

Conditional Forgiveness?

Sin in the Christian Life

1 John 1:9-10

Summary: Sin results in 1) condemnation, 2) guilt, 3) defilement, and 4) estrangement from God. Justification deals with #1 absolutely, but 3-4 in a non-absolute way in this life. There is still culpability, and a defiling, alienating effect when Christians sin, and the remedy is confession. According to Paul, David had sound teaching on the doctrine of justification by faith in Ps.32 (where he confesses sin), which means Ps.51 is a good place to learn how confession should look. He asks for forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration of the joy of nearness to God. Sin detonates a bomb in your heart that requires nothing short of re-creation. Praise God that He is a re-Creator!

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⁵ Now this is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in Him. ⁶ If we say, "We have fellowship with Him," and walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say, "We have no sin," we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say, "We have not sinned," we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. 2:1 My little children, I am writing you these things so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father-- Jesus Christ the righteous One. ² He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world.

Problem: Are Christians forgiven or not?

This section of 1 John we are currently studying is all about the solution to the problem of sin in the life of the Christian. It is a wonderful and important passage, but also a very controversial and difficult one, and the core of the difficulty is this – are we Christians forgiven or not?

Justification & Imputation

The doctrine of justification would seem to suggest that our sins are completely forgiven and will never be held against us. The moment you first believed and entrusted your life to Christ, you were justified, which means all your sins were credited to Jesus' account and all His perfect righteousness was credited to your account. Justification does not come and go as we commit sins. The believer is always justified before God – even while he is in the middle of committing a sin.

However our problem with sin still needs attention (conditional)

So if that is all we knew, we might conclude that our sin problem is completely taken care of and needs no attention. But John tells us that even as believers there are some things we need to do to deal with our sin problem. We need to walk in the light (that is, live according to the truth). We need to confess our sins – to God and to one another. If we confess our sins and walk in the light He will forgive and cleanse us, if we do not He will not. And that confession is not talking about conversion. It is in the present tense – linear, ongoing, continuous action. So there is the difficulty. How is it that our sins can be dealt with completely by the cross and yet we still have to do something in order to be receiving forgiveness and cleansing on a routine basis? How can those both be true?

Solution: only justification is absolute in this life – not sanctification

To answer that question we need to think through what happens when someone sins. Sin creates a number of problems, the worst of which is condemnation. Condemnation means a final sentence of death - eternal hell. That is one of the results of sin.

But Scripture also talks about other things that happen as a result of sin. Sin defiles us and makes a person dirty and repulsive to God, which means he cannot approach His presence. Sin also makes a person guilty before Him so that he deserves punishment. And the result of that is estrangement from God.

No condemnation

Now, when you became a Christian what happened with all that? What happened with regard to the problems of condemnation, guilt, defilement/contamination, and estrangement from God? Well, first of all, justification eliminated the problem of condemnation completely.

Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus

John 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son

John 5:24 I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

Romans 8:33-34 Who can bring an accusation against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is he that condemns?

So no one who is joined together with Jesus Christ by faith is condemned. Everyone else is. But for Christians, no matter how bad or how often they mess up, no matter who accuses them, no matter what Satan tries to pull – they cannot be condemned if they are in Christ. So for the believer, the condemnation problem is no longer an issue.

But what about the other problems? What about the defiling and alienating effects of sin and our guilt before God? Those were also addressed at the moment of conversion.

Forgiveness at conversion

Obviously we receive forgiveness at conversion.

Acts 2:38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"

So the problem of filthiness in the heart is addressed at conversion, and so is the problem of guilt. To those who rejected Christ, Jesus said

John 9:41 your guilt remains.

John 3:36 whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

Contrary to what Bob George teaches, unbelievers are not forgiven. They remain guilty and are still fully culpable before God for their sin. But we have been forgiven.

1 John 2:12 I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

Colossians 2:13 When you were dead in your sins ... God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins

Cleansing at conversion

The non-Christian (who is separated from Christ) is utterly defiled by his or her sin. There is nothing in them that is pure – they are 100% contaminated defilement. But when a person becomes a Christian he is washed.

Titus 3:5 He saved us through the washing of rebirth

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed

So the non-Christian is nothing but dirty, and the Christian has been washed clean.

Reconciliation at conversion

Because of the fact that the world is defiled and contaminated because of their sin, and their sins are not forgiven, the result is total estrangement from God. They cannot know Him, cannot love Him, cannot have fellowship with Him, and are utterly separated from Him relationally because they are repulsive to Him. They are His enemies, and cannot approach His presence at all because of His anger toward them. Non-Christians are alienated from God and far from God. But those who are in Christ are reconciled to God.

Colossians 1:21-22 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²² But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight

Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

Though we were once His enemies, God has adopted us as His own children.

Romans 8:15 you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

So, when you became a Christian you were rescued from all the perils of sin – condemnation, defilement, guilt, and estrangement from God.

But not absolute

However, there is a difference between our deliverance from condemnation and our deliverance from defilement, guilt and estrangement. Justification is absolute in this life – sanctification is not. Forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation are not absolute in this life. We are delivered in every way from condemnation – there is zero condemnation for those who are in Christ. Our justification is as perfect and as complete as it will ever be. But we are not delivered from the defilement of sin in every way...yet. And the same is true of the guilt-producing and alienating effects of sin. Those have been dealt with in a marvelous and astounding way at conversion, but not in an absolute way like they will be when we go to heaven. In this life, even as justified saints, our sins still make us guilty before God in one sense, they still make us dirty on the inside, and they distance us from the presence of God. It is not like it is for the unbeliever – who has no access to the presence of God whatsoever. But there is a very real kind of estrangement from God that takes place when we sin.

King illustration

Imagine a powerful king who is at war with a bitter enemy. Anyone who sides with the enemy is barred from the king's castle, which is an impenetrable fortress. There is a huge moat filled with crocodiles, giant walls with guards every few feet, and every other defense imaginable. There is absolutely no way in, which is good for his enemies, because if one of the enemies ever did somehow make it in he would be immediately put to death. Now imagine that you used to be one of those enemies. But you left that side and came to the king for forgiveness. He freely pardoned your treason, and not only welcomed you into his kingdom, but loved you so much he adopted you as his own son (or daughter).

So now your relationship with him has become very, very close and you dearly love each other. And you love to come into his throne room and spend time with Him. However from time to time you do rebel against His authority and resist him to his face. When you do that you are still his son, and you are still in his palace, but until you give up the rebellion you cannot come into the room where he is.

Relationship with God is dynamic (pleased vs. grieved)

That is not a perfect illustration, but I think it does give us a general picture of what our relationship with God is like. It is dynamic, not static. In other words – it changes. It does not just stay the same all the time. It grows and declines and has great victories and it has setbacks. There are times of thrilling nearness to Him and times of bitter estrangement from Him. 2 Corinthians 5:9 says we make it our goal to please Him, and Ephesians 4:30 warns us not to grieve Him. So sometimes He is more pleased with us and other times He is more grieved by us.

Grieving God → Estrangement

And when God is grieved He turns His face away from you, which means His favorable presence becomes less accessible to you. It is always accessible to some degree if you are a Christian, but when we rebel against God by breaking one of His commands and resisting His perfect will, the consequence is that we have less access to the joy and peace and hope and strengthening and rest and renewal and courage and all the other things that come from the nearness of His presence. That is what it means for God to turn His

face away from you. There is still *some* access to those things, but not nearly as much as when He is pleased with you. So when God's people sin they pray things like:

Psalm 27:9 Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior.

Psalm 13:1-2 How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?

Because of defilement

And one reason why God withdraws the nearness of His presence from us when we sin is because, even as Christians our sin does have a defiling, contaminating effect on us. It makes us dirty on the inside and in need of cleansing. The Old Testament pictures associate sin with the most disgusting things there are – excrement, a decaying corpse, leprous boils, and all the grossest, most sickening things there are. Sin is filthy to think of, filthy to talk about, filthy to desire, filthy to do. It is utterly detestable and offensive to God, and it contaminates your entire being. It makes you repulsive to God, which is why no one can come into God's presence without having been cleansed. If you study what the Bible says about cleansing you will find that the purpose of cleansing is to enable a person to approach the presence of God.

Hebrews 10:22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

If you want to draw near to God, you must first be cleansed and washed from the defiling, contaminating effect of sin. God will not endorse our sin by allowing us to draw near to Him without that sin being washed away.

Bathed but still need to be washed

Now, I realize this may be a new concept for some of you. You may be thinking, "If I am cleansed and completely washed from head to toe at the moment of salvation, why would I ever need any more cleansing?" Jesus answered that question for us in John 13. This is the chapter where Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and in doing so He was teaching them an important lesson about humility, love and servanthood. But that is not all He was teaching them.

John 13:6-12 He came to Simon Peter, who asked Him, "Lord, are You going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered him, "What I'm doing you don't understand now, but afterwards you will know." ⁸ "You will never wash my feet-- ever!" Peter said. Jesus replied, "If I don't wash you, you have no part with Me."

Can you see there that this is more than just a lesson on servanthood? It is also a lesson about being cleansed by Jesus Christ. The physical washing of the feet with water was an illustration of a spiritual cleansing that had to take place in order to have a part with Christ. Nearness to Christ and close fellowship with Him can only happen if He washes you. And Peter got the message loud and clear.

⁹ Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not only my feet, but also my hands and my head."

If it is a matter of being cut off from the nearness of Christ if he is not washed by Jesus, Peter wants to be washed from head to toe. And at this point you might expect that Jesus would say, "Good! Now you got it." But He doesn't. Jesus does not go along with the bath request.

¹⁰ "One who has bathed," Jesus told him, "doesn't need to wash anything except his feet, but he is completely clean."

If you are a Christian the whole of your being has already been cleansed. You got the full bath at conversion. All that is needed now is to wash your feet. The total, systemic, filthiness and contamination you had as an unbeliever is wiped away. But as you walk through life and commit sins you pick up dirt on your feet, and that needs to be cleansed repeatedly – day by day as you keep stepping into the mud by committing sins. And without those routine cleansings Jesus says, "You have no part with Me." Jesus said that to a man who had been completely cleansed already. There is a contaminating effect that sin has inside the heart of a Christian.

So, when you become a Christian, condemnation is out of the picture and the problems of defilement, guilt, and separation from the presence of God are greatly changed as well. Instead of being locked out of the castle, you are adopted into the king's own family. Instead of being filthy from head to toe, inside and out, through and through with zero purity, you have been completely cleansed by Jesus Christ and all your past sins have been washed away.

Cleansing and forgiveness and fellowship come through repentance (walk in the light and confess)

However, there is still a sense in which contamination and separation are an issue. Even as a child of the king you can provoke him to shut you out of his presence because of the contamination of your sin. So as Christians what we need is to sin less, and when we do sin, to be cleansed and forgiven. In 2:1 John is going to tell us how to do #1 – how to sin less. But he also wants us to understand how to obtain cleansing and forgiveness from the sins we do commit so we are not estranged from God.

And as we have seen throughout chapter one, the way to do that is to repent. You give up your excursion into the darkness and come back into the light. You confess your sins – both to brothers and sisters in Christ and to God. You acknowledge the truth about yourself, and you embrace the truth about God and strive to live in light of that truth. And when we do that, John says we get three things...

1. Forgiveness (He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins – verse nine)
2. Cleansing (the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin verse seven, and He is faithful and just to cleanse us from all unrighteousness verse nine).
3. Reconciliation (we have fellowship with God verse three)

David's example

Argument for validity

We have already covered some basic, general, broad principles about confession. But it left us wondering about specific application. Exactly what should it look like when a godly man confesses his sin? What kind of role does sorrow play? What should be the main focus of your confession? What sorts of things should you say to God? If only we had an example from Scripture of how to talk to God about our sin. We do!

When we studied the life of David we found that Scripture is clear that one reason why we have so many details of David's life, (and there is more written about David than any other person except the Lord Himself), is because God wants us to imitate David's faith. His life is an example for us.

Now, some of those folks who want to say that 1 John one does not apply to believers will say, "You cannot follow David's example – that is the Old Covenant!" David did not understand about the new situation with forgiveness of sin in the New Covenant- his example was applicable only during OT times. The person we need to look to is the Apostle Paul. He knew what he was talking about with regard to sin and forgiveness in the New Covenant. Fine – let's go right to the heart of Paul's teaching on justification by faith – Romans 4.

When Paul wants to explain to us about sin and forgiveness and justification for the believer in the New Covenant, what does he say? He quotes... David.

Romans 4:7-8 "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

That is a quotation right out of Psalm 32, where David confesses his sin. In Romans four Paul is teaching us about justification by faith alone, and the whole doctrine comes from Abraham in Genesis 12 and David in the Psalms. There is nothing uniquely New Covenant about justification by faith alone. So, if anyone was reluctant to look at David's example of how to deal with sin in the life of the believer, hopefully now that Paul himself directed us to David's prayers of confession we can feel comfortable going there. Are there some important differences between the Old Testament time and the New Testament time? Of course. But it is very important that you understand that forgiveness of sin and justification by faith is not among those differences. That is the same now as it was then. And when David confesses his sin, you will never guess what things he asks for: Cleansing, forgiveness, and restoration of nearness to God.

Confession

When we think of what confession is, it seems like a very simple matter – acknowledgement of guilt. You raise your hand and say, "I did it. Guilty as charged." And David definitely does that in this prayer.

Psalm 51:3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned¹ and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. 5 Behold! I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.

Notice all the plurals. You might expect a guy who committed adultery to talk a lot about "the sin." But David speaks not just of one sin but of his sinfulness in general. It is like he saw this boulder of his adultery and murder roll down the hill, and all it did was open his eyes to the Mount Everest of wickedness inside him. He talks about sin as being right at the core of his DNA – there from conception – always before his face.

True confession admits to wrong actions, but does not stop there. It acknowledges the polluted well out of which that sinful action came. When we say, "Wow, I don't know why I did that evil thing, but it certainly wasn't in my heart," we are not truly confessing our sin. It was in your heart – that is why you did it. We need to confess not only the tip, but also the whole iceberg.

So there is no question that when we confess our sins that involves acknowledging our guilt. When David says that God is justified in judging him, that is an admission of guilt. However that is nowhere near all there is to it. It is possible to acknowledge you committed a crime and be proud of it; or to laugh it off as a joke; or to think nothing of it. But true confession is the cry of an anguished soul that is crushed with sorrow over the sin.

¹ David knew that he sinned against people too. He sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, his own wives, and the entire nation. But he also understood that the only thing that makes sin against anybody an evil thing is the fact that it is against God. Sin is a violation of God's law. So sin against people is only sin *because* it is sin against God. That is the only thing that makes it evil. And the people we sin against are deserving of good treatment only because God loves them and desires good treatment for them. And so God really is the one against whom we commit all our sin – even though we also hurt people along the way

And if you think about it – what a marvelous truth this is, that all sin is ultimately against God. Imagine what it would be like if there were sins that were outside the scope of what God could forgive. What if God sometimes said, "I can't do anything about that sin – you need to get forgiveness from the one you sinned against." If that were the case there would be many times when forgiveness would be impossible for us to obtain. We seek forgiveness from the people we sinned against because that is part of being restored to God. But our ultimate restoration and standing with God is never held hostage by their unwillingness to forgive.

16-17 You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; You are not pleased with a burnt offering.¹⁷ The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. God, You will not despise a broken and humbled heart.

Confession is true confession when it rises up out of a heart that has been humbled and broken and crushed, and that desires more than anything to be close with God once again. And that desire will be expressed by seeking forgiveness, cleansing and restoration to intimacy.

Forgiveness

Function of compassion

Sometimes people say it is okay to confess your sins, but you should not ask for forgiveness, because you are already forgiven. But forgiveness is the very first thing David asked for.

Psalm 51:1,2 A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had come to Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

9 Turn Your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt.

When a Christian sins there is a record, and God's face is turned toward that record. There is real guilt – not just guilt feelings, but actual guilt before God. (Guilt feelings are when you feel bad for your sin. Actual guilt is when you are culpable before God and actually deserving of harshness from Him because of your sin.) David is asking God to blot out the record of the guilt and turn His face away from the sin. Whatever God's face is toward, is the thing that will be the basis of how God acts toward you. So if His face is toward your guilt, that means He is going to deal with you in accordance with that guilt. In other words, He is going to deal harshly with you. Condemnation is not the issue, but painful earthly consequences, distance from His favorable presence, vulnerability to more failure, etc. are very real possibilities. Sometimes when we sin God showers us with mercy. Other times He stings us with the rod. If His face is toward your guilt that means it is going to be the rod. And so David asks God to look away from His guilt and operate instead according to His great mercy.

The mercy of God was the starting point for David. Before he even mentions his sin he appeals to God's mercy, love and compassion. His sights are fixed on God's nature even more than on his own guilt. God's forgiveness is a function of His compassion. He is motivated to show mercy because He feels compassion inside His heart for you. God actually feels sorry for you because of your plight of having to be the object of His displeasure! And the compassion God has toward you when He looks at the horrible plight you are in when you sin - that compassion is so vast, so deep, so high, so wide - that though your sins outnumber the hairs on your head, His mercy outnumbers the stars in the sky. His mercy is vast both in quality and quantity. He shows mercy over and over and over as we keep repeating our sins. And the depth of His compassion reaches far beneath even the lowest and most base of our sinful motives and rises far above even the highest, most scandalous evils. Oh, what a beautiful and welcome sight is the Lord's mercy to the broken sinner!

And one way to experience His compassion, by the way, is to let that very compassion flow through you to others who have sinned. When we see people sin we should be filled with compassion toward them. There is a place for righteous anger, but we know our anger is not righteous if it is devoid of genuine feelings of compassion toward the sinner.

So, when we sin there is a time of chastisement and consequence during which God deals with us more according to His displeasure than His compassion. That chastisement is always 100% redemptive – never mere punishment.² However it is still painful, so David is making a heartfelt appeal for God to bring that

² Heb.12:9-11, Ro.8:1, 1 Cor.11:32, Micah 7:8,9

time to an end sooner rather than later. It is a good thing to plead with God to deal with us according to His mercy and compassion in a time when we have provoked Him to deal harshly with us. That is what it means to ask forgiveness.

Cleansing

Believed God would cleanse him

The next thing David asks for is cleansing.

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

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

The thought of being repulsive to God is absolutely intolerable to David. He cannot stand the thought so he wants more than anything to be clean. David's prayer was not to appeal the earthly consequences; he just begged to be clean. And he fully believed that God would do it. He said "Wash me and I will be whiter than snow." So many times we say, "Dear Lord, please cleanse me" but deep down we have no expectation that He will do so. But there is no doubt in David's mind. If you think your sin is too big, too ugly, too frequent, too inexcusable to be forgiven, or the stains are too indelible and ground in to ever be fully clean, spend some more time thinking about the cross, and how great a price was actually paid for your sin.

Reconciliation

David was miserable because of estrangement

So David prays for forgiveness, he prays for cleansing, and then one more - he prays for reconciliation with God. David was miserable.

Psalm 32:3-4 ...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.

And David knew exactly what was going on. That pain and agony was not because of a chemical imbalance, it was not hormones, it was not low blood sugar - it was not even the harsh circumstances of his life. It was estrangement from the God with Whom he had walked so closely in the past, so David begs for that closeness to be restored. He knew from experience that nearness to God was the source of real joy and he longed for that joy once again.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.³

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation

³ The image of God breaking our bones is a powerful one. When we hold one of our precious children in our arms the most unimaginable thing we could conceive would be for to break one of their bones. To intentionally apply to her the force necessary to break a bone – it's unimaginable. If that would be hard for us, who are evil, how much more painful must it be for God, who loves us more than we love our children? God gave His Son to die so that our bones could be guarded and protected. God protects us from injury every moment of every day. What vastness of offence it must take to move Him to take His great hands from protecting us, to take a firm grip, and to snap our bones! Oh, what an ocean of evil must be required to cause the great Fountain of infinite love to do that to His child whom He loves!

What blasphemy it is when God brings disaster into the life of a Christian and that Christian assumes there is no good reason for it. Or that God is doing it for a small reason – just to teach some little lesson. God does not willingly bring grief on His children (Lam.3:33). He would never allow even the slightest pain unless the benefit that came out of it was massive enough to far outweigh the pain.

Usually when you are in the depths of depression, and you feel like your very bones have been crushed, in times like that we think it is a big thing just to pray, “God, help me get out of bed.” We ask for little, small things, because asking to go from the depths of despair to the heights of exuberant joy just seems unrealistic. But David knew what it was like to be close to God, and there was not any question in his mind that he would be full of joy if God would just turn His face toward David.

So when we sin, and God turns His face away, it is crucial that we interpret that for what it is – the expression of God’s displeasure over our sin – because only then will you appreciate the joy of restoration. It is a big prayer for David to say, “Let the bones You have crushed rejoice.” But it is an even bigger thing to ask “Let the bones You have not crushed rejoice.” To experience the sweetness of restoration we must feel the sting of broken fellowship. I am not saying you should interpret all trials as a sign of God’s displeasure, but when we seek earnestly after Him and do not receive the joy and peace and delight that come from the nearness of His presence, it should sober us to think that He has turned His face away. And the purpose of that turning away is chastisement to drive us to seek more earnestly. The more excruciating the sting of lost fellowship, the more rich and full and overpowering will be the joy of restored fellowship.⁴ When the world gets relief from their superficial griefs all it brings is an even more superficial joy.

David wants restored joy – but not just for the sake of joy. He wants joy for the sake of praise.

Psalm 51:15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

The reason David wanted joy was so that he could praise God. Only God can open the lips of praise. David knew a lot of great psalms, he knew the verbiage and terminology – he could craft all kinds of excellent statements of praise; but he could not open his own lips in true praise. Saying the right words is within our power. Generating enough joy and delight in God for true praise to come out of our mouths is not within our immediate control. It is a work of God.

Conclusion

As Christians we are in constant danger of falling into error on one of two extremes on either side of the truth about our sin. On the one extreme is the error of focusing only on God’s forgiveness and underestimating the magnitude of the defiling effect of sin in our lives. The other extreme is the error of focusing only on the guilt of our sin and failing to appreciate the magnitude of Christ’s sacrifice and God’s forgiveness. I plan on going hard after that second error. We will look into the glories and wonders of the incalculable grace available to us and the completeness of cleansing we can enjoy.

But before we can appreciate that we need to take seriously this matter of real guilt and real defilement and real estrangement from God in the Christian life when we sin. Listen to how radical a solution David called for.

Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart Oh God

He calls for an actual act of creation – not just restoration, but creation. David had wreaked such devastation and destruction within himself that only a God who can call a Universe into being by a single word is capable of the kind of restoration he needed. The same is true for us.

In our natural thinking it seems like our sin is just a slip-up, and all that is needed is for us to be more careful next time – or to try a little harder next time. But the truth is, when we sin there is a bomb that detonates inside our soul and the devastation that results – especially the damage done to our affections – is staggering. Satan will try to tell you that if you just do some little sin it’s not going to hurt anything, and you will be able to get right back on track with your walk with God without missing a beat. And so we listen to him, and we sin, and a bomb detonated inside us that sends defiling, contaminating shrapnel throughout our

⁴ Another thing this shows us is the folly of thinking, “I’ll just sin and then repent and God will restore me.” First of all there is no guarantee you will ever genuinely repent if you have an attitude like that. But even if you do – restoration may very well come through God breaking your bones and then resetting them. That’s not what you want.

soul. After the detonation we desire God and His Word less, sin is more attractive to us, heaven seems like a distant, irrelevant mirage; righteousness loses its appeal, Scripture becomes dry, the world gets big and God gets small, and spiritual things just do not seem real. There is no greater oxymoron than the phrase “a harmless little sin.” There are some sins that are more devastating than others, but there are no sins that are harmless.

But God is not only the Creator but the re-Creator. He repairs what is broken and “restores the years the locust have eaten” (which means He undoes the damage inflicted by His own chastisement). When the bomb goes off the damage is exceedingly painful, and the restoration may be a long, painful process; but when it does come it is beautiful. There is never a life so devastated that God can not fully redeem it. He makes all things beautiful in His time. The damage and devastation in your life can be redeemed – not just patched up or turned toward some small good, but fully restored into something more beautiful than it ever was before. The more hopeless the mess, the greater the glory when He redeems it.

But that glory is marred and obscured if He brings that restoration in a context in which it will not be obvious where the restoration came from. And so very often God withholds the restoration until we cry out to Him with the kind of desperation David had in Psalm 51, so that when the restoration comes there is no chance at all that we will believe the lie that we pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps, or that the instruments God used to restore us (other people, circumstances, etc.) were the source of our restoration. David experienced God’s re-Creation but only after offering one of the most earnest, desperate prayers ever recorded. No wonder his response, after God restored him, was,

Psalm 32:1-11 Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ² Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.

Only when our eyes are opened to the desolate wasteland that is left behind in our hearts by our sin will we have any idea of the blessedness of the man who is restored from that. And it should be our craving and deep longing for that blessedness that should drive our prayers of repentance.

Benediction: Jeremiah 50:20 In those days, at that time," declares the LORD, "search will be made for Israel's guilt, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but none will be found, for I will forgive the remnant I spare.