

# Why Is the Christian Life So Hard?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

7<sup>th</sup> in an eight-part series

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*Psalm 51 (CEB)*

*For the music leader. A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him just after he had been with Bathsheba.*

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| <sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, God,<br>according to your faithful love!<br>Wipe away my wrongdoings<br>according to your great compassion!  | <sup>11</sup> Please don't throw me<br>out of your presence;<br>please don't take your holy spirit<br>away from me.   |
| <sup>2</sup> Wash me completely clean of my guilt;<br>purify me from my sin!  | <sup>12</sup> Return the joy of your salvation to me<br>and sustain me with a willing spirit.   |
| <sup>3</sup> Because I know my wrongdoings,<br>my sin is always right in front of me.   | <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,<br>and sinners will come back to you.   |
| <sup>4</sup> I've sinned against you—you alone.<br>I've committed evil in your sight.<br>That's why you are justified<br>when you render your verdict,<br>completely correct<br>when you issue your judgment. | <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from violence, God,<br>God of my salvation,<br>so that my tongue can sing<br>of your righteousness.  |
| <sup>5</sup> Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,<br>from the moment my mother<br>conceived me.  | <sup>15</sup> Lord, open my lips,<br>and my mouth<br>will proclaim your praise.   |
| <sup>6</sup> And yes, you want truth<br>in the most hidden places;<br>you teach me wisdom<br>in the most secret space.  | <sup>16</sup> You don't want sacrifices.<br>If I gave an entirely burned offering,<br>you wouldn't be pleased.  |
| <sup>7</sup> Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;<br>wash me and I will be whiter than snow.  | <sup>17</sup> A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.<br>You won't despise a heart, God,<br>that is broken and crushed.   |
| <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and celebration again;<br>let the bones you crushed<br>rejoice once more.  | <sup>18</sup> Do good things for Zion by your favor.<br>Rebuild Jerusalem's walls.  |
| <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins;<br>wipe away all my guilty deeds!   | <sup>19</sup> Then you will again want<br>sacrifices of righteousness—<br>entirely burned offerings<br>and complete offerings.<br>Then bulls will again be sacrificed<br>on your altar. |
| <sup>10</sup> Create a clean heart for me, God;<br>put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!   |   |

*Romans 7:15 (NRSV)*

<sup>15</sup> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

*Taking action – the essence of genuine repentance.*

Two weeks ago, I admitted to you that I am a sinner . . . as if you didn't know. When I reflect on the many ways that I have failed to love God and everyone else, there is one biblical story that comforts me like no other: the story of David and Bathsheba. Here's the basics.

David, the youngest son of Jesse in Bethlehem, was chosen by God to be the second king of the united Israelite tribes because God looked on his heart, not his outward appearance, for he was a man after God's own heart (2 Samuel 16:7; Acts 13:22). And, indeed, David did go on to be the idealized king of Israel, with whom God made an ever-lasting covenant (2 Samuel 7). But after that David sinned unimaginably. I've messed up plenty in my life, but, David . . . wow.

One afternoon, David sees Bathsheba, the wife of one of his top commanders, bathing in her own home. He wants her. He has her brought to him. He takes her. He sends her

away. . . that's it. Read it for yourself (2 Samuel 11). There is no hint of romance or love or goodness or morality.

David uses his power as king to forcibly take a woman who is married to another man. Bathsheba is silent in the story until she informs David that she is pregnant. She is a victim of violence, not an adulterer. How could she refuse the king's summons? And then . . . when she turns up pregnant, David makes another, even more terrible choice. He first tries to cover up his crime by having Uriah come home and sleep with his wife. And when Uriah refuses, David arranges for Uriah to be killed in battle. There is no good way to spin this. David chooses (there's that word again!) to murder Uriah, the husband of David's pregnant victim.

Like I said . . . wow. In the aftermath of his crimes, David is confronted by the prophet, Nathan. When Nathan finds out what David has done, he tells David a story of a rich man who "took" a poor man's lamb to serve to a guest. David is at first incensed by the story for he knows that the rich man is guilty, even saying he "deserves to die." Then Nathan thunders, "You are the man." David has become the taker, deserving of death. So, the question then is, what will David do?

Psalm 51 is the answer, which is printed in full above. And it is in this Psalm that we can find real hope, for despite our failings, large and small, God loves us and seeks genuine reconciliation. Yes, even with a sinner like David . . . and like me.

I've come to see that God's choice of David wasn't because David would always make the loving choice, but because, when he failed, David would come to God in genuine repentance. If David can come to God with a repentant heart, cannot we all?

#### *#51 -- A psalm of repentance*

Why is the Christian life so hard? Because, to go back to the first week of this series, we live between the times, when the kingdom of God has come already and not yet, when it is both present and coming. And our own hearts and behavior reflect that we dwell simultaneously in two worlds. Though the Holy Spirit dwells in us, though we have been put right with God by virtue of Jesus' faithfulness even unto death, we are still, every one of us, mired in sin. As the apostle Paul put it, we do the very thing we know we shouldn't and fail to do what we know we should (Romans 7:15). It is as if our feet are trapped in a swamp and we have to strive for God's kingdom with every step. We Christians are realists about this. Others may look at the world through rose-colored glasses; we do not. We see the truth about ourselves as we seek the truth about God.

Thus, even after we embrace Jesus as savior and put our faith in him, we have to make our way forward every day, striving to love God and others as we know we should. And even as we fail at this, we are charged to do better, to never settle for a life marred by sin. In Psalm 51, we see the earnest commitment by David to repent, to change his heart, his mind, and his behavior. A Bible dictionary entry sheds light on this:

The apostle Paul notes that godly sorrow produces an earnestness, an eagerness to clear one's name, indignation, alarm, longing, concern and a readiness to see justice done (2 Cor 7:11). While Paul documents many separate images of repentance, the single most prominent biblical source of images of repentance is Psalm 51, which provides an anatomy of the sinner's (David's) soul and emotions after the prophet Nathan confronted him with the enormity of what he had done in committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband (2 Sam 11–12). The psalm conveys a profound sense of both the depth of evil possible in the human heart and the confidence of one who has experienced the effects of authentic repentance—forgiveness and reconciliation with God. It also catalogs four facets of genuine repentance echoed by Paul: comprehension of wrong done, earnest desire for justice, desire for the presence of God, and changed action. . . . Changed action is the most tangible demonstration of repentance. While, like a stony face, unwillingness to glorify God signals a lack of repentance (Rev 16:9), large strides in a new direction are the most sure sign that repentance has occurred. Having requested the presence of God,

David immediately describes his plan of action: to “teach transgressors your ways,” leading to their repentance, and “to declare your praise” (Ps 51:13–15). He lends backbone to his earnest tone by envisioning outward change to demonstrate his inward contrition.<sup>1</sup>

Too often, Christians think that once they put their faith in Jesus, all the hard work is done, life will just be victory after victory. Surely, with God in their hearts, sin will be a thing of the past, part of their old selves they have left behind in Christ. But, no, that isn’t really it at all. We live between the times. We will have to press ahead every day and repent of our sin when we make the inevitable unloving choices.

Repentance doesn’t mean merely to regret or apologize for our wrong. Repentance is about action, it is about actually living a different life and making better choices. Many years, I came across a wonderful metaphor from John Stackhouse that helped to drive this home to me (pun intended, as you’ll see).<sup>2</sup>

Suppose we intend to drive from San Francisco, in northern California, to San Diego, in the far south. I insist on driving, since I’ve actually visited California once or twice and I never, ever get lost. You graciously concede the wheel, and off we go. The miles and hours go by. You begin to feel uneasy, however, when we pass what looks for all the world like a sign welcoming us to the state of Oregon. I insist that “Oregon” must be a region of California, and that Los Angeles surely must be coming up soon. As we drive through Portland, however, you are convinced I am heading in exactly the wrong direction. And as the Washington state line comes up, you become rather insistent on the point. In fact, you want very much to convert me to your opinion.

What is it, exactly, that you want when you want me to convert? First, you want me to recognize my error. I can’t take any further steps until I have agreed that I am, in fact, heading north instead of south. But let’s suppose I agree, and I say, “Yes, by golly, this sure looks a lot more like Pacific rain forest than California coastland!”—and yet *I don’t care*. “Hey, Washington is a beautiful place, too. Almost as nice as British Columbia!”

Surely true repentance is what you seek from me. Merely recognizing my mistake is not enough. I must regret that mistake. “I’m heading in the wrong direction, and I’m sorry.” Then I must take further action. I must abandon the path I’m on (taking the next exit ramp); turn the car around by crossing over to the other side on the overpass; and get a new start (by getting on the entrance ramp in the opposite direction).

Suppose I do all this. Are you now satisfied? Have I fully converted? No. Not until I drive us all the way to San Diego, which was the point of the exercise. It’s good that I’m properly reoriented. In fact, that binary move is indeed the essential move that has to be made if I’m first heading in the wrong direction. But turning around is not enough. Getting to the goal is all or nothing; it is also a binary matter. I’m not there until I’m there. Many theologians thus speak of conversion in multiple stages: repentance (recognition and regret), regeneration (a new start), sanctification (getting closer and closer to the goal), and glorification (arriving at the final destination). Full conversion is all of this.

For Stackhouse, conversion isn’t one moment after which all is different, but a process grounded on genuine repentance, i.e., the concrete actions we take to become ever-truer disciples of Jesus. Conversion is the transformation that Paul speaks of in Romans 12:1-2: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your

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<sup>1</sup> Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 704.

<sup>2</sup> John Stackhouse, “What Conversion Is and Is Not,” in *Christianity Today*, February 1, 2003.

spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” We sometimes think of conversion the moment we put our faith in Jesus. In a way, that is correct. But conversion is also a process of transformation, by which we strive to be the holy people that God has made us into.

There is irony in this. The more we come to know Jesus, the more our own sin and failures become plain and evident, i.e., the more we comprehend the truth about ourselves. From what I’ve seen, those who are closest to Christ have the deepest awareness of the gulf that still separates them from the holiness of Christ. If you want to live in the truth of things, forgo the delusions of the world for the truth that lies in Christ. Such truth is the only way to genuine transformation.

## Daily Bible Readings

*More on repentance*

**Monday, Ezekiel 18:29-32** Turn away from your sins.

**Tuesday, Jonah 3** The king and all of Nineveh actually repent and turn from evil and violence.

**Wednesday, 2 Kings 22** King Josiah repents of Israel’s sins and begins a reformation.

**Thursday, Luke 15:11-34** The prodigal son repents and heads for home.

**Friday, Luke 19:1-10** A tax collector repents in a very concrete way.

**Saturday, Galatians 5:22-23** We are to bear the fruit of transformation!

## Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Daniel.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Embracing the Bible: an introduction to Scripture*

Video of each week’s class is posted here: [vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy](https://vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy)