

Prayers of Repentance

Psalm 51

Last week we discussed “Praying in the Midst of Temptation” from Psalm 73. We saw how Asaph was bold enough to talk with God about his temptation; he was secretly envious of those who indulged every fantasy they had, seemingly without consequence. He began to doubt whether or not there was any benefit in keeping his hands and heart clean. But when he entered into the sanctuary (God’s presence) he saw things very differently. He now understood that the wicked were in a very dangerous place and that God is indeed “good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” He prayed through his temptation until he got to a place of obedience.

But how do we pray if we have already given in to temptation and sinned? Is there any point in praying after the fact? Today we are going to see from Psalm 51 that after we’ve sinned, there are some rich avenues of prayer that can be explored - ways of praying that invite God to do something much deeper than we might imagine.

If you’re anything like me, after you’ve sinned you mainly want to feel better. You want to get rid of the guilt and feel better ASAP. But Psalm 51 will encourage us to avoid short cuts that help us feel better but that leave the deeper structure of sin in tact. David illustrates how to pray in a way that invites God to do a deep work in our lives.

Bring to mind a recent sin (or a recurring sin) as we go through Psalm 51. Perhaps God will give you a vision for how you can pray deep, healing prayers of repentance in relation to that sin.

The heading of Psalm 51 tells us the occasion for this psalm: *A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.* You may remember the account of David’s sin with Bathsheba recorded in 2 Samuel 11-12. One spring King David stayed home instead of going out to battle with his army. One evening he was walking around on the roof of his house and noticed a beautiful woman bathing. He inquired about her and found out that she was a married woman named Bathsheba whose husband Uriah was off in battle in David’s army. David’s desire overpowered any sense of fidelity or honor; he called for Bathsheba and “lay with her.”

When David found out that Bathsheba was pregnant, he arranged for Uriah to return from battle so that he could be with Bathsheba for a night. Everyone would assume that the child was Uriah’s. But the plan didn’t work. So David conspired with his general, Joab, to have Uriah abandoned on the battlefield so that he would be killed. That plan worked. And David married Bathsheba and she bore him a son. But the last line of 2 Samuel 11 says, “But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord.”

To make a long story short. . . God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David about his sin and inform him that the son born to Bathsheba would die. David has experienced catastrophic moral and spiritual failure: he has committed adultery and successfully planned and carried out a conspiracy to have a man killed. How does a guy like that deal with his guilt? Psalm 51 tells us. Psalm 51 also tells us how we can pray when

we're in similar circumstances. Remember that lust is adultery of the heart and that anger is murder of the heart. Psalm 51 doesn't give us a formula to follow, but it does give us some tangible ways to pray in light of our sin. We'll see at least four different ways to pray "Prayers of repentance."

Prayer idea: Ask God for grace (unearned, undeserved favor) (v. 1) Beginning in verse 1 David appeals to various aspects of God's character. David wasn't "claiming" or demanding anything; he knew that his forgiveness and restoration was wholly dependent upon God's grace.

1 Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.

David understood that his only hope was God's grace. He couldn't defend himself and his actions, so he didn't try. He couldn't say to God, "You owe me forgiveness because of all I've done for you." Rather, he came into the presence of God and appealed for grace according to His character: "according to Your lovingkindness" (covenant loyalty) and "the greatness of Your compassion."

Just like David, when we sin, we should simply ask God for grace. David asked God to "blot out his transgressions" - to remove them completely. We understand that "in Christ" our sins are already blotted out because of Jesus' sacrifice. But we still need plenty of grace when we sin: grace to get past the lure of our sin, grace to get past the guilty feelings we have because of our sins, grace to minimize the consequences of our sin, grace to learn the deep lessons God is trying to teach us.

Of course we should never presume upon God's grace - as if we can sin whenever we want because He is gracious. But we need to understand that God isn't honored when we think that He is stingy in forgiving us and reluctant to restore us.

We need to resist the temptation to think that we need to "make up for" our sin by some type of sacrifice or by a prolonged period of obedience. It's not like doing community service in order to avoid jail time. We can't "work off" our sin because "the wages of sin is death!" (Romans 3:23). Our sin requires nothing less than a death. As believers in Jesus, we have accepted that we can never get rid of our sin. . . that only His death can pay for our sin. We believe that we are saved by grace and that we are kept by grace. We aren't saved by grace and kept by works/obedience. Our relationship with God is grace from first to last.

Therefore, when we sin, like David we come to God for more grace. Hebrews 4:16 encourages us to do just this:

16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

God doesn't make deals, and God doesn't sell anything. He can't be bullied or manipulated. Since He only gives grace, we should ask for grace when we sin. In relation to **your** sin, have you simply asked for grace?

Prayer idea: Admit your sin (and your sinfulness) against God (vv. 2-6) In these verses David gives a thorough, comprehensive accounting of his sin. He had obviously thought through his actions and evaluated them theologically - in light of Who God is and how we should relate to Him. David uses three different words in verses 2 and 3 to describe his actions: iniquity, sin, and transgression. He basically uses these three terms synonymously; but piling one upon the other gives the effect of expressing how serious his actions were.

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.

David felt "dirty" because of his sin; he felt defiled. And so his prayer was, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." He didn't try to protect himself by pushing his sin to the back of his mind; he said, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." This is the opposite of sweeping it under the rug. And notice how he takes full responsibility for what he'd done: he calls it **my** transgressions and **my** sin. Verse 4 is striking:

4 Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge.

Yes, David had sinned against other people. As someone in a position of power and authority he sinned against both Bathsheba and Uriah. But ultimately his actions were an offense to God. Ultimately David answered to his God. This doesn't minimize the offense against others involved; rather, it heightens David's accountability to God.

I suspect our tendency is to do the opposite. We think, "God is gracious. I'm not worried about Him. I'm worried about my husband/wife/coworker!" Those we see with our eyes tend to evoke more fear in us than the One whom we can't see. But unless we understand that the sins we commit are first and foremost against our heavenly Father, we'll never really repent (which includes a change of life). We may have a guilty conscience or we may feel horrible that we got caught. But unless we see our sin through God's eyes, we won't have a true change of heart.

The prayer idea here is to enter God's presence and ponder how your sin has offended God Himself. For example, you might ask, "How is my anger toward my children an offense against God?" Perhaps you'd conclude that your anger is a violation of your God-given responsibility to shepherd them through the tough times of their lives; you are called by God to be patient and gentle with them instead of angry. Or perhaps you'd

conclude that you routinely look at the “speck” in their eye and ignore the “log” in your own (Matthew 7). For example, sometime I find that I’m very impatient with my children over all sorts of things (such as lack of thankfulness), but I fully expect God to be patient **with me** over those same issues. We need to see our sin through God’s eyes.

In verses 5 and 6 David admits/confesses his very sinfulness (over which he had no control):

5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.
6 Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.

David isn’t saying that there was anything sinful about the circumstances of his conception or birth. He is saying that he - like every person - was sinful from day one. Scripture teaches that we somehow “inherit” our sinfulness from Adam, our first “father.” We are born sinful. . . and therefore we all sin. This wasn’t an excuse for David’s sin, but it was the context of his sin. Adultery and murder were consistent with his condition as someone “brought forth in iniquity.”

David asks God to give him what he didn’t naturally possess: truth and wisdom in his innermost being. He’s looking beyond forgiveness to godliness.

David’s example encourages us to be very honest and thorough in admitting our sin to God. You might think that this would be a depressing, discouraging exercise. . . why would you possibly dwell on something as disappointing as your own sin? My experience is that being honest with God about my sin doesn’t beat me down; it gives me hope. As someone has said, “Where there’s sin there’s hope” because God has provided a remedy for sin in the sacrifice of His Son. In Christ we have every reason to come clean before God. When we pray in this way we are inviting God to do a deep work in our lives.

Prayer idea: Appeal to God for full spiritual restoration (vv. 7-12) These verses describe how David was able to look past his sin and guilt and see what his life could once again be. He understood that cleansing from sin wasn’t an end in itself; cleansing led to experiencing God in all of His fulness. I won’t comment on every idea expressed in these verses (there’s a lot of repetition). I want us to notice David’s boldness in asking God to cleanse/wash him, restore his joy, and give him perseverance.

7 Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

He’s basically asking God to act like a priest and cleanse him. In the Old Covenant a person who was defiled in some way (sin or disease like leprosy) would appear before the priest for purification. In some circumstances the priest would take a branch of hyssop, dip it in water or blood, and sprinkle it upon the person. The water or blood

symbolized the person's purification. David uses this imagery to ask God to purify him from his sin.

Since sin has the effect of dulling our senses and muting our delight in God, he prays:

8 Make me to hear joy and gladness,
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.
9 Hide Your face from my sins
And blot out all my iniquities.

I'm impressed that David hasn't lowered his expectations of God to the level of his own behavior; he still believed that God will is gracious and full of compassion. He wasn't like the younger brother in the parable of the prodigal son who hoped to return to the father's house as a servant with lesser status. No, David wanted to be fully restored in every way. Even though he understood that his own sin had robbed him of true joy, he didn't believe that God had consigned him to that condition forever. And so he asks, "Make me hear joy and gladness . . . let the bones which You have broken rejoice" (he acknowledged that God's hand of discipline had been severe, but he still believed that he could be fully restored to a place of joy). In verse 9 he basically prays that his sins would be wiped away fully and permanently.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.

David knew that obedience was a matter of the heart, so he asked God to create in him a clean (unpolluted) heart. And he knew how people commonly repent of some sin and find themselves eventually desiring that sin again, so he prayed for God to "renew" in him "a steadfast spirit" - a spirit that was resolute in following God.

Verse 11 reflects David's deepest fear: being separated from God and being unusable to God.

11 Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

In the old covenant God gave His Spirit to specific people for specific reasons. The OT is full of examples of people who were once filled with God's Spirit but eventually became hardened in heart and unusable to God. King Saul, David's predecessor, was a good example of this. At one time he prophesied by the Spirit of God but because of his rebellion God rejected him and withdrew His Spirit from him. In the new covenant God gives His Spirit permanently to those who trust in Jesus; the imagery used in the new covenant suggests that our relationship with God is permanent (adoption, becoming a new creature in Christ, being transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of light). Nevertheless, it's possible to grieve and/or quench the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30, 1 Thess. 5:19) by our heart condition. And so it's appropriate for us to pray something similar to David's prayer in verse 11: "God keep me close and keep me from becoming useless to You."

12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.

Again, David prays for joy and perseverance. He wanted what Paul called in 2 Corinthians 7 “a repentance without regret.” He didn’t want to repent now and later regret it and go back to his sin.

After you’ve sinned, what are your spiritual ambitions? Sometimes we say to God (in effect), “If you let me sleep on the porch, I’m fine. . . or in the shed out back. . .” But David prayed, “I want my place back at Your table. I want to eat your very best food and drink your very best drink. I want it all when it comes to Your presence and joy and gladness.” That’s the type of restoration that glorifies God. In Christ God wants to restore us and take us places we’ve never been before.

Prayer idea: Talk with God about walking in humility and about future usefulness in the lives of others. (vv. 13-19) After appealing to God for restoration, David turns his attention to the influence he might have in the lives of others in the future. The order of these prayers is significant. ***After*** his joy had been restored and ***after*** he had experienced God’s cleansing David would be in a position to influence others. Notice this emphasis in verses 13-15.

13 *Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners will be converted to You.
14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation;
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.
15 O Lord, open my lips,
That my mouth may declare Your praise.

David understood that those who experience a massive amount of grace and mercy are in a great position to encourage others to experience the same. He looked forward to the day when he would “teach transgressors” the ways of God, when his tongue would “joyfully sing” of God’s righteousness, and when his mouth would “declare [God’s] praise.” He didn’t believe that his sin disqualified him from influencing others to seek God.

This reminds us of Jesus’ words to Peter in Luke 22. Jesus predicted that Peter would deny Him three times, but He also said that after Peter “turned back” to God he would “strengthen [his] brothers” (Luke 22:32). God has a solid track record of redeeming the sinful events of our lives for His glory. When a person truly repents (as David did in Psalm 51), that person has a “voice” to speak into the lives of others. That was true for David, for Peter, and for the lives of many people here in this room.

Verses 16 and 17 further explain what must be necessary in our lives in order for us to be useful to God in this way.

16 For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;

You are not pleased with burnt offering.
17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

David isn't saying in an absolute sense that God didn't desire sacrifices. He's saying that animal sacrifices don't mean a thing without a contrite heart. David needed to live in a place of brokenness before God. He knew that God would never despise or reject a person with a "broken and a contrite heart." He understood that God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.

David knew that he needed to walk in humility in order to be used in the lives of others. The prayer idea is to consciously talk about these issues with God: walking in humility and future usefulness. This conversation with God may be the very instrumental in your life. You and I aren't useful in the lives of others just because we've sinned in some specular ways. If you want to be used by God, you have to walk in humility before God and before others. And so we should be warned by David's comment, "a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." At the same time we should be full of faith because this is the heart God delights in creating within us.

What type of church would we be if each of us walked in humility and maintained a broken and contrite heart? How might God use us in each others' lives? And how might He use us in the lives of others in our community?