

WEEK 2
09.10.17

DAVID'S PRAYER OF REPENTANCE



FOCUS VERSES

Psalm 51:10

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

LESSON TEXT

Psalm 51:1–13

1 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

9 Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

11 Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

12 Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

13 Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.



FOCUS THOUGHT

David's prayer serves as an example of true humility and repentance.



CULTURE CONNECTION

A Sea of Forgiveness

As a university undergraduate, I had the privilege to take a seminar on impeachment taught by retired Congressman William L. Hungate. Congressman Hungate was a ranking member of the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee that had voted to submit three articles of impeachment to the full House, leading to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon.

In addition to his encyclopedic knowledge of the history and legal issues involved in presidential impeachment, Hungate shared with us many behind-the-scenes glimpses of the proceedings. These looks behind the curtain were often funny, sometimes shocking, and frequently had the effect of disabusing me of my naïveté concerning how Congress actually worked.

One memorable assertion was that if Nixon had accepted responsibility and offered a sincere public apology for the actions of his subordinates, the American people would have reached into their tremendous reservoir of forgiveness and given him the support he needed to continue his presidency. Hungate believed, as do many recent political historians, that Nixon may not have even been aware of the illegal activities of the White House Special Investigative Unit (“The Plumbers”). But when he chose to use the power of the presidency in an attempt to cover up their crimes, that decision cost Nixon his office and reputation.

I am not sure if America still has an abundant reservoir of forgiveness, but I do know the One who has an infinite sea of forgiveness that washes all who sincerely repent and bathe in its depths.

OUTLINE

I. DAVID’S SIN

- A. David Was Unfocused and Unengaged
- B. He Allowed Temptation to Rule
- C. His Sin Was Exposed

II. DAVID’S PRAYER OF REPENTANCE

- A. David Came to God in Humility
- B. David Took Personal Responsibility for His Sin
- C. He Confessed and Asked Forgiveness
- D. He Was Restored

III. REPENTANCE INVOLVES GODLY SORROW

- A. Godly Sorrow Produces Repentance
- B. Repentant Prayer Empties the Soul for God’s Spirit

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Sin is the great destroyer of mankind. Every evil we face, be it moral, physical, social, or spiritual, is the direct result of sin. Like a careful motorist sharing the highway with a multitude of drunk drivers, we will likely be

injured at some time by the sins of others. However, that analogy falls short because none of us are free from the influence of sin. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

If we live a model life of extreme puritanical strictness so that all who encounter us would deem us holy and blameless, we still come far short of the absolute perfection of God. The only standard of holiness is God’s holiness (Romans 3:10; I Peter 1:15–16), and the only way to achieve God’s holiness is through the imputation of His perfection (II Corinthians 5:21; Psalm 32:1–2; Romans 5:15–19; Philippians 3:9).

God’s demand of sinless perfection is not an exercise of power by a capricious deity but an expression of love by a Father protecting His children. Because of the fallen nature of humanity, we all suffer maladies, grow infirm with age, and eventually die. Sin transforms that which is good and beautiful into foul malevolence. It can taint and ultimately break the closest of relationships.

The church has a responsibility to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16), lessening by our prayerful presence the impact of sin on the world. But if the “salt have lost his savour” (Matthew 5:13) or “the light that is in thee be darkness” (Matthew 6:23), how can we fulfill that essential role? Thankfully, God has provided a way for that which has been destroyed by sin to be restored by grace in answer to repentance.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. DAVID'S SIN

The superscription preceding Psalm 51:1, (verse one in the Hebrew Bible) gives us the context of our lesson: “To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” David’s sin of adultery and murder, recorded in II Samuel 11, represents a major turning point in the life of the man after God’s own heart (I Samuel 13:14). David was far from perfect and his life was full of success and failure, but he was set apart from his sins by true repentance.

A. David Was Unfocused and Unengaged

The story of David’s sin is told against the background of a war against the Ammonites begun in II Samuel 10 but suspended because of the winter rains and cold. When spring arrived, David dispatched his army under the command of Joab (David’s nephew by his half-sister Zeruihah) to resume the campaign. After the civil war that established David’s claim to the throne (II Samuel 2:8–14), it was not unusual for David to leave the fighting in the hands of Joab. II Samuel 10:7–14 shows us that God had used Joab and his brilliant military strategies to defeat David’s enemies in the first round of the Ammonite war. Only when facing a major invasion by consolidated Syrian forces did David resume direct command of the Israelite army (II Samuel 10:17–19). With the Syrian threat eliminated, it seems only natural that David would again entrust the Ammonite conquest to Joab.

Intruding into this narrative of public triumph is a shift to personal pathos. According

to Walter Brueggemann, this abrupt transition from David’s life under blessing to his life under curse cuts so sharply that it almost defies interpretation (*First and Second Samuel: Interpretation Commentary*). Because of this we may seek for simplistic answers—some key point at which an intervention would have prevented David’s failure. Many people see such a key point in II Samuel 11:1: “But David tarried still at Jerusalem.” Staying home from the campaign obviously provided the opportunity for David’s sin. As David Guzik wrote in his verse by verse commentary: *2 Samuel*, “If David had his attention where God wanted it, he would never put it where God didn’t want it.”

B. He Allowed Temptation to Rule

By seeking a single point at which David failed, we ignore the fact that sin is a process rather than an incident. According to James 1:14–15, “Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin.” Throughout his life, David’s relationship to women showed a sense of ownership rather than partnership. He usually treated women as objects through which he could obtain some personal goal. Not until Bathsheba became pregnant did David consider her anything more than a convenient outlet for his lusts. Even while on the run from King Saul, David began to multiply wives in disregard of God’s plan for marriage and in direct disobedience of the law for kings in Deuteronomy 17:17.

This inclination was so well known to David’s court that when he became old, they brought a beautiful young virgin to his bed to serve as his nurse and warm him (I Kings 1:1–4). “As I think of what happened, of this I am sure, that it did not happen all at once. This matter of Bathsheba was simply the climax of something that had been going on in his life for twenty years” (Alan Redpath, *The Making of a Man of God*).

That David would murder one of his devoted mighty men to cover up his adultery is surprising, given his merciful treatment of many who had wronged him. However, David was a “man of war” (I Chronicles 28:3) who was accustomed to violence and slaughter. It is often easy for such a man to forget the

value of life and loyalty when his reputation and authority are at risk. The appearance of getting away with one sin often leads to a boldness in committing others. Before David committed these sins, he was involved in patterns of behavior that may not themselves have been sin, but made him more open to temptation when opportunity arose.

C. His Sin Was Exposed

The story of David's sins is one of the best-known stories of the Bible. It formed the factual basis for the 1951 motion picture "David and Bathsheba" and the background story in novels such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Crooked Man*, and Joseph Heller's *God Knows*. It has been portrayed in the Broadway musical *King David* by Alan Menken and Tim Rice, and it is mentioned in popular secular songs such as "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen, "The Angel of Death Came to David's Room" by the rock group MewithoutYou, and Sting's "Mad about You." The story of David's sin even appears on some college entrance exams to earn advanced placement in English.

Dean Ludwig and Clinton Longenecker coined the term "The Bathsheba Syndrome" to refer to authority figures whose moral failures occur in part due to their success as leaders. There are few clearer examples of how a secret sin can come to define the public perception of the sinner. Concerning this story, G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "In the whole of the Old Testament literature there is no chapter more tragic or full of solemn and searching warning than this."

David's attempt to keep his sins hidden was doomed to failure and only multiplied the offense. Even discounting God's knowledge, David had involved a number of servants and the Jewish army itself in carrying out the sins. Bathsheba was from an important family, the daughter of Eliam, one of David's mighty men and the granddaughter of Ahithophel, a chief advisor to David. Her husband Uriah the Hittite was also a mighty man, whose suspicious death in battle followed immediately by the remarriage of his widow and the subsequent delivery of a child had to raise eyebrows.

David only fooled himself by thinking he

could cover his sins. But that is exactly the point. As long as he fooled himself, he could pretend there would be no consequences for his actions. He could hide his guilt from himself and face himself in the mirror saying, "I'm not like that. That was an aberration. The circumstances made me do it." That is why the prophet Nathan's proclamation, "Thou art the man" (II Samuel 12:7) was so shocking to David. David's sense of justice could be aroused against a rich man who stole his poor neighbor's pet lamb, but he could not face the fact that He was guilty of far more heinous acts. David still loved righteousness and hated iniquity. He still wanted to be a good and just king. The reality of his sins were too horrific to bear, but he could not deal with them until the man of God brought them to the forefront of his consciousness.

Through the prophet, God told David, "Thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun" (II Samuel 12:12). Rather than denying, excusing, or minimizing his guilt, David simply replied, "I have sinned against the LORD" (verse 13). This too revealed David as a man after God's own heart. David's six-word response (just two words in Hebrew) made the difference between continued slavery to sin or restoration and forgiveness. Immediately upon David's admission of being guilty of sin, Nathan proclaimed, "The LORD also hath put away thy sin."

II. DAVID'S PRAYER OF REPENTANCE

"I have sinned against the Lord" is the essential foundation of all prayers of repentance. Subsequent to the events recorded in II Samuel 12, David penned a Hebrew poem that more fully expressed what he felt at that moment. This poem was set to music as a psalm and sent to the chief musician to be included in the public worship of the Temple that would be built after David's death. James L. Mays called Psalm 51 the fullest exposition of the sentence "I have sinned" in the Bible (*Psalms: Interpretation Commentary*). He argued that Psalm 51 may be said in full or in part more often in public worship and private devotion than any other Scripture.

A. David Came to God in Humility

David began the psalm by humbly

admitting He needed God's grace followed by a three-fold plea for cleansing. The wording of this prayer implied David's recognition of the deepest personal guilt without any defense or appeal to mitigating circumstances.

David's first petition was for mercy (to show gracious favor). This request was not based on any good David may have done or service he may have rendered unto God, but on God's lovingkindness (faithful loyalty motivated by a character of goodness and kindness).

Next he prayed that God would blot out his transgressions. While it would be common in such a prayer to ask for forgiveness, David knew that forgiveness of sin is not sufficient. The transgression must be wiped away in the record in Heaven and all traces obliterated as if it had not occurred. This request was founded upon the multitude of God's tender mercies (feelings of loving compassion). As is common in Hebrew poetry, the second verse was parallel in thought to the second petition in verse one. It repeated and expanded upon the petition to blot out David's iniquity by requesting that God wash him thoroughly from his iniquity and cleanse him from his sin. "Wash" and "cleanse" are synonyms as are "iniquity" and "sin." Thus David asked that the divine record be expunged and that he be personally cleansed.

B. David Took Personal Responsibility for His Sin

In Psalm 51:3 David stated, "I acknowledge my transgressions." The word *acknowledge* means more than just "admit." Rather it involves noticing, realizing, or discovering one's sinfulness so that one becomes aware of its nature and is confronted by its reality. This was the result of Nathan's declaration "Thou art the man." The first step in real repentance is recognizing the true nature of sin and accepting responsibility for one's transgressions.

David then stated, "My sin is ever before me." Those who are repentant cannot hide from the sin within them. Rather, they keep it continually before their mental vision. "Mock penitents confess their sins, and straightway forget them. Real genuine ones find it impossible to forget" (G. Rawlinson, *Psalms: The Pulpit Commentary*).

C. He Confessed and Asked Forgiveness

Verses 5 and 6 expand the prayer beyond the confession of particular sins, to an acknowledgement of human sinfulness. "I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" presents the truth that we are sinners by nature even before we are old enough to choose to sin. Because God "desirest truth in the inward parts" it is "in the hidden part" that God will make the repentant one to know wisdom. Thomas Cheyne (quoted in the *Pulpit Commentary*) pointed out that the first part of verse 6 is equivalent to "nothing will content thee but this perfect, inward purity" and the second is a plea that the repentant will be given godly wisdom, which is the heart of godly perfection.

Given the sinfulness of humanity in the face of God's call for perfection, forgiveness for one sin or even a multitude of sins is not enough. There is only one remedy that can purge the human heart. Hyssop was prescribed in the leitical law for spiritual defilement caused by leprosy (Leviticus 14:4) or coming into contact with a corpse (Numbers 19:18). The hyssop was dipped in blood and sprinkled on the defiled. In the first part of Psalm 51:7, sinfulness is pictured as a leprosy of the soul bringing us into contact with this body of death (Romans 7:24). Only the sprinkling of the blood of Christ can cleanse us. To be washed in the blood of the Lamb makes us whiter than snow. (See Isaiah 1:18.)

D. He Was Restored

We saw in II Samuel 12:13 that immediately upon David's confession "I have sinned against the LORD," God responded through the prophet Nathan, "The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die." As soon as he called, God answered. David was spared the full penalty for adultery and murder demanded by the Law.

Beginning at Psalm 51:9 we see that the truly repentant are not just seeking to avoid punishment or desiring relief from the guilt and shame of sin. David again asked that his iniquities be blotted out so God would hide His face from seeing them. He desired more than forgiveness, purification, and cleansing. He needed a divine act of creation and renewal (verse 10). "Many of the prayers

for help say, 'Change my situation so I may praise you.' This one says, 'Change me; I am the problem'" (J. L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation Commentary*).

Forgiveness by God and restoration to His good pleasure does not necessarily mean we will escape the temporal consequences of our wrongdoing. The eternal consequences are wiped out by God's forgiveness, but He does not always shield us from paying the costs of the sin itself. There is a difference between suffering judgment for sin and receiving the judgment of sin. A former smoker may still die of lung cancer. A former shopping addict may still suffer symptoms of withdrawal and remain overwhelmed with debt. A former angry and prideful father may still find his relationship to his children damaged or broken.

This is especially true when the sin involves or is known to others. While all believers are expected to walk blamelessly, as a God-ordained king, David's sins reflected directly upon God and God's people. (See I Timothy 3:13; James 3:1.) Nathan told David that "thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme" (II Samuel 12:14). David's actions were exactly what many of these enemies would have done in the same situation. That David's failures were not unusual for the kings of the world did not mean those kings would excuse them in David. Sinners usually hold believers to a higher standard than they demand of themselves. And when believers fail to keep that standard, it is God who receives the blame.

In Psalm 51:4 David wrote, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest." This in no way diminishes the fact that David sinned against Uriah, Bathsheba, Joab, and the entire nation of Israel. David recognized that sins against one's neighbor are ultimately sins against God. More importantly, the smallest offense against God is far more vile than the greatest wrongdoing against man. With this understanding, David knew and accepted that God would be justified in allowing the harshest penalty for his sins.

We may ask ourselves, *Why has this evil befallen me?* The simple answer is this: because we live in a sinful world. In light

of human imperfections and our total dependence on God's mercy and grace, we should be more surprised by the many blessings that fall upon both the just and the unjust. If we truly understood the depth of our failings, we would declare God to be justified and clear whatever His judgment might be.

III. REPENTANCE INVOLVES GODLY SORROW

A. Godly Sorrow Produces Repentance

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (II Corinthians 7:10). This verse has often been misinterpreted to mean that godly sorrow is repentance. Some doubt that an individual can be truly repentant unless he or she is outwardly emotional. Of course, repentance is much more than an expression of sorrow or a venting of emotion, but sorrow is frequently a motivation for repentance, and repenting is often an extremely emotional process. In Psalm 51:8, David likened the pain of sin to broken (literally "crushed") bones. Those who do not feel such pain in their souls at the thought of their sin will find it difficult to repent. If sin is merely an inconvenience or annoyance, they can learn to ignore or tolerate it.

B. Repentant Prayer Empties the Soul for God's Spirit

Verse 11 demonstrates the seriousness of a believer's unrepentant sins. David recognized he was in a dangerous position. If he remained too long in an unrepentant state, God might cast him away and take the Spirit from him. Instead, through repentance David could once again experience the "joy of thy salvation" (verse 12) and be sustained by God's generous Spirit. The remainder of the psalm speaks of the fruitful life lived in the Spirit and contrasts outward expressions of religion with true expressions of salvation. The Spirit is given space to work in our lives only when we unclutter our souls through frequent heartfelt repentance. (See Hebrews 12:1.)

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The life in Christ is characterized by joy and gladness (Psalm 51:8), dependence on God's grace (verse 9), the new-birth experience (verse 10), living in His presence by His Spirit (verse 11), the joy of salvation (verse 12), witnessing and evangelism (verse 13), deliverance and singing (verse 14), and lips that praise God (verse 15). These joys come from a repentant life. God does not become frustrated by those who frequently come to Him seeking restoration because of sin (verse 17). His frustration is with those who see themselves as too holy to repent—whose sins are hidden from their own eyes with excuses or justifications. For the saint, repentance is “the walls of Jerusalem” (verse 18)

and the sacrifice of righteousness (verse 19).

While sinners may come to God with prayers similar to Psalm 51, it is foremost a prayer for the saint. The prayer became a psalm to be used in public worship, sung by a choir, and accompanied by instruments. Its inception was a horrendous sin that all sane people would recognize as evil, but only in the title do we find that connection named. Sin need not be so blatant and public. It may be something we excuse as a simple human foible, personality defect, bad habit, or poor character trait. It may be the failure to do some small good when given the opportunity. Still, it is sin, and it is deadly. It is not the sinner living apart from God who needs this psalm. It is us. ■

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the statement “Every evil we face each day, be it moral, physical, social, or spiritual is the direct result of human sin.”
- Why didn't the adultery and murder David committed disqualify him from being king? Why was he still called a man after God's own heart?
- What songs of repentance are a part of twenty-first century Apostolic worship? Do these songs serve the same function as Psalm 51?
- Ask a member of the class to lead the group in a prayer of corporate repentance.