is in this battle to say, “Lord, help me!” A heart that feels the wrath of God does not see or know anything with which it can comfort or strengthen itself, so absorbed is it in its despair.