

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Psalm 51
October 18, 2015

Sermon Summary

Forgiveness, for Real! Psalm 51

“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity” (Psalm 32:1-2a). Blessed indeed! Perhaps we should render this, “Happy, indescribably happy, inexpressibly free and joyful and empowered is the man or woman whose sins are forgiven!”

If you struggle to connect with that truth, if it sounds foreign to your soul, if the possibility of real forgiveness, eternal, never-ending, genuine forgiveness of all your sins seems impossible or something intended only for others, I have good news for you today. It comes in the form of Psalm 51.

This psalm has a special message for several groups of people.

First, Psalm 51 is for those who have never come to grips with the horror of human sin and the magnitude of divine grace. Often grace becomes meaningless, and certainly less than "amazing", because we lose sight of the depths of our depravity. David helps us on both counts by describing in graphic detail the reality of his sin and the breath-taking glory of forgiving grace.

Second, this psalm is for those who think some people are too high or too holy to fall. Let us never forget that this psalm describes the experience of *David*, King of Israel, the "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14)!

Third, this psalm is also for those who think that once you have fallen, you can never get back up again. It is for those who think it's possible to fall beyond the reach of God's grace and forgiveness or that there is a quantifiable limit to divine mercy. ***But no one is so holy that he/she can't fall, or so fallen that he/she can't be forgiven.***

Fourth, Psalm 51 is for those who think that if you *have* fallen and *have* actually gotten back up, perhaps even forgiven, you are *still* useless from that point on both to God and the church. This is for people who think that once you've committed the sort of sin that David did you are forever confined to the sideline in the game of life. You are marginalized and penalized and never permitted to serve or minister in any meaningful way again. David's experience will prove otherwise.

The historical setting for this psalm is stated in the superscription: ***"To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba"*** (see 2 Sam. 11:1-18,26-27; 12:1-18). None of us likes to have our struggles and problems broadcast publicly, much less our sins of the flesh. Yet here we are told that this psalm was written *"to the choirmaster"*! How would you like for your worst sins to be projected on the screen at church and set to music for the corporate worship of God's people?

This psalm is a remarkable, and in many ways unparalleled, description of the nature of conviction, confession, and forgiveness. But at the same time we celebrate, with David, the joy of having one's sins washed clean, we dare not forget that his transgressions yielded significant and far-reaching consequences:

- (1) his denunciation by Nathan and the public shame it brought (2 Sam. 12:1-14);
- (2) the death of David's son (12:15-23);
- (3) trouble with Amnon: he raped Tamar, Absalom's sister (13:1-22);
- (4) the rebellion of Absalom (13:23-18:33); and,
- (5) trouble with affairs of state (e.g., the revolt of Sheba in 19:41-20:26).

The lesson is that ***whereas sin is certainly personal, in many cases it is anything but private!***

David's Appeal (vv. 1-2)

On what basis does David ask for acquittal (vv. 1-2)? Does he appeal to his track record as King over Israel? No. We hear nothing of this sort of argument: "Your Honor, this is my first offence. I have no prior criminal record. And I can call to your attention numerous witnesses who know me and will testify that I'm not an on-going threat to the welfare of society at large."

Neither do we hear David remind God of how many psalms he has written and how much of a blessing they've been to God's children. Does he cite his faithful service or marshal forth a long list of character witnesses? Not in the least.

He doesn't expect to be forgiven based on his sincerity or spiritual intensity or deep pain for having sinned or fervor of heart or promise not to sin again or his depth of determination to somehow "make it up" to God. That's not to say sincerity and zeal and conviction aren't important. But ***David's appeal is based on what he knows of God's mercy and compassion and steadfast love.***

I think one of the primary reasons we struggle to believe that God has truly and fully forgiven us is that we think God forgives based on the intensity of our emotions: the more we feel the pain of failure the more likely God is to let us off the hook. The more fervent our faith, the more articulate our explanation of the circumstances that led to our sin, the more badly we feel about what we've done, the more determined we are never to repeat our failures, all serve to increase the likelihood that God will forgive. So when we fall short in these ways, we live in fear and anxiety that forgiveness is a pipe dream.

Note the three words David uses in vv. 1-2 to describe his sin. If nothing else, it indicates on his part an acknowledgment that it **is** sin, and not just some trivial mistake. He calls it a "***transgression***" (a willful, self-assertive defiance of God), an "***iniquity***" (a deviation from the right path), and a "***sin***" (a missing of the divine mark).

Equally vivid are the three words he uses in his plea for forgiveness. He asks God to "***blot out***" his transgressions, to erase it from the record (Ex. 32:32; Numbers 5:23) or wipe it away (2 Kings 21:13; Is. 44:22).

He beseeches the Lord to "***wash***" him from his sin (vv. 2,7b). This word was often used of a woman first saturating a garment with lye soap and then treading it under foot on a rock, beating and pummeling it as the rushing waters poured over it. One can almost hear David, tearfully praying:

"Gracious Lord, do that to my spirit! My sin is like a deep-dyed stain that has soiled the fabric of my soul, and no ordinary soap or detergent, far less any good works I might perform, can remove it. My transgressions are like ground-in dirt. Lord, scrub me clean by your mercy and grace!"

Finally, the word "***cleanse***" was one used for ceremonial purification in the OT.

David's Confession (vv. 3-4)

When David turns, in vv. 3-4, to confess the magnitude of his sin, his language is no less graphic. He doesn't describe sin in the abstract. He portrays it in the most vividly personal terms as he can: "***I did it!***"

David makes no excuses, offers no rationalizations, and refuses to shift blame. He doesn't say, "Well, now wait a minute God. Yes, I sinned. But it takes two to tango. What about Bathsheba's complicity in all this? She's so beautiful and seductive. And my wife wasn't meeting my needs. Besides, the pressures of being King over your people are enormous. Given what I face on a daily basis, I'd expect you to cut me a little slack." No!

There's no insanity plea or appeal to diminished capacity. Do you recall the infamous "Twinkie Defense" used by Dan White when he killed San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and supervisor Harvey Milk in 1985? He pleaded innocent based on his alleged "diminished capacity" brought on by certain biochemical reactions to junk food! I'm innocent, Your Honor. I overdosed on Twinkies!" None of that here.

My sin, he says, "*is ever before me*" (v. 3b). It is no intermittent flash but a perpetual obsession, a sight from which I can never turn away. It is, as it were, seared on the inside of my eye-lids: I see it all the time. Worse still, it is a sin ultimately against God alone (v. 4a).

But how can it be against God "only" if he committed adultery with *Bathsheba*, conspired to kill her husband *Uriah*, disgraced his own *family*, and betrayed the trust of the *nation Israel*? Perhaps David would argue that whereas one commits *crimes* against people, one *sins* only against God. More likely still, "*face to face with God, he sees nothing else, no one else, can think of nothing else, but His presence forgotten, His holiness outraged, His love scorned*" (Perowne, 416). David is so broken that he has treated God with such disregard that he is blinded to all other aspects or objects of his behavior.

David's confession is not simply to "get things off his chest", as if confession were merely a therapeutic release of sorts. His confession is far more than an emotional catharsis for his soul. It is designed to tell everyone that **God was in the right all along, that God's judgment was true, just, and that the Almighty is blameless** (v. 4b).

Perhaps we should all take a moment and think about the way we respond when we sin. Is our pain the result of merely getting caught? Is our greatest fear that others might think less of us now that our failures are public knowledge? Are we more anxious about the consequences of our sin than we are about the fact that we rebelled against the glorious and majestic God of heaven and earth?

David's Congenital Depravity (vv. 5-6)

How long has David had this problem with sin? Did it start with puberty? Was he turned to the "dark side" by some childhood or teen-aged trauma? "The problem," says David, "isn't so much that I sin. The problem is that I'm *sinful*, and *always have been*. These deeds of the flesh are symptomatic of a much deeper problem. The fact is, 'I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me' (v. 5). My transgressions are not of recent vintage. This was no freak, one-off event. *I've been a sinner from my mother's womb!*"

Thus David confesses his *hereditary sin* (v. 5) as the root cause of his actual sin (v. 4), but makes no effort to vindicate himself on that basis. In explaining his sinfulness by reference to the natural propagation of the species, David moves beyond his birth (v. 5a) to the very genesis of his being in the womb of his mother, indeed, to the very moment of conception (v. 5b). However, "David is not trying to accuse his mother in order to excuse himself!" (Henri Blocher, *Original Sin*, 28). The focus of the entire psalm is the personal accountability of David. No one is to blame but he alone. His point is simply that "his very being is shot through and through with the tendencies that produced the fruits of adultery and murder. As far back as he can go, he sees his life as sinful" (ibid.).

David's intent isn't to impugn the sex act itself, but rather to confess the native corruption of that which is its product. The words "in sin" "should not to be thought of as calling into question the physical act of sexual intimacy by which he was conceived in his mother's womb. Rather, "it should properly be taken either to describe the status of the generating mother or else be referred generally to the embryological development resulting in transplanting the predicate of sinfulness to the child. It would be utterly opposed to the thought of the Old Testament [cf. Gen. 1:28; 9:1,7; Ps. 127:3,5; Gen. 29:31; 30:22,33; Ruth 4:13; Ps. 139:13; Job 10:8ff.] to imagine that conception or parturition was sinful" (Dalglish, *Psalm Fifty-One*, 121-22).

In other words, David's problem (yours and mine too!) isn't that we commit individual acts of sin. The problem is that we have **a constitutional propensity to sin**. *What we need most isn't a new lifestyle, but new life! Not new habits, but a new heart!* And what *hope* is there for this?

David's Prayer for Pardon (vv. 7-9)

Countless Christians feel spiritually paralyzed by the lingering stain of sin. Neither therapy nor religious formulas, not good intentions or good deeds, can erase the vivid memory of their transgression(s) or bring cleansing to the defiling sense of guilt. The oppressive weight of their failure(s) is virtually suffocating.

Thank God for Psalm 51! It is a refreshing and heart-warming reminder of the hope of forgiveness. But it's even more than that. David not only prays for *pardon* from past sin but also for the *power* to walk in future purity.

He begins with an impassioned plea for ceremonial cleansing, cast in the form of what Hebrew scholars call synonymous parallelism: **“Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow”** (v. 7). David’s choice of words is instructive. “Hyssop”, an aromatic herb with a straight stalk and a bushy head (it looked a lot like broccoli), was dipped in the blood of the sacrifice and then sprinkled seven times on the person who was defiled (cf. Lev. 14:1-9; Num. 19). The word translated “purge” might more literally be rendered, “de-sin” me! Only then will David be “clean” and “whiter than snow”. Can this actually happen for sinners like you and me? Yes!

But David longs for more. He asks that God would enable him to **“hear joy and gladness”** (v. 8a; cf. Isa. 35:10; 51:11). David employs a common figure of speech called *metonymy of effect for cause*, according to which he means: “Make me to experience the joy and gladness that come from hearing the announcement of forgiveness.” He may even have in mind a priestly or prophetic oracle in which another loudly declares that his sins are forgiven (cf. 2 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 143:7-8).

Try to remember those occasions when you’ve really blown it; you failed, you sinned against someone dear to you. You confess your transgression to that person, and then wait anxiously to hear them say: “Hey, that’s ok. I forgive you. Don’t think about it ever again. It’s over. It’s done.” What wonderful words! ***We so long to actually “hear” forgiveness pronounced over us, and this is what David longs for.***

Sin can be as spiritually devastating and painful to the soul as broken bones are to the body, thus his cry: “Let the bones that you have broken rejoice” (v. 8b). David’s desire is that his entire being, body, soul, and spirit might once again revel and rejoice in the blessedness of communion with God.

Once more he prays: “Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities” (v. 9). Don’t look any longer on my failures! Let not your eyes gaze on my wickedness! Blot it from view, erase it from memory (cf. Ps. 103:12; Isa. 27:9; Jer. 1:20; 18:23; Micah 7:19; Zech. 3:4,9)!

From Forgiveness to Renewal (vv. 10-12)

With verses 10-12 David’s prayer gets even more specific. He petitions the Lord for *spiritual power* (v. 10), *spiritual presence* (v. 11), and *spiritual pleasure* (v. 12).

Simply asking for pardon isn’t enough. One must also have the **power** by which not to commit the same sin again. It’s as if David says, “Forgiveness pertains to the past, but what of the future? Unless God does something new and fresh in my life I’m doomed to repeat all over again the sinful and stupid things I’ve done in the past.”

No mere “makeover” will do, no matter how “extreme”! David refuses to settle for a glossing over his faults, and pleads for a replacement of the old with the new. A “clean heart” (v. 10a) and a “right spirit” (v. 10b; or steadfast, firm, reliable spirit), his way of describing the inner core and center of his life, are essential for a life of holiness.

David can’t bear the thought of the loss of intimacy of fellowship and its attendant joys, and thus prays that he not be cast from God’s **presence** (see Ps. 16:11; 21:6; 73:27-28) or suffer the loss of God’s Spirit (v. 11).

What does David mean when he prays that God would not take his Spirit from him? Does he envision the possible loss of his salvation? Does he envision the withdrawal of divine grace? No.

Aside from the saving activity of the Holy Spirit in the OT and the empowering ministry by which believers are sanctified and enabled to live holy lives, the Holy Spirit was poured out on select individuals to equip them to perform important tasks in the covenant community of Israel. For example:

- (1) Craftsmen who worked on the tabernacle/temple (Exod. 31:1-6)
- (2) Civil administrators (such as Moses and the 70 elders in Num. 11:16-17,25-26)
- (3) Military commanders (such as Joshua; Num. 27:18)
- (4) Judges (appointed and empowered to rule over Israel as in Judges 3:10; 6:34)
- (5) Samson (Judges 14:5-6,19; 15:14; 16:20)
- (6) Prophets (1 Chron. 12:18; Micah 3:8)

(7) Kings over Israel (Saul in 1 Sam. 10:1,6,10; 16:14; and David in 1 Sam. 16:12-13)

Thus there was a ministry of the Holy Spirit in the OT, unrelated to personal salvation or character, *designed solely to empower, enable and equip someone for a task to which God had appointed him/her*. Such, I believe, is what David has in mind in Ps. 51:11. His prayer is that God would not withdraw the enabling *anointing* of the Spirit that empowers and equips him to lead Israel as King. Indeed, he may well have had in mind that disturbing scene where “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul” (1 Sam. 16:14) and prays that such would never befall him.

God’s power, God’s presence, and yes, even God’s *pleasure* is at the heart of David’s prayer: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (v. 12a)! *Sin suppressed is delight destroyed*. David was saved, but his soul had soured. He longs once again for the enjoyment of God that comes with intimacy. Salvation doesn’t fluctuate. It is constant. But our capacity to enjoy it, to rejoice in the assurance that we are in the right with God is something that can be undermined by sin. So David cries out for the renewal of joy in God.

David’s request that God “uphold” him “with a willing spirit” (v. 12b) is his way of saying: “Lord, work in my heart not simply that I might obey you, but that I might *want* to obey you. Help me so that my obedience would spontaneously flow from a heart that desperately desires to honor and obey your word. God, I don’t want anything to do with forced compliance. I want my devotion to you and your word to be voluntary and free and joyful and willing.”

David’s Promise of Ministry to Others (vv. 13-19)

David concludes with a vow of commitment in vv. 13-19.

Yes, it is possible for the fallen to be forgiven and used of God in ministry to others. David anticipates that after his restoration he will again “teach transgressors [like himself] your ways” (v. 13). David anticipates once again singing “aloud” of the “righteousness” of God (v. 14b). With pardon and power comes the opportunity to once more “declare” God’s “praise” aloud (v. 15).

Note also the relationship between testimony and praise in vv. 13-15. “When God answers our prayers, we respond by telling him how great he is; but we do so in public, and this is of the essence of the matter” (John Goldingay, 168). *Often guilt acts like glue: it seals shut the mouth of praise. It’s as if David says, “My conscience has shamed me into silence. Right now my lips are sealed because of my sin. Forgive me and open my mouth and I will surrender my voice to you!”*

People have often misunderstood the concluding verses of Psalm 51 (particularly vv. 16-17), thinking that God has rejected his own appointed sacrifices. But in the OT, “not that, but this,” is merely an emphatic way of saying “not that, without this” (cf. 1 Sam. 15:22; Hosea 6:6). David is simply telling us that what matters most to God is the inner spiritual reality of a truly contrite and broken heart. Without it, sacrifices are worthless. With it, they are a sweet-smelling aroma to God (see vv. 18-19).

Conclusion

Following his adultery, which set him out of ministry for a couple of years, Gordon MacDonald wrote a marvelous book entitled, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*. In it he tells the story of how as a child he once knocked over a lamp, cracking the ceramic shaft on one side. He quickly placed it back on the table, turning the lamp so the crack was not visible. He lived in fear each day that his misdeed would be discovered. “The longer the confrontation was delayed,” he writes, “the worse the consequences promised to be in my mind.” When the day finally arrived, his mother asked him, “Did you do this?” He confessed. What happened next is instructive for us all:

“But Mother never said a word. She took it to the kitchen, glued the pieces so that they once more fit tightly together, and within a few hours returned the lamp to the table. The crack was always there, but the lamp was rebuilt. And it served its purpose for years. Broken worlds may always have cracks to remind us of the past; that’s reality. But sometimes the grace of God is like the glue my mother used on her lamp. The bonded edges can become stronger than the original surface” (xviii).

Some of you have cracked lamps in your past and live in constant fear, devoid of joy, paralyzed in life, relationships, and ministry. You wonder whether you will ever again experience the joy of intimacy with God, much less a fruitful ministry to others.

But God is in the business of rebuilding cracked lives and shattered dreams. His “steadfast love” (v. 1a) is a soul-cleansing power, his “abundant mercy” (v. 1b) a force for restoring long lost hope. All he asks of you is a “broken spirit” and a “contrite heart” (v. 17a). These, says David, he will “not despise” (v. 17b).

This is what Jesus Christ died and rose again from the dead to make possible for repentant sinners. It’s yours for the asking!