

Ash Wednesday  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**Announcement of alarm and peril**

**2** Blow the horn in Zion;  
give a shout on my holy mountain!  
Let all the people of the land tremble,  
for the day of the LORD is coming.  
It is near—  
<sup>2</sup>a day of darkness and no light,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread out upon the mountains,  
a great and powerful army<sup>f</sup> comes,  
unlike any that has ever come before them,  
or will come after them in centuries ahead.

**Change your hearts**

**12** Yet even now, says the LORD,  
return to me with all your hearts,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow;  
**13** tear your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the LORD your God,  
for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love,  
and ready to forgive.  
**14** Who knows whether he will have a change of heart  
and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?  
**15** Blow the horn in Zion;  
demand a fast;  
request a special assembly.  
**16** Gather the people;  
prepare a holy meeting; assemble the elders;  
gather the children, even nursing infants.  
Let the groom leave his room and the bride her chamber.  
**17** Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the LORD's ministers, weep.  
Let them say, "Have mercy, LORD, on your people,  
and don't make your inheritance a disgrace,  
an example of failure among the nations.  
Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

<sup>f</sup>Or a great and strong people

**Mourning Customs** The Israelites, following customs from the ancient world, employed ritual forms to display their sorrow over pain and suffering, death, their return to the Lord concerning sin, or their horror at blasphemy. These ritual acts included fasting, tearing clothes, wearing rough goat hair garments, sprinkling dirt or ashes upon their heads, shaving or pulling out hair and beards, and chanting laments. For examples, see Job 1:20; Esther 4:1-3; Jonah 3:1-9; 2 Samuel 1:2; Ezra 9:3.

**2:12** Dt 4:30;  
1Sa 7:3;  
Is 22:12;  
Hos 12:6; Jl 1:14  
**2:13** Ex 34:6;  
Ps 34:18,  
51:17;  
Is 57:15; Jon 4:2  
**2:14** Jl 1:9,  
1:13;  
Am 5:15;  
Jon 3:9;  
Hg 2:19  
**2:15** Nm 10:3;  
Jl 1:14, Jl 2:1  
**2:16** Ps 19:5;  
Jl 1:14  
**2:17** Ps 79:10,  
115:2;  
Eze 8:16

**2:1-11** These verses describe in detail the locust destruction coming on the day of the Lord. They use various images to show the effects of the locust.

**2:1** *horn*: A horn signals a public alarm. Here it alerts the nation to the coming of the day of the Lord (see Hos 5:8).

**2:2** *clouds and thick darkness*: main features of the day of the Lord. Amos 5:18-20 describes judgment to come on the day of the Lord in similar language.

**2:12-17** In light of the difficult circumstances, the prophet calls the people to return to the Lord in a special assembly. The priests should lead them in fasting and public worship at the temple, where all can seek a renewed relationship with the Lord.

**2:12** *now... return*: There is still time to return. Sorrow and weeping come with the call. The heart represents the intentions, desires, and expectations of a person. Note the calls in Deuteronomy 6:5 and 10:12 for Israelites to love and serve the Lord "with all your heart." Jesus understands this to be the first and greatest commandment (Matt 22:37-38).

**2:13** *tear your hearts*: In the ancient world people would tear their clothing to show that they were sorry and wanted a change of circumstances. King

Josiah tore his clothing after hearing the contents of a scroll found during temple repairs. He then led the people in a ceremony to return to the Lord (2 Kgs 22:8-23:3). Joel knows that people will show signs of sorrow such as weeping and fasting at the temple. He urges them to make sincere and lasting changes and not simply outward signs. *merciful and compassionate*: The Lord is ready to forgive. The prophet reminds the people of this core belief. When the Israelites failed in the wilderness and made a gold calf, judgment came upon them (Exod 32-34). Nevertheless, the Lord offered them mercy and forgiveness (Exod 34:6-7). Jonah 4:2 describes the Lord's mercy in similar terms.

**2:14** Forgiveness is God's free choice. Even at this late date God may still give a blessing to the distraught people, based on their heartfelt response to God.

**2:15-17** Everyone should participate in the special assembly. The altar for sacrifice is in the courtyard in front of the door to the temple. The priests stand between the altar and the temple when leading worship. See Joel 2:1.

**2:17** *inheritance*: Israel is God's family (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1). As such, they're also God's inheritance (Deut 32:8-9).

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## Psalm 51:1-17

**51:1** 2Sa 12:1,  
2Sa 24:10;  
Ac 3:19

**Psalm 51**

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

**51:2** Ps 51:7;  
Ac 22:16;  
Heb 9:14;  
1Jn 1:7, 1Jn 1:9

<sup>1</sup>Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

**51:3** Ps 32:5;  
Prv 28:13;  
Is 59:12

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

**51:4** Gn 20:6,  
Gn 39:9;  
2Sa 12:13;  
Lk 15:21; Ro 3:4

<sup>2</sup>Wash me completely clean of my guilt;  
purify me from my sin!

**51:5** Job 14:4,  
Job 15:14;  
Ps 58:3; Eph 2:3

<sup>3</sup>Because I know my wrongdoings,  
my sin is always right in front of me.

**51:6** Job 38:36;  
Prv 2:6; Ecc 2:26

<sup>4</sup>I've sinned against you—you alone.

**51:7** Ex 12:22;  
Nm 19:18;  
Ps 51:2; Is 1:18;  
Heb 9:19

I've committed evil in your sight.  
That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,  
completely correct when you issue your judgment.

**51:8** Is 35:10

<sup>5</sup>Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,  
from the moment my mother conceived me.

**51:9** Ps 51:1;  
Jer 16:17

<sup>6</sup>And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;  
you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.\*

**51:10** Eze 11:19,  
Eze 18:31,  
Eze 36:26;  
Mt 5:8; Ac 15:9

<sup>7</sup>Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;  
wash me and I will be whiter than snow.

**51:11** 2Ki 13:23;  
Is 63:10;  
Eph 4:30

<sup>8</sup>Let me hear joy and celebration again;  
let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.

**51:12** Ps 85:6

<sup>9</sup>Hide your face from my sins;  
wipe away all my guilty deeds!

**51:13** Ps 37:38;  
Is 2:3; Lk 22:32;  
Ac 9:21

<sup>10</sup>Create a clean heart for me, God;  
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!

**51:14** 2Sa 12:9;  
Ps 35:28,  
Ps 71:15

<sup>11</sup>Please don't throw me out of your presence;  
please don't take your holy spirit away from me.

**51:15** Ex 4:15;  
Ps 35:28, Ps 63:3,  
Ps 119:164,  
Ps 119:175

<sup>12</sup>Return the joy of your salvation to me  
and sustain me with a willing spirit.

**51:16** 1Sa 15:22;  
Ps 40:6

<sup>13</sup>Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,  
and sinners will come back to you.

**51:17** Ps 34:18

\*Heb uncertain \*Correction

**51:1-19** Like other prayers for help, Psalm 51 includes complaint (51:3-5), petition (51:1-2, 6-12, 14a, 15a), and expressions of trust and praise (51:14b, 15b-17). Because the complaint involves the psalmist's own sin, Psalm 51 is the fourth of the church's Penitential Psalms (see Ps 6). The title invites the reading of Psalm 51 in conversation with 2 Samuel 11:1-12:14 (see Ps 3), the story of David and Bathsheba, in which David broke at least half of the Ten Commandments. In this way, the story makes an appropriate context for hearing Psalm 51, even if the psalm didn't originate in this historical context.

**51:1** The opening petitions invite more attention to God's character than to the psalmist's sin. *Have mercy*: See Psalm 4:1. *faithful love*: See Psalm 5:7. *compassion*: See Psalm 25:6. All three of these basic qualities of God occur in God's self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 34:6, which comes at the conclusion of the gold calf incident that involved grievous sin on Israel's part. The firm belief about God's merciful character is apparently what enables the psalmist to confess sin so honestly and openly.

**51:2-4** Similar to Psalm 32:1-5, Israel's basic words for sin occur here: *guilt* (51:2; see Ps 51:5), *sin[ned]* (51:2-4; see Ps 51:5), *wrongdoings* (51:3), and *evil* (51:4). The word translated *wrongdoings* suggests purposeful rebellion.

**51:5** This verse has often been interpreted to mean that sexuality transmits "original

<sup>14</sup>Deliver me from violence, God, God of my salvation,  
so that my tongue can sing of your righteousness.

<sup>15</sup>Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will proclaim your praise.

<sup>16</sup>You don't want sacrifices.  
If I gave an entirely burned offering, you wouldn't be pleased.

<sup>17</sup>A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.\*  
You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.

sin," but it is better understood as a poetic expression of the widespread and unavoidable sin in the human situation.

**51:7** *Purify... hyssop*: See Leviticus 14:49, 52; Numbers 19:18, where hyssop is used in cleansing rituals.

**51:10-12** *Create... God*: God has the ability to create and re-create, activities associated elsewhere with God's spirit (see Gen 1:2). The threefold repetition of *spirit* suggests that new life is possible for the forgiven sinner. *holy spirit*: Isaiah 63:10-11 is the only other occurrence of this formulation in the OT. It seems here to designate the living and life-giving presence of God.

**51:13-15** The forgiven sinner becomes a grateful witness to God's merciful character (see Ps 32:8-11). Every organ of speech is involved: *tongue* (51:14), *lips* (51:15), and *mouth* (51:15). *Deliver me from violence*: In the Psalms, those who pray are often victims of violence, often precisely because they are attempting to represent God's ways (see Ps 4:2-5; see sidebar, "The Enemies" at Ps 3). *my salvation*: See Psalm 13:5. *your righteousness*: See Psalm 5:8. In this context, God uses forgiveness to set things right.

**51:16-17** Humble thankfulness and obedient praise are what God desires, as the previous psalm has also suggested (see Ps 50:14, 23; see also Ps 40:6; Rom 12:1-2

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## 2 Corinthians 5:20b - 6:10

**5:20** Mal 2:7;  
2Co 6:1; Eph 6:20

**5:21** Ro 1:17;  
1Co 1:30;  
Heb 7:26;  
1Pt 2:22; 1Jn 3:5

**6:1** 1Co 3:9;  
2Co 5:20

**6:2** Ps 69:13,  
Ps 95:7; Is 49:8,  
Is 55:6; Lk 4:19

**6:3** 1Co 8:9,  
1Co 8:13,  
1Co 9:12,  
1Co 10:32,  
1Co 10:33

**6:4** 1Co 3:5;  
2Co 11:23,  
2Co 12:10,  
2Co 12:12;  
2Ti 2:24

**6:5** Ac 16:23;  
1Co 4:11;  
2Co 11:23

**6:6** Ro 12:9;  
1Co 2:4;  
2Co 11:6; 1Th 1:5

We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" <sup>21</sup>God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God. <sup>1</sup>Since we work together with him, we are also begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup>He says, *I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation.* <sup>b</sup> Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation!

<sup>3</sup>We don't give anyone any reason to be offended about anything so that our ministry won't be criticized. <sup>4</sup>Instead, we commend ourselves as ministers of God in every way. We did this with our great endurance through problems, disasters, and stressful situations. <sup>5</sup>We went through beatings, imprisonments, and riots. We experienced hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger. <sup>6</sup>We displayed purity, knowledge, patience, and generosity. We served with the Holy Spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>telling the truth, and God's power. We carried the weapons of righteousness in our right hand and our left hand. <sup>8</sup>We were treated with honor and dishonor and with verbal abuse and good evaluation. We were seen as both fake and real, <sup>9</sup>as unknown and well known, as dying—and look, we are alive! We were seen as punished but not killed, <sup>10</sup>as going through pain but always happy, as poor but making many rich, and as having nothing but owning everything.

<sup>b</sup>Isa 49:8

**5:11–6:10** Paul moves toward the conclusion of the discussion of his apostolic ministry by describing his work as that of an ambassador who represents Christ. Opening with another brief defense of his actions (5:11-13), Paul turns to a summary of the good news, highlighting two points. First, Christ's death for all people has resulted in a new creation for those in Christ (5:14-17). Second, God's reconciliation with sinners through Christ has resulted in the ministry of Paul and his colleagues, as they represent Christ in bringing people into reconciled relationships with God (5:18-21). The next section (6:1-10) contains a charge for the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain (6:1-2) and an additional defense of Paul's ministry (6:3-10), including the second of three lists

of the hardships Paul endured during the course of his mission (6:4-10; cf. 2 Cor 4:8-10; 11:22-33; see 2 Cor 1:5).

**5:21** *God caused...the righteousness of God:* This densely packed statement describes a divine interchange whereby the sinless Christ assumes the human condition so that sinful humans might become the righteousness of God. In the words of the 2nd-century bishop Irenaeus, "Christ became what we are, in order that we might become what he is." For this idea of interchange in Paul's letters, see also 2 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 3:13-14; Romans 8:3-4.

**6:2** *I listened to you:* a quotation of Isaiah 49:8. Paul believes the *day of salvation* spoken of by Isaiah has arrived in Christ.

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## Ash Wednesday Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

**6:1** Mt 6:16,  
Mt 23:5

### Showy religion

**6**“Be careful that you don’t practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

**6:4** Jer 17:10;  
Mt 6:6, Mt 6:18;  
Heb 4:13

**2**“Whenever you give to the poor, don’t blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. **3**But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing **4**so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

**6:5** Mt 6:2,  
Mt 6:16;  
Mk 11:25;  
Lk 18:11

**6:6** 2Ki 4:33

### Showy prayer

**5**“When you pray, don’t be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. **6**But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

**6:16** Mt 6:2,  
Mt 6:5; Lk 18:12

**6:17** Ru 3:3;  
2Sa 12:20; Ecc 9:8

**6:18** Mt 6:4,  
Mt 6:6

**6:19** Prv 23:4;  
Lk 12:21,  
Lk 12:33;

Heb 13:5; Jas 5:2

### Showy fasting

**16**“And when you fast, don’t put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. **17**When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. **18**Then you won’t look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

**6:20** Mt 6:19,  
Mt 19:21;  
Lk 12:33,  
Lk 18:22;

1Ti 6:19

**6:21** Lk 12:34

### Earthly and heavenly treasures

**19**“Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. **20**Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. **21**Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

**6:1-18** Jesus talks about how one shouldn’t try to show off to other people when participating in righteous practices like aiding those in need, prayer, and fasting. These practices should direct people’s attention to God and lead people to praise God, not direct people’s attention and praise to oneself (see Matt 5:16).

**6:2-4** *Whenever you give to the poor*: Care for the needy is grounded in the OT (e.g., Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-37; Deut 14:27-29) and has a strong tradition in Judaism in the time of Jesus (e.g., Tob 4:6-7; Sir 3:30; 7:10). With the use of the word “whenever,” Jesus assumes that his followers will give to the poor. The only question is whether they will do so faithfully.

**6:2** *blow your trumpet*: an exaggerated form of advertizing one’s religion. In the ancient world, people were praised for their generous gifts with monuments and inscriptions. *hypocrites*: actors who play parts onstage. Here the word is used negatively to describe people who pretend to be one thing but are really something else.

**6:3** *don’t let your left hand*: a powerful image designed to drive a sharp wedge between religious practices and public honor.

**6:5-15** *When you pray*: Jesus assumes that his followers will pray, and gives both negative and positive instructions on how to pray. The emphasis is less on “technique” and more on one’s motivations for prayer and on recognizing rightly the one to whom prayer is offered.

**6:5-6** *standing*: a typical posture for praying (e.g., 1 Sam 1:26; Neh 9:1-5; Mark 11:25).

Jesus isn’t criticizing the posture of standing itself, nor is the problem simply the public nature of these prayers. Instead, the problem is using prayers to God as a way of attracting the attention of others. Jesus emphasizes the nature of one’s motivation to pray. On “hypocrite,” see note on Matthew 6:2.

**6:16-18** *when you fast*: Jesus assumes his followers will fast, that is, deliberately refuse to eat, and sometimes to drink, for a set period of time. In ancient Israel fasting was a common ritual for mourning, remorse, or request for divine aid or wisdom (e.g., 1 Sam 31:13; 2 Sam 12:16; Neh 9:1-3; Dan 9:1-19). In the OT, it’s often associated with humility (e.g., Ezra 8:21; Ps 35:13; Isa 58:3, 5), which contrasts sharply with the attempt to attract attention to oneself that Jesus talks about here. As in Matthew 6:1-8, so here Jesus directs his followers to avoid showy religion in favor of religious acts devoted to God.

**6:19-24** Concern for wealth and treasures gets in the way of what really matters—a heart oriented toward the things of heaven (see Matt 6:10). According to a common view in the ancient world, the eye allowed the body’s light (or darkness) to be seen by others. Whether one’s eye is *healthy* or *bad* signals whether one’s life is full of light or of darkness. Here, “wealth” is portrayed as if it had the status of a god someone might serve. This would be the opposite of serving God. The idea of piling up treasures in heaven is found in 2 Esdras 7:77: “You have a treasure of works stored up with the Most High, but it won’t be shown to you until the last times.”

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