

Lent Devotional March 4, 2026

Scripture

Psalm 51

1 *Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy,
blot out my transgressions.*

2 *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.*

3 *For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.*

4 *Against you, you alone, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.*

5 *Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

6 *You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

7 *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

8 *Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.*

9 *Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.*

10 *Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

11 *Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

12 *Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

13 *Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.*

14 *Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.*

15 *O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

16 *For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.*
17 *The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

*18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem;
19 then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Devotion

The Rev. Sara Lawson '18

Psalm 51 begins with a plea for mercy. This cry is echoed throughout the prophets, in the ministry of Jesus, and quite memorably through the simple prayer of the tax collector in Luke, “God, have mercy on me a sinner” (18:13). How often do we begin our prayers with an acknowledgement of helplessness? Often, it is only at our lowest points that we can come to God knowing that our lives and all we have are in His hands. We make excuses and justify our actions: “She had a hard life.” “He was abused.” “They were poor.” “We deserve ...” And the excuses go on. But David makes no excuses.

He acknowledges three ways he has sinned: he has transgressed (rebelled against God); he has acted out of iniquity (or a perverted way of thinking); and he has missed the mark (falling short of the life God had desired for him). In no place does he even consider blaming God for his bad choices, for his own actions.

Several years ago, when I was reading Psalm 51 and reflecting on David’s story, I remember being struck by the similarities in wording between the psalm and the account of Cain in Genesis 4—as well as the vast contrast between the two men. Both are confronted with their sins, but while Cain denies what he has done, David confesses, owning his faults and pleading for mercy.

Sin is not currently in vogue. We use other words, excuse our ungodly behaviors, and find less humbling ways to show our devotion, like giving up something trivial for Lent. At least, that is my temptation. But naming our sin allows us to throw ourselves at the mercy of a God who loves us so much that He sent His Son to die for us and restore our relationship with Him.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner. Create in me a clean heart. Cast me not away from Your presence. And may I dwell in Your house and among Your people and gaze upon Your beauty all the days of my life. Amen.