**SUMMER IN THE PSALMS SERIES – PSALM 51 – LOOK BENEATH! – LLOYD ASHWORTH**

This psalm is David’s repentance and confession after he has used his position and power to take for himself Bathsheba and then he tried to cover it up by having her husband killed in battle. I was interested in Matt's opening of his message last Sunday in which he spoke about the erosion of traditional values from the cradle to the grave. In schools and the workplace, in our homes and family lives with issues like abortion, euthanasia, drug and alcohol dependency, parenting – there is hardly any area of life where the new inclusive and liberal has not become the norm. One key writer and influencer in my life has been Dr Larry Crabb, who just last week entered palliative care after a long battle with cancer. In 2018 I attended one of his intensive trainings as part of my ministry sabbatical. And I well remember one session in which he spoke of the need to look ‘beneath’ rather than at. In counselling, in understanding people’s behaviour – don’t look at the presenting situation – look *beneath* it to what is *driving* that behaviour. And that is exactly what I want to do with Psalm 51 today…..I want to look beneath what we know is the cry of a broken man when he realizes his moral failure. You see, beneath King David’s life and beneath our lives is something insidious which the Bible calls sin. It’s this message that is unpopular and under attack not only outside the church of believers but also *insid*e. With many millennials leaving the church some biblical scholars have started a movement to re-attract them back to faith. There are three key doctrines under attack today….if there ever was a time when we need to be clear about these it’s now! Time won’t allow me to go deeply into these but I will give you a glimpse of the issues beneath!

**What is the Bible?** – Most of us have been bought up with the belief that the Bible is the Word of God through which God speaks to us and reveals his purposes in the world. Change this slightly – the Bible *contains* the Word of God and you have a whole new world open for you that sounds plausible but in fact, it empowers you to use scissors and paste with the Bible, cut out parts you don’t like and paste in others where it suits your argument. These ‘new ways’ of interpreting the Bible and you can exegete the Bible text towards the outcome you want or the belief you want to support. And so we have a whole new generation of people who as Matt said last week see faith as an add on to their lives. The Bible can be manipulated to support whatever lifestyle they choose, and there are no moral imperatives anymore. We as a society are cut adrift with no boundaries to help us navigate life….just change one word and you permit yourself to write your own life laws.

**What is the meaning of the Cross?**  Looks like a fairly tame statement. But, beneath this statement is a trend towards reconfiguring the death of Jesus to extract from it the unpalatable. The idea that God would punish his son with a bloody death on a cross in exchange for our sin is outmoded. What we call substitutionary atonement is out of favour and what appeals more is a God of mercy, forgiveness and acceptance. And this kind of doctrine opens the door for total inclusiveness without personal repentance. Jesus didn’t need to die on the cross for our sin. It’s we who need to suppress our desires and concentrate on the positive, good and gain moral uplift towards becoming loving beings and community to the world. The cross isn’t the way God brings reconciliation of a lost world to himself, it is merely a demonstration of the lengths God will go to, to demonstrate love. You see there is truth mixed in with error.

**What is the Gospel?** The gospel is God’s proclamation of the good news that Jesus is the way to the Father. Today many believe this is too narrow and that a God of love and mercy wants all to come to faith. So, the new teaching now enables people of any faith to be included in God’s universal family. The gospel becomes a model of how to live life well and doesn’t need proclaiming so much because if you adopt this inclusive approach then there is no essential message that needs proclaiming. Do you see with a slight twist how this might appeal to people, it softens the message, it creates a completely new theology of the cross and it promotes God as a much more loveable deity. But it's not the truth as the Bible teaches nor is it the truth about the cross or the message we are to proclaim. All this fails to adequately answer one core issue. And that is what the Bible calls the terminal condition we all have. At heart is our rebellion against God and all that is good. The old fashioned word for it is sin. And Psalm 51 is the sinner's psalm.

**Sin is born in us**…we have all succumbed. It takes various forms and shapes in our lives, sometimes we manage it, suppress it, or express it. It’s alive in us! It’s like our internal wiring has a built-in propensity to do wrong.

**Sin comes from inside us…** The book ofRomans says it’s like a nature that leaks its way out. We don’t have to try and make it happen – it’s just there! You don’t sin because you do something wrong you are a sinner because inside you something is damaged and broken – and each of us lives out this nature of sin in different ways.

**Sin is costly in our lives**. It causes pain and hurt to us and those we love and others we mix with. We just cannot keep this condition to ourselves. As we grow we get better at doing it, concealing it and managing it. Then we grade sin into big sins and little sins, the biggies like stealing, lying, cheating or adultery and little sins like truth-telling, gossip or slander. But here’s the news you know *God doesn’t grade sin.*

**Sin is something God specialises in dealing with**. God is very used to people who sin. He has had a lot of practice at this. No matter what your sin, God can take who you are and bring something good out of the carnage of your life choices. That’s the ***story of the Bible through and through***. In fact, it could be the overarching story of the rest of the Bible, is God dealing with the sin problem inside each of us.

**In today’s Psalm 51 we see a redemptive journey of someone on their way back from failure** – we get an insight into the process and journey David took to recover from his life choices. So what I want to give you today is a ***pathway back***, regardless of what sin, failures and life choices you have made – this pathway each of us must tread.

1. **ADMIT** – **Face your life with its failures –** v3-4

God sees, God knows. God confronts us with our sin and failures. He doesn’t turn a blind eye to them.Sometimes one of the hardest things to do is to admit that it was YOU who did this stuff. We are great at blame-shifting, minimalizing, and rationalising. But here is the first step – to just say – Yes it was me, I did it.Confrontation comes to us in many forms, it comes *internally* by our ***conscience,*** or nudge of Holy Spirit. Then it can be an *external* source, like a life event. Or it could be a person who challenges you; your spouse, colleague or a friend. This is not easy to receive – but what we need to learn to do when this happens is take this to God and ask ‘Lord is there truth in this?’ What do you say to me about this? Admit – really means to ***agree*** with the way God sees you. Try to stop pretending, minimalizing or justifying your choices.

1. **APPRAISE** – This means to *see something*, get some insight into the real issue.

So what does God want me to see? To look beneath the choice to what is driving that behaviour. See that God *wants to forgive you* *and put you in a fresh direction*.

***On what basis does God forgive us?*** God forgives because his *character is to forgive. V1 because of your unfailing love.* I sin because I was born a sinner. But God while not overlooking your sin and its consequences has made a way of dealing with your sin and failure. Mercy is where someone gives something that is undeserved.

***How does God forgive us?*** Equally and fairly. Here is where the topic gets messy and bloody. Because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin” **Hebrews 9.22**

***God does not have good and bad days***…bad days when he punishes people and good days when he turns a blind eye to people’s sin. Because he is just and fair every sin by every person must be paid for. V4 Sin might be against people but primarily it is against God.

1. **ASK –** I want you to see here that confession starts from inside you and moves outwards. *(internal to the external process)* There are **three symbolic pictures i**n this psalm – they help us understand how God deals with our sin when we ask him to.

**LIBRARY: “Blot out” my transgressions – comes from the library –** it means to erase the writing, on the papyrus. The writing had to be scrapped off then something else could be written in its place. God, I want you to erase something I have done so there is no record of it. ***Purging* takes place.** You can write something new instead of being reminded of your failure and shame.

**LAUNDRY: “Wash and purify”** me v7 comes from the **laundry -** the stain of sin in our lives can be removed. Have you ever walked around with a stain of something on your clothes, everyone else can see it! Maybe you don’t even notice, but here the prayer is for the inside of the heart to be washed. ***Purity*** is restored.

**LEPROSY: “Create” in me a clean heart** v10 – comes from **leprosy.** Lepers were banished from the village or community and forced to live outside the gates until they had been healed. The thought here is that sin separates us, it isolates us from those we love. What we do affects them also. But once cleansed we can come back into the community! **Don’t banish** me from your presence***. Proximity*** is restored.

**Don’t take** your Holy Spirit from me (one of the few references to the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament). **Restore** joy to me – v12 (choice first, then emotions). **Make me willing** to obey you v13 – my choices are broken and damaged **Then I will teach**. **Unseal my lips** – to praise you v15

**V16-20 The Psalm finishes with verses about offerings and sacrifices.**

We need to understand clearly that while we are forgiven and cleansed – we are still capable of sinning again and again. Our sin problem is dealt with by the cross but our sin nature remains alive. There is no magical quick fix for your sin nature. Your heart can be allured away by something enticing. So what is the difference between say someone like David who sins in such a grievous way and any number of people who have done the same but never made it back into fellowship with God? I think here in this psalm we see the key difference…. It’s the heart! **ADMIT – AGREE – ASK**

David didn’t try to dress up his sin, minimise it, or trivialise it. He turned back to God with broken-ness and an open-hearted confession. My sense of achievement, self-confidence, my ego and its desire to control, my selfish desires, lusts and greed is still very much alive inside me. I can still choose to let them dominate my thinking and actions or I can choose to allow the Holy Spirit to heal and control me. You will never be free from this wrestle until heaven!

***The media portrays Christians mostly as kind of do-gooders and namby-pambies. People who needed a crutch like God to get through life. Especially men they were effeminate losers with little backbone!*** Then I saw something – that people with faith swim against the current.They are people whose ***strength is in God***. They are not swayed by public opinion and peer pressure. They are strong people, sometimes rough on the outside and carry in their hearts gold forged by fire, the gold of God. They are **meek people** who know *how to serve*, who are secure enough to know their weaknesses but also ask for God's help in their lives. Describing the people who walk like this with God is difficult. But it looks like they have been somewhere and experienced something that sets them apart from others. They are *more secure* not less, *more God-focused*, more *confident* but not in themselves, more *capable* but not because of their skills, more *deeply assured* but still live with the vulnerabilities of being human. If you think confession is for weak people who need God as a crutch to lean on then you have not trod any of the pathways towards knowing God.

Confession is for people who know - *know they are sinners and need God* *- know that they are being changed ‘beneath’* *- know that they carry in their lives a deep sense of Gods strength.*  We read Psalm 51 and we go….well this won’t have much to say to me….I haven’t killed anyone, I haven’t murdered or committed adultery... I only deal in small sins! Yet this Psalm speaks to us all. Because when we look beneath – at our own lives we see our need for God’s forgiveness, restoration, cleansing and washing. The final verses of this psalm say…God what you are looking for is a broken and contrite spirit…a softness of heart.