

“Repentance and Forgiveness”

March 11, 2007

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Scriptural Foundation: Psalm 51, NIV

For the director of music.

A psalm of David.

When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.

⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

⁶ Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.

¹⁴ Save me from bloodguilt, O God,
the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸ In your good pleasure make Zion prosper;
build up the walls of Jerusalem.

¹⁹ Then there will be righteous sacrifices,
whole burnt offerings to delight you;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

David is the last person you would expect to dive into the cesspool of sin. He lived the life of consistently good decisions and sound character. When fear confronted him he picked up five smooth stones and went out to fight the giant Goliath.¹ When self-advancement opened the door he spared Saul’s life in honor of his kingly position.² Over and over again, for forty-six years, David’s record of integrity and faith was without equal among men. David is the last man you would expect to give himself to corrupting passions, but that is precisely what David did.

There he was, roughly at the age of forty-seven, luring another man’s wife into his bed, and then lying to cover up his sin. Ultimately, he would take Bathsheba’s husband’s life through battle,³

² Late one afternoon, after his midday rest, David got out of bed and was walking on the roof of the palace. As he looked out over the city, he noticed a woman of unusual beauty taking a bath.³ He sent someone to find out who she was, and he was told, “She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.”

⁴ Then David sent messengers to get her; and when she came to the palace, he slept with her... Then she returned home.⁴

¹ 1 Samuel 17

² 1 Samuel 24

³ 2 Samuel 11

⁴ New Living Translation (NLT)

That day David saw only the beauty of sin. He saw the intense pleasure stolen fruit would give to him. David saw the excitement and the thrill of this illicit relationship. He saw the sweetness and the delight this act would bring him. That is what David saw that day and that is all David saw.

David did not see many things. He did not see the added sins of deceit and murder he would have to embrace in order to hide his initial sin. He did not see the guilt and the shame which would attach itself like Super Glue to his soul with such strength it would cause him to inwardly groan day and night. He did not see the sleepless nights he would toss and turn in bed, unable to find peace with himself or peace with God. He did not see this sin would leave him without appetite that he would later write he body would waste away because he was unable to eat. He did not see one day he would loose four of his own sons as a result of this act of transitory joy. He did not see his nation would ultimately be divided and disintegrated as a result of his actions.

Some people read David's story as some kind of excuse for sin. They say, "Look at David. He sinned and things seemed to turn out all right for him." As I consider this heart-attitude I am frankly bewildered by it, for nothing in Scripture defends it. Psalm 32 is a parallel psalm to our text, and David would write concerning the condition of his heart as a result of his sin,

³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

David's story teaches us not to presume upon God's mercy and grace. David's story is not given to us to sedate our souls to the poisonous nature of sin, but rather to awaken us to its deadly threat in each of our lives. David reminds all of us sin is a clear and present danger.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer would write a booklet entitled, "Temptation". In that booklet he wrote these words, "In our members there is a slumbering inclination toward desire which is both sudden and fierce. With irresistible powers desire sizes mastery over flesh, and all at once a secret, smoldering fire is kindled. The flesh burns as if it is flames. Joy in God is extinguished in us and we seek all of our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us. He looses all reality and only desire for the creature is real. Satan does not now fill us with a hatred of God, but with a forgetfulness of God."

At the moment David stared down upon Bathsheba, he did not hate God he just simply forgot God. This is where sin begins and has its corrupting work. Consumed by passion for the creature, the Creator was blotted out of David's mind and so it is with us if we are not alert and aware. This is the reason the Apostle Paul will write, at the end of his letter to the church in Ephesus,

^{6:10} Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

Without God's power none of us are safe. Someone may ask, "What if I have already rebelled against God? What if I am experiencing the sharp, dual-edges of shame and guilt which cut at my inward life and leave me without peace? What can I do about the incessant pounding of the telltale heart which reminds me of my sin and locks me us to darkness and despair of soul?"

Thankfully, we have an answer to these questions in Psalm 51. The answer God gives us to those questions is we must repent of our sins and put our hope in God's mercy. We must return to God in faith, believing He could do that which is impossible.

We are going to discuss biblical repentance and David reveals three phases of biblical repentance which helps us move ourselves toward spiritual restoration following sin. These three phases will be: Phase I: A humble plea; Phase II: A harsh pronouncement; and Phase III: A hopeful petition.

We first look at the first phase of biblical repentance and that is a humble plea for God's mercy,

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion...

David begins his quest for spiritual restoration where we must begin and that is with God's character and His attributes. We, in and of ourselves, are left powerless to restore ourselves. Spiritual restoration does not begin with a pitiful nature of our predicament; rather it begins with the merciful character of God's person.

God brings spiritual restoration not because we deserve it as a result of our pitiful condition or as a result of us begging helplessly and hopelessly. No, if we are to find restoration it is because of something outside of us and that something is God's character and David knows this and that is the reason why he fastens his heart and soul on the person of God.

In calling out to God he uses three terms to describe His nature. He first says, "Have mercy on me"; then he says, "...according to your unfailing love"; and finally he says, "...according to your great compassion." I ask you, do you know the God who is the Creator of the universe, who is sovereign and righteous and just, is also the God who is merciful, slow to anger, and compassionate?

True repentance always begins with an appeal to God for His mercy, for we know we can never do anything to deserve spiritual restoration and to earn spiritual restoration, but if it is to come it will come solely as a result of God's mercy. As sinners we must not approach God upon the basis of His justice. His justice would crush us under its infinite weight if we were to approach Him on this basis. I have always found it strange to hear people complain God was somehow not fair to them or just in His dealings with them and that is immensely strange to me. I ask myself the question, as I hear such a complaint, "Fairness? Justice? Is that what you really want from God? Oh, tremble at the thought God would deal with us in fairness or in justice." If God would deal with any of us in fairness and in justice, not one of us would stand. We would all perish like wax in the flame. I praise God He does not deal with us in fairness, but rather He deals with us in mercy.

When we stand before God we do not need His justice, but rather we need His mercy. How can we know the God who is and the God who created is merciful, compassionate, and unfailing in His loving kindness? We know that the same way David knows that and that is through the Bible, through the revelation God has given us of Himself. This is an important point.

We do not know God is merciful or loving and kind and willing to forgive because that is what we want this God to be. We do not know God is merciful and loving and kind because other people say that is who He is. No, there are many odd and wrong ideas our own soul generates with regards to God and the world around us presents with regard to the nature of God, so we cannot trust these sources. The only source which is reliable is the source of God's self-revelation, for if God did not reveal Himself to be merciful we would not know Him to be merciful. That is the reason why it is so important for us to be people of the Book so we might know God and enjoy Him.

Modern man says, "The God of the Old Testament was just, harsh, and punishing. The God of the New Testament is merciful, kind, and loving." David would not have had any hope if that were so. God is not a God who evolves, who changes with time. No, God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. David knew God was merciful on the basis of God's revelation of Himself in the Old Testament.

In Exodus 34, God has just given the Law and He has revealed Himself to be just and righteous. Moses came down from Mount Sinai and he found the people engaging in idolatry around a golden calf. He throws the stone tablets and breaks them into pieces and God calls him back up the mountain. God gives to Moses a new set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments. If ever there was a time for God to declare His justice, "This is it!" and He does. He does not deny it, but in the midst of the revelations of Himself He wants Moses to know something else regarding His nature,

⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

His mercy is not weakness. God is just through and through, but His mercy is sure and infinite. That is what makes the Gospel so precious; God, in mercy, sent His Son Jesus paying the ultimate price so He might maintain justice and still be merciful to us. What wonder that is!

Moses shines the spotlight of his heart on God's grace at the outset of his cry for spiritual restoration. As he does so he makes three requests with regards to God's mercy. The first request is found at the end of Verse 1, "Blot out my transgressions."

The word "transgression" refers to crossing a forbidden boundary with a thought of serious rebellion. This is a word which will describe, if you remember your world history, Caesar's actions at the Rubicon. The Roman Senate said, "As long as you stay north of the Rubicon, we will be at peace, but if you cross the Rubicon River with your forces, we consider that an act of war." Caesar decided to "transgress" and cross a boundary with a serious intent of treason and of rebellion, and civil war broke out.

What God describes our sin to be, and what David came to understand his own sin to be, is a transgression; not a little mistake and not a minor flaw, but a transgression against God Himself. We have crossed the boundary of God's world law and in doing so we have openly declared rebellion against the rightful, Sovereign Lord. David cries out, "Lord, obliterate the record, blot out the record of this treasonous and rebellious act."⁵

The second way Moses requests God's mercy is found in Verse 2, "Wash away all of my iniquities." He recognizes his iniquities have made him dirty from the inside out and unclean. Moses is requesting the washing away all of his sin and not just a part of it. He wanted no part of the perversion and corruption of sin anymore.

He goes on to say, in the third way of requesting mercy, in Verse 2, "Cleanse me from my sin." The word "sin" means a falling short and a missing of the mark. We miss God's mark of righteousness when we sin, thus falling short of the target of God's glory, of living up to His requirements, to be fit for Heaven, and to be fit in a relationship with Him.

When I was a little boy we had a bit of woods which stretched well behind our house. Deep in the woods was a creek which ran along the bottom. We would run back and forth across it, but we did not want to get wet because there was a whole day in front of us and that would make us uncomfortable, but we would jump over various parts of the stream. Some were very narrow and some pretty wide, at least to a little boy's eyes. I remember on one occasion running across and trying to jump across that muddy stream and falling back into it. I came up all muddy, wet, and dirty. I had sinned! I had missed the mark! My mark was to make it across the creek, but it did not make that mark. Instead, I fell short of the mark and as a result my whole person became unclean. This is what happens when we sin.

God has a mark for us and He says, "Here is what my standard is," and we run out and even though we may be able to jump further than most of our peers, it matters not if we miss the mark and fall back into that cesspool. We, nonetheless, are in the same condition as the rest in need of calling out to God for mercy and crying out, "God, cleanse me!"

Phase I of biblical repentance is a humble plea for God's mercy. Phase II is a harsh pronouncement of our own sin. David had become tired of covering up his own sin and of making light of it. He is ready to make a full confession unto God and before man without sugar-coating his wrong doing and without dressing it up, though it did not seem as horrible as it truly was, and without applying a coat of paint. David did not come to this confession immediately, in fact, if we read Scripture correctly, it appears it was almost a full year of David seeking to sweep his sin under the rug and unwilling to make a confession before God finally broke through in His grace and he was willing to deal with God rightly.

His experience was awful, even as we read in Psalm 32,

³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

I believe David is describing the experience of every believer who willfully sins before God and is silent to God, who is unwilling to confess and unwilling to deal rightly with God. The believer who has been genuinely been born again cannot exalt in his sin. Someone may ask, "My experience is I have sinned against God and I am all right with it. I do not understand what David is talking about. I am at peace with myself. I believe it is all right." Friend, your case is a

⁵ Psalm 51:9

leprous disease and it all the more shows the reason why you need call out to God for mercy. This leprous disease has robbed you of spiritual feeling and this is of no benefit to you to feel no pain when great injury smashes down upon you. It is a sign of death. If this is the case in your heart and your life when you say, "I look at my sin and I am okay with it. I can live with my sin. I am not troubled by it," all the more you need to cry out to God and say, "God, be merciful. At least let me have some healthy spiritual feeling", for only if we come to grips with healthy spiritual feeling will we cry out to God as David did to confess.

What did awaken David to genuine repentance after a year of hiding his sin? God sent him a messenger by the name of Nathan. Nathan comes to David and tells him a story, "There were two men in a certain town, one was very rich and the other was very poor. The rich man had all kinds of herds and flocks of cattle and sheep. The poor man had nothing but a little lamb. He worked hard to buy that lamb. He raised that lamb and he grew up with his children. This little lamb ate from the man's own dinner plate. It drank from his own cup. He cuddled this lamb in his arms like a baby daughter.

"The rich man had a guest come to visit and he said, 'I need to feed my guest,' which was appropriate, but instead of taking any from the hundreds and hundreds in his flock, he went over, in a show of power to this poor man, and he grabbed the little lamb and he slaughtered it and served it for dinner." David heard this story and he was enraged. Furiously, he said, "As surely as the Lord lives, any man who would do such a thing deserves to die!" Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"⁶

David was the monarch. He did not need to answer to anyone on the human plane. He could have Nathan executed and said, "I am going to cover my sin another time," but God was gracious to David and David's heart broke at the recognition of his own sin. He humbled himself before God and he confessed to God and said, "I have sinned against the Lord."⁷

I urge you, receive the messages God gives you with regard to your own sin. Perhaps a message comes to you regarding your own sin from a prophet, a teacher of God's Word. I urge you to receive it. Perhaps a message regarding your sin comes to you from a trusted friend or family member. Perhaps a message regarding your sin come to you from the Scripture; you are reading along and all of a sudden the Holy Spirit causes a verse or a series of verses to jump off of the pages and attach to your soul and you awaken to receive it. I will tell you this, even if that message comes from an enemy, a denier of God Himself, for God delights to use all sources and all kinds of messengers, but let us receive as from God the message He would give to us regarding our sin. Only then will we come to genuine repentance.

There is no human remedy for sin; the only remedy is from God, but the remedy is sure. If we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.⁸

As David makes his confession, there are three parts to his confession by which he aligns his heart with God. The first part of his confession is: He gains an awareness of his sin,

³ For I know my transgressions...

Prior to this David had swept them under the rug, but now he comes full face-to-face with them. Many of our problems begin right here. We fail to recognize our actions and attitudes to be sin at all. We may consider them to be flaws or mistakes, but sin? We believe we are okay, but we are not.

I have a friend who, when his son was young would teach him to pray. He used the acronym "ACTS": Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. What a great thing that is for a dad to do to take his son and help him learn how to pray. He also taught his son how to write a prayer journal. One day, after teaching him this, he was looking in his son's prayer journal and he looked under the letter "C". He saw, for that particular day, his son had written, "No sins!" As he turned the pages, for several weeks in a row, there were no sins. We, perhaps, could excuse a young boy for not having a close enough awareness, but it has nothing to do with age. It has everything to do with spiritual sensitivity.

⁶ 2 Samuel 12:1-7a

⁷ 2 Samuel 12:13a

⁸ 1 John 1:9

Perhaps we would be a little savvier, if we were to write a prayer journal of confessions, we would say something without the seriousness David applied to his own sin, but we would say something. But, we would fall short of a real awareness.

The second part to genuine confession is: He embraced how evil his sin was,

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...

Many object to this verse by saying, “Didn’t he sin against Bathsheba or Uriah?” Yes, he did, but David understood sin, by definition, is against God because God alone defines sin. The reason it is wrong to do wrong to another person is because God says it is wrong. God is the One who defines righteousness because He is righteousness. All sin is in reference to God, and that is why all sin, whether big or small on the human scale, is infinitely serious because it is done against an infinitely glorious Person and an infinitely righteous and sovereign Person. Sin is infinitely evil because it is committed against the Sovereign and Holy God.

Do you view your sin in reference to God or only in reference to yourself and others around you? Until we view our sin in reference to God we will never see its gravity and, thus, we will fall short of biblical repentance and spiritual restoration. David understood his heart had been awakened.

In the third part of his confession he took full responsibility for his sin. There were no excuses. He acknowledged he sin, not because of his circumstances, not because of his strong temptation, the Devil made him do it, not because Bathsheba should not have been bathing on the rooftop at that time, not because Bathsheba should have said, “No!”, not because he was caught in a weak moment, and not because he had been running around with the wrong crowd. No, there were no excuses and no mild explanations. David sinned because,

⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Here David is describing what theologians call “The Doctrine of Depravity”, or “The Doctrine of Original Sin”. By describing this, David is saying he is not blaming his mother or the condition of his birth, but he is saying, “I have sinned, not because of these other circumstances or happenings, but I have sinned because my heart is not right with God. I have sinned because, deep down in my soul, I am a sinner and I am corrupt by nature.”

This is not the story of a good person gone badly, but this is a story of a sinful and corrupt person acting out his corrupt desires, and we often fall short of that. We often want to say, “I have sinned because...”, and it is something outside of us. He came to realize his sin was deep inside of him and a part of his corrupt nature and that is a huge problem.

Spiritual restoration only comes through genuine confession. It is not only the streams flowing from our life which are the problem, but it is that the fountainhead is corrupt from within and we need God, for without Him there would be no hope.

David recognized he needed two things which every sinner needs. First, he needed forgiveness, but also he needed transformation. It is not enough to clean up the streams if the fountain and the spring are putrid. David said, “God, I need you to clean up the streams and forgive me, but I also need a transformation of my heart.” The last phase of genuine repentance is a hopeful petition and a confidence in God to bring pardon and purity,

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

His first petition is for forgiveness and for cleansing. Is it possible to have the stain of past sins removed? The answer the Gospel gives us is, “Yes”, because this is God’s work and all things are possible with Him.

It is interesting David would pray, “Cleanse me with hyssop”. When he prayed this he is giving us a peek into his understanding of God’s plan of redemption. Hyssop is a branch which is often used as a brush because it has fine, feathery parts. It is used as a brush because it can be dipped into paint or blood. It is first referenced in Scripture at the Passover, when the children were leaving the land of Egypt. God said, “Take a sacrificial lamb, slay it, dip the hyssop

branch in the blood, and apply the blood to the doorpost of your house. When the angel of death comes that evening the angel will pass over and will not bring punishment or condemnation upon this house.”⁹

Hyssop is used elsewhere in Leviticus¹⁰ and Numbers¹¹ for the sprinkling of blood for the cleansing of sin to take place.

David is saying, “God, I understand something about what you taught all through Scripture. I understand, without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” David is calling upon God to sprinkle the atoning blood of the Messiah upon him, which offers the cleansing of sin, and the blood which the Messiah will spill on his behalf. Genuine and authentic repentance always points to Jesus the Messiah and the blood He spilled. It is not enough to say, “God, forgive me upon the basis of your forgiving nature”, but we must say, “Cleanse me with hyssop. I look to Jesus and He is the only Hope and the only Confidence I have of forgiveness and I look to Him.” Without Jesus there is no forgiveness of sin available to me or to anyone else. Come to Jesus and embrace Him as your Savior and your Lord.

That is not where David stops. He goes on to pray, not only for pardon but for purity. It is important, for genuine repentance, we not stop short of God’s design and say, “God, I want forgiveness and I want to be free from the punishment of sin, but I am content in my sin.” That is not genuine repentance and that will bring you nothing, soul restoration, or salvation, for the heart which is repentant will say, “God, not only am I sick of the punishment my sin brings to me, but I am sick of my sin itself and I want to be free. I cannot free myself and I cannot make for myself a clean heart.” That is the reason why David says,

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God...

David uses the words Moses used in Genesis 1,

¹ ...God created the heavens and the earth...¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence...

He is using a powerful word of God creating something out of nothing. He does not say, “God, here is my heart. Fix it up and mend it and make it right. In its basic nature it is pretty good. If you put some healing balm on it and massage it a bit it will come back.” No, he said, “God, there is nothing to begin with in me. There is nothing whatsoever. Create in me a new heart, a heart of purity, a heart which loves the things You love, a heart which sets its affections upon You.”

I fear many ask God for forgiveness for the freedom from punishment without having any longing to change. The greatest thing is all of life is walking with God and sin always separates us from God and we need to have His presence daily walking with us. That is what we long for. The joy of the Good News is not so much only in the fact of being delivered from the punishment of our sin, but the joy of the Good News is we can now walk with God. If we are not excited about walking with God we miss the Gospel itself, for this is the joy of the Gospel; this is the Good News.

The last thing David prays for is,

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation...

Joy always follows pardon and purity and David longs for this joy to return. Sin offers joy, but it only robs it from us. It is righteousness which offers joy.

I warn you, Satan wants to deceive you in your confession of your sin. He wants to deceive you into thinking it is wrong to ever experience joy again. He wants to put you in a place of self-loathing and self-pity. Satan comes to us and says, “Do penance. You need to hurt from your own sin long enough before you accept from God the joy of your salvation. Pay for your own sin!”

⁹ Exodus 12:1-14

¹⁰ Leviticus 14:4-7, 49-52

¹¹ Numbers 19:6, 19:18

The Gospel brings a better word. The Gospel says, "Rise up, o man. Rise up, o woman, and claim your joy." We do not deserve it and we know that, but claim your joy, for it is to God's glory when we do. Do not rob God of His rightful glory again. Claim your joy because God sent His Son Jesus to purchase for you freedom and life. Rejoice in Him now.

Do you long for pardon and purity? Such is free and it is offered to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He is a sufficient Savior. You may be saying, "I have not sinned as David. I have not committed adultery and I have not committed murder. My wound is not as serious." Is this really true? The Bible says sin is grave because it is an expression of rebellion against the infinite God; all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.¹² I urge you to being where David began by considering God's mercy and calling out to Him.

¹² Romans 3:23