

MERCY

FOR TODAY

—A Daily—

PRAYER

—from—

PSALM 51

JONATHAN PARNELL

In this book, Jonathan works hard to bridge the gap between our intellectual knowledge of God and our lived experience with God. And the result is a simple, practical, and powerful read with great tools for leading you toward a deeper, whole-hearted love of God.

—**Dhati Lewis**, lead pastor of Blueprint Church and vice president of the Send Network, North American Mission Board

Jonathan Parnell is one of the most thoughtful and interesting young writers in the evangelical world today. If you haven't yet read his writing, *Mercy for Today* is a great place to start. It is a theologically sturdy, pastorally sensitive, well-written devotional text. Highly recommended.

—**Bruce Riley Ashford**, provost and professor of Theology & Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

One of the most basic truths of Christianity is that we are always in God's presence. The challenge for many of us is to come awake to that reality. Of the many ways that I've been blessed by my friend Jonathan Parnell, this is at the top of the list—he helps me to feel the realness of Jesus. Whether it's pressing home the fact that I can actually praise God, or helping me to own the fact that my main problem is my distorted heart, or making me to feel the earnestness of David's prayer for God's presence, or reminding me that joy is at the center of the Christian life, Jonathan has a remarkable way of connecting God's truth and my experience so that I walk away with a greater sense that Jesus is real and God is merciful.

—**Joe Rigney**, assistant professor of Theology & Literature, Bethlehem College & Seminary, Minneapolis

A timely invitation to step away from ourselves, and who we think God is, to discover a deeper and richer mercy than we have

imagined. This is a great little book to jumpstart a cold heart, and warm the affections for a greater God. Who doesn't need that?

—**Jonathan K. Dodson**, lead pastor of City Life Church, author of *Gospel-Centered Discipleship, Here in Spirit*, and *Our Good Crisis*

Jonathan Parnell offers a moving pastoral reflection on Psalm 51. The key to this prayer is that it is addressed to a God who is outside of us, radically other than us, but communicates himself to us by his saving presence. Parnell is after the “lived sense” of this reality. He invites us to appeal to this God for mercy, to thirst for our joyful experience of his presence. The oceans of God's mercy are more satisfying than the splash pads of self-justification.

—**Dr. Matthew LaPine**, pastor of Theological Development, lecturer, Salt Network School of Theology

God's pursuit of his people is relentless; his call to seek him is clear. The Christian's greatest joy is God himself. But oh how we falter in our pursuit while the God of mercy awaits us daily! Jonathan Parnell offers a clear, helpful path through Psalm 51 to daily seek the God who will be found.

—**Ming-Jinn Tong**, pastor for Neighborhood Outreach, Bethlehem Baptist Church

Mercy. It's not just something nice. It is the foundational need for every person on planet earth that, by God's amazing grace, realizes they are a sinner. Jonathan Parnell's book, based on Psalm 51, will once again open your eyes to this wonderful, necessary and not often talked about topic. Read the book! Allow God's mercy to utterly transform you!

—**Steve Treichler**, senior pastor, Hope Community Church, Minneapolis, MN

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**BH**  
PUBLISHING  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Printed in the United States of America

978-1-5359-5927-8

Published by B&H Publishing Group  
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 234.1  
Subject Heading: REPENTANCE / GRACE  
(THEOLOGY) / BIBLE. O.T. PSALMS 51

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 • 24 23 22 21 20

To Melissa, my wife



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Paul asks, “What do I have that I did not receive?”—and I wonder, *What have I received that hasn’t come through others?* My whole life is grace, and it’s grace by means of people, and one of the best ways to cultivate gratitude, I’ve found, is to recognize those people. To acknowledge them before God, to give him thanks for them, and when it’s possible, to thank them.

When it comes to this little book I’d like to mention a handful of people through whom God’s grace has come, beginning with Bible translators. I read the Bible in English every day, and that’s nothing short of a miracle. Though I preach from one English translation, I benefit from them all, and I’m grateful for every man and woman who has helped make that possible. To every translator and producer of any modern English Bible, thank you, really.

Thank you, Brandon Smith, for your early encouragements in this book, and thank you, Taylor Combs and team, for considering my proposal and moving forward. It has been a joy to work with B&H, and I’m especially grateful, Taylor, for your comments and help with my first draft. Thank you, pastors of Cities Church, for your encouragement toward my writing. Much of this book was written on Tuesday mornings when I didn’t have a sermon the



## MERCY FOR TODAY

following Sunday, and that was from the blessing of these brothers. This team of pastors is the greatest thing I've ever been part of, and I love you, men—Aufenkamp, Easterwood, Foster, Kleiman, Mathis, Rigney, and Thiel.

Thank you, Matthew LaPine, for reading an earlier version of this manuscript, and for your help and encouragement. Thank you, Jon Fuehrer, for your blameless service at Cities Church (see 1 Tim. 3:10), and for your friendship. You have encouraged me more than you know. Thank you, John Piper, for your influence on my life, and for the ways you've encouraged me in preaching and writing.

Thank you, to my children, Elizabeth, Hannah, Micah, John Owen, Noah, Ava, Nathaniel, and you who are currently with your mother. You kids are more important to me than church folk, and I love you very much. God knows how rich you make me.

Thank you, Melissa, my wife and best friend, and the one to whom this project is dedicated. How in the world did this book make it here? How have we?

The mercy of God.

# CONTENTS

|                             |     |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Introduction . . . . .      | 1   |
| 1: People like Us . . . . . | 13  |
| 2: Praise . . . . .         | 27  |
| 3: Change . . . . .         | 49  |
| 4: Presence . . . . .       | 73  |
| 5: Joy . . . . .            | 93  |
| Conclusion . . . . .        | 115 |
| About the Author . . . . .  | 117 |



# INTRODUCTION

There are two things you should know before you read this little book: first, and most important, God is merciful; and second, because of God's mercy, our repentance is possible.

Right away I'm assuming this doesn't sound strange to you. If you're a Christian, you've heard before in one way or another that God is merciful. It's one of his most frequently cited virtues. In fact, I wonder if perhaps it's so frequently cited, right along with "grace," that we tend to yawn at the word. God's "mercy and grace" can become a blob category that we just use to say he's more nice than harsh. It can become our way of giving a respectful hat-tip, a creaturely nod of acknowledgment—but it no longer captivates us.

You know how this goes. Our overuse of deep words can tend to diminish our sense of wonder. We can reference realities with our mouths that our hearts can't grasp—partly because it's easier to polish our words than grow our affections. Indeed, this is one of the diciest things about being a pastor. I once heard it said that the most difficult part of pastoral ministry is that pastors must be close to God, or at least be good at *pretending* to be close to God. Oh my.

*Am I truly close or am I pretending?*

## MERCY FOR TODAY

This is the kind of question that really matters to me, and it's in the foundational mix of why I've wanted to write about God's mercy. Pastors tend to *talk about God's mercy* at the conceptual level (I plan to do that in these pages), but we must also *testify of God's mercy* from our own experience (I plan to do that too). And though I'm writing as a pastor, I'm coming at this as plainly human. I'm as desperate for God's mercy as anybody who ever lived, and I'm going to talk and testify about God's mercy like that's true. My hope is that you freshly grasp the wonder of God's mercy in your own life.

## HIS MERCY IS MORE

The mercy of God is a reality true to God's nature that we could not live without. Now, I realize we could say that about everything to do with God's nature; everything that is of God, pertaining to his identity, is indispensable. We don't get to shuffle the pieces and rank them. God is God, and he gives *himself* in all that he is. At the level of our existence, though, as fallen creatures who borrow every breath, God's mercy is the mystifying pathway of hope into everything else. I have breathed again, just now, and my heart is still beating—and I know about oxygen and organs and all that biologically enables me to stay alive—but beneath these ingredients and functions I am here in this moment *because of God's mercy*. And I mean that as deeply and truly as I can. If it weren't for God's mercy, I would not be here. You wouldn't either. *We are because God is . . . merciful.*

God is kind—that is what mercy means. Maybe you've heard it said before that God's grace is getting what you don't deserve, and

God’s mercy is not getting what you do deserve. That’s true, in one sense, and it will certainly preach, but it doesn’t tell the whole story. God’s mercy is more than that. Yes, it means pardon, and yes, it means God withholds judgment—but it all starts in the heart of God himself. In other words, God *shows* mercy because God *is* merciful. So we’re not just talking about a thing God does, but who God is.

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God’s mercy, I would  
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wouldn’t either.

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## NOTHING HELD BACK

There is a special phrase in Luke’s Gospel that speaks to these depths. It’s found in Zechariah’s prophecy in Luke chapter 1. Zechariah is prophesying about God’s purpose for his son, John, and he says in verses 76–78:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the  
Most High; for you will go before the Lord to  
prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to  
his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because  
of the tender mercy of our God.

Verse 78 is the third time *mercy* is used in the chapter. First, in verse 58, Elizabeth’s pregnancy of John was understood as the Lord’s “great mercy” to her. Then in verse 72, Zechariah called God’s faithfulness to Israel “mercy promised to our fathers.” Both of these mentions have to do with actions and things. The old, barren woman was pregnant with a child, and *that* was God’s great

mercy to her. It became as practical as a crying baby she thought she'd never have.

And also, many years before Zechariah and Elizabeth, God swore to Abraham that he'd do certain things for his people. He'd conquer their enemies and rescue them from trouble, and Zechariah summarizes all those things as God's "mercy promised." A surprising pregnancy and fulfilled promises—both are called *mercy*.

But in verse 78, it goes deeper. Salvation was coming for God's people, and the mission of John the Baptist was to make that known. He was preparing the way for Jesus by spelling out for folks how big a deal Jesus is. Jesus meant salvation. Jesus meant the forgiveness of sins. *But why?* What is behind even the sending of Jesus and his gospel?

Verse 78: "... because of the tender mercy of our God."

Jesus has come because of God's "tender mercy"—that's the special phrase, and in the entire New Testament, it only shows up here. The word *tender* actually means "inward parts." It's referring to the stuff deep down on the inside, like how we might use the phrase "the bottom of my heart." We're talking about the place of profoundest motivation, and in Luke 1:78 that describes God's mercy. It is mercy as true and sincere as it possibly could be. There's nothing held back. This is ultra mercy—mercy extreme in its compassion. In fact, it's so unexpected and wondrous that we really can't wrap our heads around it. That's why Luke gives us images, first with a sunrise that overcomes the darkness,<sup>1</sup> and then with an

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1. See Luke 1:78–79.

unforeseen neighbor who helps a man half-dead,<sup>2</sup> and then with a father who runs to embrace his estranged son who is timid with shame.<sup>3</sup> This is how the mercy of God looks. This is God’s *tender mercy*.

## BRIDGING THE GAP

At this point, though, mercy is still conceptual for us, even with our imaginations in overdrive. And while that is valid and important—*thank God for our imaginations*—something different happens when we begin to understand that we ourselves are in the same place as those people stuck in darkness, and as that man left for dead, and as that son who smelled like pigs rehearsing his lines on the long road home. That requires our imagination, too, but it’s our imagination employed by the integration of truth and experience.

One counselor-friend of mine often says that Christians have a mental category for God’s truth but a “learned sense” of God in everyday life. Sadly, those two are rarely the same, and bridging the gap between them is what the life of faith is all about. *Will I take God at his Word even when it’s not clicking for me? Will I believe what God says over the other voices? Will I live like God is more real than my troubles?* Our faithful resolve to answer these questions in the affirmative becomes the most important strides throughout our Christian walk, especially when it means overcoming the hurdles of past wounds. It’s not arbitrary that the apostle Paul uses the

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2. See Luke 10:25–37.

3. See Luke 15:11–32.



metaphors of a footrace and a fight to describe enduring faith.<sup>4</sup> We must take the unchanging truths of God and wrestle them into personal relevance:

*Yes, God is kind and merciful. He says so. He shows us in Scripture. I recognize this as truth. And I also know what it's like to be lost, to sit helpless, to feel shame. I know what it's like to need God's mercy.*

Connections like this shape our lived reality. It makes us see things differently. It is what we do when we pray.

## BUILDING THE BRIDGE

There are already a hundred reasons to pray, and here's one more: prayer is the exercise of connecting God's truth to our experience. And I don't just mean the specific things we say in prayer, but the very act of prayer itself. Prayer, most basically, means *we come to God*. It means that we—you and I, people like us—approach God. *How marvelous is that?* We address God! Whether we're sitting in darkness (Ps. 88:6) or crying from the depths (Ps. 130:1) or resting in God's deliverance (Ps. 116:8–9), prayer is the act of speaking to God from our experience. It's when we actualize the truths about God we believe. It's the first and most important step of faith in lived reality.

This is the reason the psalms are so helpful.

When I was a kid in Sunday school, the book of Psalms was always the easiest book in the Bible to find. I had a teacher once tell

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4. See 2 Timothy 4:7.

me that the psalms were right in the middle, and that if I ever wanted to read one I just needed to place my thumb halfway into the golden fore edge. It was almost like magic. “Hey, Mom, watch this.” *Voilà!* The psalms. And it might as well have been magic—not how I could get there, but that the psalms really are in the middle.

In the earliest days of my discipleship I learned that the center of my Bible showed me how to pray. This book that was supposed to be a “lamp to my feet” (Ps. 119:105)—the verse quoted at my baptism as I exited the water—was a book that didn’t just report truth, but modeled for me how to live truly. The Bible has never been a sterile collection of propositions, but more like a soundtrack to everyday life, and we get to sing along. Indeed, *we must sing along*. That’s one way to talk about praying the psalms.

•—————•  
 Prayer is the exercise of  
 connecting God’s truth  
 to our experience.  
 •—————•

## HELPFUL AND GNARLY

God didn’t us leave us to ourselves to figure out who he is, or how to come to him—and as we pray the psalms, we are learning both. We are learning to express, in real life, the truth we embrace. But it’s not just truth about God, it’s also truth about ourselves.

The Psalms show us that there is such a thing as *the way* of truth. God intends for us to live in congruence with his reality regardless of our circumstances, but the problem is that this isn’t easy—and the angst is clear. We’re only three psalms into the book before David is working through the difficulty of a good night’s sleep. David penned the psalm after he had been chased out of

Jerusalem by an army of conspirators. There was a growing mob of men who wanted his head, and David was looking for a pillow. His enemies were chasing him, and the man needed sleep:

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory,  
and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the  
LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill.  
(Ps. 3:3–4)

David remembers that God is his shield, and that God hears his prayers—and so, *goodnight*.

The Psalms get much gnarlier than this, though. While the psalmists often display brazen faith in the midst of adversity, at other times they are just trying to find their way back to God. “O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger . . .” (Ps. 6:1). “For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt . . .” (Ps. 25:11). “I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin” (Ps. 38:18). “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared” (Ps. 130:3–4). Most notably among these psalms of contrition is Psalm 51, which begins: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (Ps. 51:1). This is the psalm behind the contents of this book.

Psalm 51 is the psalm *par excellence* when it comes to repentance, but its greater message is simply that repentance is possible. That’s the second thing you need to know for this book you’re holding now, right alongside God’s mercy.

## REAL REPENTANCE

It's no secret that the good news of Jesus includes the call to repentance. The Gospels show us right from the start that John the Baptist rocked the Israeli world with his stunningly straightforward "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). The book of Acts only makes it clearer. The preaching of the apostles demanded their hearers to repent. Jesus Christ has come back from the dead, for crying out loud! *That means something*. It means, at the very least, that business as usual isn't going to work. If Jesus has really defeated sin and death, then you can't live as if he hasn't. The new creation has broken into this darkened world and now everything is different. For the apostles, then, every human who heard this news—and who hears it to this day—is confronted with a decision. The message of the gospel has always been a fork in the road, and the invitation, the command, has never changed: "Repent."<sup>5</sup>

Repent because it's possible. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, whatever path you're following, you can turn. You can stop. You can *decide to follow Jesus*, as the old song goes.

Now, there are depths of wonder when it comes to *how* that happens. Repentance doesn't mean you're pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. Not at all. It is something that God grants<sup>6</sup>—something he gives, not something you achieve.<sup>7</sup> And at the same time, the fork is in *your road*. The invitation is for *you*—and not as a one-time sort of thing, but as an all-of-life sort of thing. The

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5. See Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 14:15; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20.

6. See Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25.

7. See Ephesians 2:8–9.

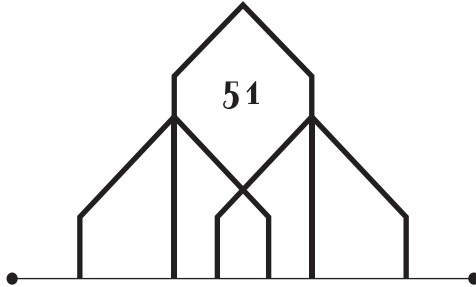
## MERCY FOR TODAY

Reformer Martin Luther said it best in the first of his Ninety-Five Theses: “When our lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”

When you choose to follow Jesus, you are born again—*born again to follow him*. And every day you continue down that path, that long obedience in the same direction,<sup>8</sup> putting off and putting on, crucifying the old self and giving life to the new self, saying “No” in order to say “Yes.” That life—an “entire life” of repentance—requires much mercy. As you walk this road, you are walking deeper into the mercy of God. That’s what this book is about.

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8. Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 1980, 2000).



**HAVE MERCY ON ME, O GOD,  
ACCORDING TO YOUR STEADFAST LOVE;  
ACCORDING TO YOUR ABUNDANT MERCY  
BLOT OUT MY TRANSGRESSIONS.**

