

Summer Psalms

*¹ Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
² but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
(Psalms 1:1–2 ESV)*

*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.
(Psalms 29:2 ESV)*

Have Mercy On Me O God

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Psalm 51

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Psalm 51; that's on page 474 in your pew Bibles. We are told in the title of this Psalm that it was written after David's adultery with Bathsheeba and after he had been confronted by the prophet Nathan. That story is told in 2 Samuel 11-12; let me remind you of it quickly. David is approaching retirement. Most of his great battles lay in the past. He is not a young shepherd boy anymore and neither is he going out at the head of the armies of God. The story begins with these words:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. (2 Samuel 11:1 ESV)

David is secure, David is established and David is gearing down. There is a danger for men especially in too much relaxation. Men are made to work and retirement is never spoken of in a favourable way in Scripture. Sure enough, David got himself into trouble. You remember the story. He was up on the roof of his palace and he happened to see a beautiful young woman bathing naked on the roof of the house next door. Seeing the woman wasn't David's sin. Lingering and lusting over her was. He sent a servant to inquire about the woman – the servant replied:

“Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” (2 Samuel 11:3 ESV)

She is a married woman, David, the granddaughter of your Prime Minister and the wife of one of your soldiers. She is off limits. Go inside, you dirty old man. But David didn't. He sent for her and he lay with her and he sent her home again. O how the mighty have fallen! And it got worse. She became pregnant – OF COURSE SHE DID! David thought that no one would know – but David forgot God. She became pregnant, David panicked, he sent for Uriah who was fighting at the front thinking that Uriah would sleep with his wife and no one would be the wiser. But Uriah didn't sleep with his wife. He was an honourable man – a soldier's soldier and he refused to indulge in any comforts that would not be available to his men in the field. He went back to the front carrying a letter from David commanding his murder and betrayal. In just a few days David has gone from the best of men to the worst of men – that's what sin does.

After Uriah dies at the front, David marries Bathsheeba and he thinks that he has covered his tracks and that no one will know. But David has forgotten God. Chapter 11 ends with these ominous words:

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD. (2 Samuel 11:27 ESV)

God SEES and God sends a prophet – Nathan – and Nathan says to David: YOU ARE THE MAN! YOU ARE THE MAN who has sinned against God and has stolen the wife of another. You are a taker and a liar, and a rapist and a murderer and your sin has found you out.

It takes a brave man to speak that way to the king. But David was cut to the heart. He said:

“I have sinned against the LORD.” (2 Samuel 12:13 ESV)

He did not deny it; he did not make excuses. He OWNED IT. In that moment, under the Word of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit – David repented. He saw his sin and he saw the Lord. That's repentance and sometime after that David as he reflected upon his experience wrote Psalm 51. It is THE PSALM of repentance in the Bible. Martin Luther said about Psalm 51:

“Here the doctrine of true repentance is set forth before us. There are two elements in true repentance: recognition of

sin and recognition of grace.”¹

We will read Psalm 51 together and then examine it according to those categories. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!
3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. 6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. 14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; 19 then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar. (Psalms 51:1–19 ESV)

You’ve heard me say before that the Hebrew word for “repent” is the word “*shuv*”. It literally means to turn. Repentance is about turning away from sin and turning towards the grace of God. You cannot turn from sin until you are helped by God to see sin for what it is – you have to see it, you have to LOATH IT before you can stop loving it – only then can you turn towards God in humility, faith and desperation. That is what happened to David. Under the Word of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit he was enabled to recognize his sin and to take hold of the grace of God through humility and faith. That’s repentance. Lets take a look at some of what David has to say, first of all about the recognition of sin.

The Recognition Of Sin

David uses just about every POSSIBLE Hebrew word for sin in verses 1-5. He has been helped to understand sin in all of its ugly depth and breadth. The first thing he says is found in verse 1. He says that:

¹ Martin Luther as cited in *Reformation Commentary On Scripture, Old Testament VII* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 385.

1. Sin is rebellion against God

The word translated as “transgression” in the ESV is the word “*pasha*” and it means rebellion against authority – either human or divine.² In this case it is DIVINE authority that David has rebelled against. He is the king – he is the highest human authority in the land – but David here acknowledges that even the king is subject to Divine Authority and David has rebelled against that. He has broken the 6th and the 7th commandment.

Here is our first lesson in repentance – God is always the most offended party. David will come back to that in verse 4 – but here he begins by calling sin what it is. It is not a mistake, it is not poor judgment, it is not a bad decision – IT IS REBELLION AGAINST THE AUTHORITY OF GOD. It isn’t repentance until you admit that. You are a created thing. You are accountable to the authority of your Creator. This is the doggy door of real repentance. This is where Kings and commoners get on their knees before Almighty God. Repentance begins with acknowledging the authority of God as ULTIMATE and PRIMARY. That’s what sin is – it is defiance and rebellion against God.

Secondly David says:

2. Sin deserves punishment

In verse 2 David uses another word for sin – translated in the ESV as “iniquity”. This word, the Hebrew word “*aon*” refers to guilt and its associated punishment. David owns the consequences of his actions. With the first word in verse 1 he admits that he has broken the law of God. I have committed adultery. I have committed murder, David says. Now here he admits that there are appropriate consequences associated with those sins. David knows that in the Bible BOTH of those sins are punishable by death. That’s why he says in verse 16:

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it (Psalms 51:16 ESV)

There are no sacrifices in the Old Testament for adultery and murder. There is only death. David does not try and minimize his sin. He does not try to bargain with God. He says: “What I’ve

² KM Hebrew Dictionary, Accordance Version, H7322.

done is wrong. I deserve death and hell. I have offended against your law and I have wounded, hurt and killed other people. I deserve every consequence associated with my behaviour.”

That is REPENTANCE! When you own the act and the consequences. If you are bargaining with God, if you are defending your actions, if you are MINIMIZING the impact then you are not repenting. You are repenting when like David, you say – I did it. It was wrong. I own the consequences. That’s what it means to repent. That’s what positions you to beg the court for mercy. The judge does give mercy to people who are still arguing the verdict. You have to own it – in full – act and consequence. That’s what David did and it was wise.

Thirdly, David says that:

3. Sin is evil – it is an assault upon the person and character of God

Look at verse 4:

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight (Psalms 51:4 ESV)

Now you might quibble with what David has said – surely he sinned also against Bathsheeba and Uriah. But David here goes to the heart of the matter. All sin is ultimately and inevitably against God. To sin is to believe that God is not good. It is to “de-God God” and to put yourself and your own wants and needs at the centre of the universe. Sin certainly results in injury and hurt to other people – but even that is ultimately an assault upon God. The people we injure are themselves made in the IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD. If you spit upon a statue of the King then you assault the dignity of the King. And that is what people are. We are image bearers of the King and so any assault on human beings is ultimately an assault on God. That is the heart of the matter and David faces it head on.

Fourthly, David says that:

4. Sin is inherited and “original”

In verse 5 David says:

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. (Psalms 51:5 ESV)

Now David is not saying that the sex act by which he was conceived was sinful – men and women are TOLD by God to be fruitful and to multiply and God knows how that happens so this is not a condemnation of sex, rather it is an acknowledgment that people are sinners FROM conception. This is the doctrine referred to as “original sin”. It doesn’t refer to the first sin – the sin of Adam and Eve – it refers to the fact that we inherit from Adam and Eve – in our GENES as it were – a twistedness towards and an inclination for actual sin. According to the Bible we are SINNERS WHO SIN – that’s important! We are not sinners BECAUSE WE SIN – we are SINNERS WHO INEVITABLY SIN. Martin Luther actually said:

“This is the most difficult teaching of this Psalm, yes, of all Scripture or theology; without it, it is impossible to understand Scripture correctly, as the dreams of modern theologians prove.”³

You are a SINNER who sins – I am a SINNER who sins. What this means is that right down to the root – right down to the DNA we have been warped and twisted by sin. We are not now what we were created by God to be – can’t you just FEEL THAT in your soul? Don’t you just KNOW that to be true?

I’ve told you before that any coherent worldview has to attempt to answer two fundamental questions: Why is there something rather than nothing? And why are things not now the way we sense they should be? The Bible answers both of those questions with remarkable clarity. There is something rather than nothing because in the beginning GOD CREATED and things now are not the way we sense they should be because WE FELL. We sinned and we are changed. We desire things we shouldn’t, we believe things we shouldn’t, we DO THINGS we shouldn’t – we are sinners who sin – God help us!

That is what David has been woken up to by the Word of the Lord and by the operation of the Holy Spirit. He has helped to see that he is a sinner – root and fruit! He is a sinner who sins and he stands in desperate need of the mercy and grace of God. Lets take a look now at some of what David has to say about the recognition of grace.

³ Martin Luther as cited in *Reformation Commentary On Scripture, Old Testament VII* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 383.

The Recognition Of Grace

The first thing he says is found in verse 1. David is convinced that:

1. Grace is unwarranted

Having felt his sin David cries:

Have mercy on me, O God (Psalms 51:1 ESV)

The word translated as mercy is the Hebrew word “*chanan*”. It means have pity, be kind, show compassion. David knows that he has no legitimate claim upon the favour of Almighty God. There is nothing in him that would merit God’s continued blessing. He has BLOWN IT BIG TIME.

He has raped and murdered and lied. He is the man – he DID THAT and he cannot undo it.

All he can do now is beg for a mercy he does not deserve. You see, that’s what mercy is – that’s what grace is! If you think you deserve it then you have not understood it. You don’t know God, you don’t know sin and you are not saved. Grace received is ALWAYS received as a gift.

Secondly, David says that:

2. Grace comes from God’s commitment to his people

If we do not deserve it then why does God give it? The answer is in verse 1:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your **steadfast love** (Psalms 51:1 ESV)

David hopes for mercy because God has made a commitment to his people! The word translated there as “steadfast love” is the Hebrew word “*chesed*” - it means covenant love or committed

love. God is committed to his people. He made them for himself and he will not be thwarted by our sin. The whole Bible is built around that premise. When Adam and Eve sinned there were consequences but those consequences were never said to be final. Even in the midst of judgment God promised a coming salvation. He spoke to our enemy about our Savior; he said:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15 ESV)

This line of humans is not finished! You have not TRIUMPHED over them! A Seed will come – born of a woman – who will DEFEAT the devil at some cost to himself. That is the promise of the Gospel! That is God promising to come and set his people free! God made a commitment to himself and to us AND TO THE DEVIL that sin would not defeat his plan. His plan was for us to be with him and to enjoy him forever. David casts all of his hope upon God’s commitment to his Word. God will show mercy because God has promised to set his people free from the tyranny of sin and death. That is David’s only hope and plea.

Thirdly, David has come to understand that:

3. Grace is forensic

If you watch CSI – which you probably shouldn’t – then you know that “forensic” has to do with evidence. So when I say that God’s grace is “forensic” what I mean is that certain evidence has been destroyed or disqualified and other evidence has been admitted in our favour. David asks for this to happen, he says:

blot out my transgressions. (Psalms 51:1 ESV)

To “blot out” means to erase. So God obviously maintains an evidence book – multiple books actually. In Revelation 20, which depicts the Final Judgment, John says:

the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. (Revelation 20:12 ESV)

So David has a problem. He knows that what is written in the books is sufficient to sink his soul to hell. God has seen it and recorded it and it cannot be undone - his only hope is that God, by

sheer mercy, will obliterate the record. This is the great hope of the Old Testament prophets. Micah, for example, looked forward to a day when:

You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:19 ESV)

The prophets looked forward to that – the Apostles in the New Testament looked back upon it and they saw something that was even better than David hoped for. In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul says:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV)

That's even better than what David hoped for – this is the Great Forensic Exchange! Our sin is credited to Christ's account and his righteousness is credited to our account – this is what theologians refer to as imputation. No one has ever defined it more simply than A.A. Hodge. He said:

“The transfer is only of guilt from us to him, and of merit from him to us. He justly suffered the punishment due to our sins and we justly receive the rewards due to his righteousness”.⁴

That is the heart of the heart of the Gospel and that is amazing and forensic grace, praise the Lord!

Fourthly, David says that:

4. Grace is God changing the course of human sin

Look carefully at verse 4:

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, **so that** you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. (Psalms 51:4 ESV)

That is a purpose clause. God has purposes in David's sin – that's what the Bible says. Somehow – David's responsible agency and God's Sovereign purpose are both at work in David's sin. I realize that sounds complicated – Alec Motyer brings this down to street level

⁴ A.A. Hodge, *Outlines Of Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, reprinted 1999), 501.

when he says:

Divine purposeful working is so all embracing that, while God cannot at all be held responsible for man's sin, yet man's sin has its intended place in revealing the righteousness and justice of God."⁵

Part of repentance is seeing God's purpose even in our sin – you can do that of course, only AFTER you have taken full responsibility for it. But in faith and in hope, if you believe in the grace of God then you can begin to see how God has and will use your sin to bring you to himself and to fit you for life and ministry.

You can hear David's faith in that in verse 13. He says to God, 'if you forgive me and restore me then':

I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. (Psalms 51:13 ESV)

I can see how this will be used in my life to help and even to SAVE other people – that is part of God's marvelous grace to forgiven sinners.

Let me show you one more. In verses 10-12 David says that:

5. Grace is Spiritual

David knows that left to himself he will only return to sin – he needs constant, internal, capital S Spiritual help from God. He needs a right Spirit. He needs a Spirit of holiness. He needs to be held in faith and righteousness by a willing Spirit. David needs help from God to live as he was created to live. He needs more than the external encouragements of the law. He needs more than the external deterrent of the law – he needs the Spirit of God written on the heart. That is the great and climactic hope of the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 36 God says:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:26–27 ESV)

That is what David asked for! The Spirit of God inside our hearts, making us new from the inside

⁵ J. Alec Motyer, *Psalms By The Day* (Geanies House: Christian Focus, 2016), 136.

out! Helping us to see our sin and our Savior so that we can be changed into the same image by one degree of glory to the next.

For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

Grace is Spiritual – thanks be to God!

Finally, we should notice how David comes out of his season of repentance in order to sing and to speak with the people of God.

Singing And Speaking With The People Of God

Look at what David says in verse 13-14:

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. 14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. (Psalms 51:13–14 ESV)

When you have helped me, when you have healed me and restored me THEN I will teach transgressors your ways, I will build up the house of the Lord, I will offer right sacrifices, I will lead in worship and rejoice in your kindness forever.

That is real repentance. Real repentance is a move out of sin and back to the presence and the people of God. When you have left sin and received grace then you want to serve God's people and sing of his mercy FOREVER. That's what happened to David and that is what the Spirit is saying still today.

Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:19–20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God, let's pray together.