

Psalm 51

This is of course David's profound confession following the adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. There is no doubt that in this sin we see David's godly sorrow for his sins. As C.S Lewis reminds us, "a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness". If God can forgive a man for two such heinous crimes (adultery and murder), he can forgive us for our sins.

This Psalm deals with the confession of sin.

Sin is a notion that does not have much currency in everyday life. We don't talk much these days about sin and its effect on our relationship with God and on its effect on other people. The confession of sin should be part of our worship to God but it's not natural to confess. When the words are hard to find, how do we confess sin to God. Here in Psalm 51 we find out that answer.

"Psalm 51 is shot through with the righteousness and compassion of God; in turn, God's righteousness and compassion provide the background to David's sin and assure the reader of forgiveness"
Michael Travers.

It may have taken Nathan the prophet to confront David with his sin but when he did the Holy Spirit brought about a deep conviction on David and he repented immediately (2 Sam 12:1-14). No less than 9 times in the Psalm David asks for forgiveness.

READ Verses one – two

A remarkable two verses as they describe human wrong doing. David appeals to the "unfailing love" of God as the basis of his hope for forgiveness. Three key words are given in the opening two verses. "Transgressions", "iniquity" and "sin". These imply rebellion, guilt and a falling short of God's requirements. The use of all three terms seems intended to be very comprehensive. This reinforces that the confession is far-reaching and complete.

We know particularly the two terrible sins that David had committed. However, the Psalm goes further here indicating the whole constellation of sin. It's easy to begin to understand why this Psalm goes beyond

David's personal sin. The community of God used this Psalm for confession in the church.

READ Verses 3-6

"I know my transgressions" (3). This expresses far more than just an awareness of sin. This expresses sorrow and commitment not to repeat the offence. In verse 4, David's claim that the sin is against God alone. This is not to cheapen the terrible sin against Bathsheba and her Husband but to heighten the sense of offence against his creator and God. David knows that real forgiveness must come from God himself.

"Surely I was sinful at birth" (5) David's honest self-evaluation recognises that sin has a long-term and far-reaching influence in his life. He's not saying that it was just a "slip up" in an otherwise unblemished life. Sin is a daily struggle against our very nature. Not something to be explained away or brushed aside casually.

"You desire Truth in the inner parts" (6) This is the kind of transparency that God desires in our lives. This inner place is very important to God. Translated it means the "in the entrails" or deep down inside of us. No one else knows this place only God and you. We may all have 'stuff' hidden away deep down but if we are prepared to be vulnerable, to open ourselves up. This is where God will transform us.

Our inner self will be changed by God's teaching and ongoing work. How does David put it, "wisdom in the inmost place". The only way your inner self can be revealed and transformed is by God's wisdom. Counsellors, Pastors and others can help to point out problems or addictions or maybe even sin in your life but, none of those people can bring about change.

Change, according to Psalm 51 comes from allowing God's wisdom to impact you deep, deep inside Where only you and God can go.

READ Verses 7-9

Now comes David's plea for cleansing. Note again a number of words used, **"Cleanse me" (7), "wash me" (7), "blot out" (9).** This psalm recognises a deeper type of cleaning. David is asking for nothing short of total restoration with God. This section ends in verse 9, with David's

desire that God no longer take account of his sin. “Hide your face from my sins” he says.

In verse 7 David mentions the Hyssop. Branches of the “hyssop’ plant were apparently bound together and dipped in water and used in rituals of cleaning to sprinkle on persons or items requiring purification. It’s a very strong image. In verse 8, David compares sin to the crushing of bones in, an incredibly strong metaphor. David’s saying – want to know what sin will do to you. It’s like having your bones crushed. Particularly unconfessed sin.

READ verse 9.

David knows that he will only be restored in his relationship with Yahweh, if God takes this extraordinary step of “hiding his face” from his sins. Restoration is entirely in God’s hands. Such an act implies that God chooses not to take our failings into account but to “blot them out”. David is counting on God’s “Unfailing Love and Compassion”. We love and serve a God who wants to love us. He is full of love and mercy and compassion. He is ready to forgive but we must take a stand and oppose our sinful nature.

We must not let our sin that separates us from God simply blend into the background, like wallpaper on our computer or explain it away, or rationalise what we have done. We simply need to acknowledge as David has, that all sin is against God and we must humble ourselves and ask for forgiveness.

Verses 10 –12

We must be confessing Christians. Confession is necessary to restore our relationship with God. Here David acknowledges the need for a transformed inner attitude.

Characterised by a “pure heart”, a “steadfast spirit” and a “willing spirit”. These will produce the kind of enduring change that will provide the firm foundation for a continuing relationship with God. David is asking God to create him anew. Have you ever thought that through confession and restoration that there is the chance that God could create you anew?

We know from Scripture that as believers we have been created new in and through Christ Jesus. However, we also know that we are not recreated perfect and like David still have to wrestle with sin in our lives.

Maybe, confession and a reliance on the mercy and compassion of God, opens a door for a deeper work in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through confession, God wants to recreate in you a pure heart and a steadfast spirit.

Having gone through both inner and outer cleansing. David asks for a lasting transformation of the Holy Spirit and is buoyed with new hope as he asks for the lasting experience of God's presence. He doesn't take anything for granted, does he? Of course, we live in a time when the Holy Spirit is available to us on a personal basis. To be a Christian is to have the presence of the Holy Spirit.

David didn't and yet he knew the difference it would make in his life. He had seen God take it away from Saul. He knew what happens if it's taken from you. Paul's words of "be filled with the Holy Spirit" should be ringing in our ears as we read this Psalm. We should be so grateful that God's spirit has been poured out on all of us.

VERSES 13- 17.

For Israel and for David, confession and restoration are never simply private acts. Here the anticipation of deliverance leads to vows of public acts of praise. "Transgressors" and "sinners" will learn the "ways" of God by learning of David's transformation through God's redeeming grace. They will, in David's words, "turn back to God".

"You do not delight in Sacrifice" (16)

What God desires is *inward change*, marked by Truth, wisdom and a broken contrite heart. The eighth century prophets like Amos spoke against Israel bringing offerings and sacrifices and thinking they were right with God (Amos 5: 11-15). Particularly, when they are ripping off the poor and operating corruptly.

Israel thought that by following strict guidelines about the outward ritual their relationship with God was safe and secure. It is inward change that is effective not symbolic outward signs. The inward work of God is what brings lasting change and is pleasing and acceptable to God.

Verses 18-19

These last verses were particularly relevant to Israel in exile. David's confession and restoration acted as a guide for the community in exile.

Through the words of this Psalm were to confess their sin and lay the groundwork for the restoration of the sacrificial system and their covenant relationship with God.

Picture here for a moment Israel in exile with no temple to worship in or bring sacrifices. This Psalm, with its focus on the inward reality of a right relationship with God rather than the sacrificial system, would have given this community real hope in the midst of despair. This hope expressed in the last verse that the sacrificial system would be restored.

Israel's covenant God had not forgotten them or abandoned them forever. Clearly God is pointing out that the inner attitude of sin invalidated the sacrificial system of Israel and led to the demise of the kingdom in exile. It's the renewal of the inward life of repentance and faith that will restore the covenant community in its relationship with God.

In its confession of sin, this Psalm is radical in three ways. David who prays is gripped with a sense of sin. It is his primary problem and he accepts it. He was conceived and born this way. It is not a matter of what he has done but what he is. He is flawed but he is smart enough to know his only real recompense is the mercy of God.

Further, David recognises his sins against God. Sin raises the question of his relationship to God. What God will do with him- cast him out of God's presence- withdraw the power of the Holy Spirit from his life. He sits under God's judgement knowing only God can blot out his transgressions. Wash and purify him of his sin, cleanse him of the stain he feels on his life, deal with his guilt.

David, in this Psalm wants to be changed. He knows that simply dealing with what he has done is not enough. God must deal with what he is. He pleads for God to create him again. To create a pure heart and a new steady spirit. He wants to offer a broken and contrite heart not a burnt offering or sacrifice. God does not want something- he wants David.