

Lent Devotional March 25, 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. Dr. Lisa D. Kenkeremath '11

Against you, you alone, have I sinned (Ps 51:4).

I have always been troubled by this verse of Psalm 51—don’t we sin against other people all the time? It seems to me that sin is rarely just between God and us, as our ways of self-absorption and self-interest almost always hurt someone in some way. Calvin, though, puts the verse in context in his commentary on the Psalms: “ . . . though the world should pardon [us], . . . God is the Judge with whom we have to do.” In other words, human forgiveness alone cannot appease our consciences.

In Jonathan Franzen’s 2021 novel *Crossroads* (a story of a disintegrating family), the characters try, and mostly fail, to live virtuous lives. Russ, a Reformed pastor, schemes to have an affair with one of the youth group moms while his wife and two of his sons are in crisis. Russ believes in his own basic goodness and righteousness, so while briefly troubled by his dalliance with a woman not his wife, he doesn’t dwell on it—sin and guilt are not an issue for him.

Russ’s wife, Marion, a former Catholic with a haunted past, believes that bad things that come her way are just retribution for the sins of her young adulthood. Her therapist tries to coach her toward self-forgiveness, but Marion objects: “I know you think it’s sick to blame myself, but spiritually I think it’s healthier.” Though Russ and Marion both have distorted views of the nature of forgiveness, Marion’s view does seem spiritually more astute. For Marion, sin is not an idea or a feeling, but something real, nameable, and intractable. Marion errs in rejecting the possibility of forgiveness, but Russ errs in taking it for granted.

The psalmist does not take it for granted. Yet he knows that he has to do with a God whose nature it is to be forgiving. “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (v. 17). God calls us neither to self-flagellation nor to indifference about the ways we fail to do what is right and good, but only asks us to be honest about ourselves.

Prayer

Holy God, You desire truth in the inward being. So, create in me a clean heart, and put Your Spirit within me. Keep me from self-delusion about the ways I do wrong or think wrongly, and help me to trust in Your grace alone to forgive, heal, and change me, through Jesus Christ. Amen.