

Women's Bible Study – Winter/Spring 2010

The Heart's Cry: A Look at Heartfelt Prayer

March 10, 2010

The Heart's Cry for Repentance

Psalm 51

Michelle Harris



Psalm 51: for the director of music: A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

I love music, and I enjoy history, so the fact that this song is connected to a specific historical event in the life of the songwriter has always interested me. Psalm 51 is the fourth and best known of seven penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). This psalm was recited by Sir Thomas More and Lady Jane Grey before they were executed; Henry V had it read to him on his deathbed, and William Carey, the great missionary to India, requested it for his funeral sermon.

I admit I was more than a little intimidated when I read Charles Spurgeon's assessment of this Psalm when writing his commentary. He writes, "Such a psalm may be wept over, absorbed into the soul, and exhaled again in devotion; but, commented on—ah! where is he who having attempted it can do other than blush at his defeat?" (qtd. in Boice, 424). Makes me want to plunge right in!

I know we spent the whole fall series talking about David, but I think it's important to refresh our minds about what this psalm is all about, so I'm going to take us back to II Samuel 11 and read parts of the account recorded there. "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, 'Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?' Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. . . Then she went back home. The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, 'I am pregnant.'" David tries to cover up his sin by bringing Bathsheba's

husband Uriah home from battle so he will go home to his wife, and the baby's conception would appear to be a legitimate one. But Uriah won't sleep with his wife when his men are laying their lives down for the kingdom, so David has him killed and then quickly marries Bathsheba. The end of the chapter reads: "When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the Lord."

Only the prophet Nathan had the courage to confront David. And David repents. He hears Nathan and admits, "I have sinned against the Lord." The great Puritan Matthew Henry writes, "Those that have been overtaken in any fault ought to reckon a faithful reproof the greatest kindness that can be done them and a wise reprover their best friend." It is hard not to be offended when someone calls us on a wrong committed. But how wise we are when we can see the truth in their words and we let God move us to repentance. I can think of reproofs that have been painful but beneficial throughout my life—from my parents, from a couple high school teachers, from my husband, and from some of you. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Ref.) When forced to face our sin, if we don't blow it off or get angry, our first response is usually to feel terrible. That's not a bad thing. Repentance and then restoration is a process that begins unpleasantly! Psalm 51 is kind of a poetic record of that process.

The psalm divides into 6 sections, beginning with David's approach to God and his cry for forgiveness. David pleads with God to have mercy on him. Mercy is the withholding of punishment from someone who deserves it. David knows he deserves to die for what he did. Death was the punishment for both murder and adultery, and David committed both. Notice on what grounds David makes his appeal. His appeal is based on God's character, and he names three attributes of God here—mercy, love, and compassion. God gave this self-portrait in words to Moses way back in Exodus (and notice those same 3 words): "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (34:6). When we really mess up, we can't appeal to God on the basis of his justice or his omnipotence or his omnipresence. Only his mercy. David's words are echoed in the publican's in Luke 18: "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" We have nothing to plead with or bargain with. We can't recommend our good works to balance out the bad. We have only God's kindness and his inclination to show mercy.

Just as David appeals to three attributes of God, he makes three requests of him: wash, cleanse, and blot out. These three requests are repeated later in the psalm, in reverse order, so we'll talk about them in a bit. The final group of three is the three words for breaking God's law. The first is transgression, which means to cross a forbidden boundary; it contains the idea of a serious rebellion. Think of Caesar at the Rubicon. Just like that, we cross a line and are at war with God. The second word for breaking God's law used here is iniquity. This word refers to perversion, to the depravity of our very natures, which we'll see again in verse 5. The last word is sin, which means to fall short or miss the mark. It's as if, by using these three words, David is acknowledging that his breaking of God's law was far reaching and comprehensive.

The next section is David's admission of his sin, verses 3-6. He understands 3 things about his sin—its "terrible-ness," its meaning, and its origin. He says, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." He knows that what he did was "evil" in God's sight. He doesn't minimize it or gloss over it. Even though God has forgiven him—remember, this is after Nathan told him that "the Lord had taken away" his sin (II Sam 12)—he still thinks about it with pain. I know sometimes I can

be flippant about my sin; I want to take it lightly (though I rarely do this with other people's sin!). If you point out a sin in my life, I will try to minimize it. (I was just having a bad day, I'm not as bad as so-and-so, I didn't really mean it like that, you're just being critical . . .) But David doesn't do that. He dwells on it long enough to let its terribleness sink in.

He also has a clear idea of exactly what he's done. He knows the meaning of his sin. He says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned." How can he say that? What about Bathsheba? What about Uriah and his family and the baby? His wording here is not meant to minimize the harm to Bathsheba, to Uriah, to Uriah's family, to the kingdom, to the innocent, dead baby. Rather it clarifies exactly what sin is. Isn't that the very definition of sin? That it is an offense against God. We hurt other people, but we sin against God. We may wrong someone or commit a crime against someone, but it's a sin because it's against God. Only because God exists is a wrong thing wrong. Only because our neighbor is created in God's image is it wrong to harm him. Instead of belittling the offense against Uriah and Bathsheba and the baby, it heightens the sense of offense.

Do you know that feeling of your sin being "ever before" you? Something from 5, 10, 20 years ago that makes you cringe, even weep, every time you think of it? There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ. But we can't appreciate that truth if we gloss over our sin. Making a big deal of our sin, really thinking about what it is and what it *cost* is what allows us to appreciate the joyful truth that if we're in Christ we won't be condemned for it!

David goes on by saying, "you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge." God is right, he's just, he's entitled to judge sin. Paul quotes this verse in Romans 3 in the context of arguing against those who say that if our sinning highlights God's glory, shouldn't we sin more? Listen to verse 5: "But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, 'If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?' Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—'Let us do evil that good may result' Their condemnation is deserved." But if God is just, you might say, how can he let David go free? Bathsheba has been violated, Uriah murdered, the baby is dead. How could Nathan the prophet say, "The Lord has taken away your sin"? How can that be just? Hear Paul's explanation again: "God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25-26). The sacrificial death of the only completely innocent Person is what allows God to be both just and merciful to sinners like David and like me.

Finally, David knows the origin of his sin. Verse 5 confirms the doctrine of original sin—"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." We don't start out as innocent children, only to be corrupted by society as we grow. We are not sinful because we make wrong choices; rather, we make wrong choices because we are already sinners. David knows his sin was not a hiccup on an otherwise pure life. It was an expression of what he has always naturally been.

As a side note, Rich and I have found this truth to be really freeing as we parent our 4 children, though it flies in the face of worldly parenting wisdom. It has kept us from being shocked by our children's sin. It has kept us from thinking that their sin always reflects badly on us as parents. No,

our failure to *deal with* their sin would reflect badly on us, but the fact that they sin simply confirms what Scripture teaches. Two sinful parents produce sinful children. This truth has also kept us from fearing that we will forever scar our children by every mistake we make. We all *start out* “messed up” and are completely dependent on Christ to save us, not our parents’ skill or lack thereof. *Of course* we influence our children for good or ill and we are responsible to disciple them, but my point is that it’s not all up to us.

So this verse confirms the doctrine of original sin, but it also confirms the teaching that personhood begins at conception. Psalm 139 also makes a case for life beginning at conception. Christians should be winsomely involved in fighting the battle for the recognition of personhood before birth.

The last verse in this section is verse 6: “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.” If we’re going to admit our sin, we have to have God’s help in knowing what it is. I’ve been thinking a lot about this lately, between our fall series on the heart and this verse. It takes time and discernment and ultimately the Spirit of God to identify what is really deep in our hearts. Why did I take pleasure in that bit of nasty gossip? Why did I put myself forward in that situation? Why did I snap at my husband? What is in my heart? God wants us to be truthful about the inner parts. And He is the one who will teach us what is there if we are willing to listen: For the word of God is living and active . . . discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

Next David moves on to his plea for cleansing in verses 7-9. He makes several appeals in this section, and he uses the same 3 verbs he used in verses 1-2, only in reverse order: cleanse, wash, and blot out. The word cleanse means to purge. It has one of the words for sin as its root, so it literally means to “de-sin” me. Hyssop is a plant with hairy leaves and branches; it grows in the crevices of stone walls. It was used as a small brush in ancient times. Bunches of hyssop were good for sprinkling water or blood in the cleansing ceremonies required under the law (Lev. 14:6, Num. 19:6). Hyssop was first mentioned in Ex. 12:22 at the very first Passover. Hyssop was to be dipped in blood, then the blood sprinkled on the top and sides of the door frame so that the destroyer would pass over that house and not kill the firstborn. The reference to hyssop reminds us of Heb. 9:22: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” Do you see how the Old Testament foreshadows the new, and how the outer ceremony reflects the inner reality?

The second word is wash—“wash me and I will be whiter than snow.” You, like me, probably do a lot of washing. I wash dishes, I wash walls, I wash floors, and I wash clothes. I spend a lot of time trying to get stains out of clothing, particularly dirt and blood out of the knees of white baseball pants! Am I willing to give as much time and effort to the cleanliness of my soul? David’s plea to God for washing reminds me of the supernatural washing Isaiah describes: “Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (1:18).

The third verb David uses here is “blot out.” This refers to removing writing from a book or erasing an indictment. In the ancient world if a writing mistake was made on a sheet of papyrus, the word would be blotted out, the paper turned sideways and the papyrus used again since it was so expensive. We all have sin written on our lives that will stand against us unless something is done, unless it is blotted out.

Look at the last two pleas David makes here. He asks that God hide his face from his sins. The phrase “hide your face” is used throughout the Psalms meaning to “no longer look with favor” (13:1; 22:24; 27:9). That is, the psalmist asks God, “Don’t hide your face from me.” Don’t turn from me with disfavor. Here he’s saying, “DO turn your face from my sin.”

Finally, David asks to hear “joy and gladness” and that the bones God has crushed would rejoice again. Psalm 32 is thought to be a parallel psalm to this one, and in it David adds, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” There is often a physical element to sin, isn’t there? If something is not right between us and someone we love, we often can’t sleep, we can’t concentrate, we just don’t feel well. That is the Spirit of God working on our hearts, and we are wise if we don’t quench him but instead take the necessary action. One of our kids recently needed to make things right after offending a friend. We urged a phone call as soon as possible, though we didn’t require it. At bedtime that night I inquired about the situation. I was happy to hear this child say, “I made the phone call, and I apologized. I sure feel a lot better.”

The next section is verses 10-12, David’s desire for inward renewal: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” This aspect of repentance is really important, because it shows that our confession is genuine. We’re not content with only forgiveness, but we don’t want to sin again. When our youngest was 4 or 5 she got in big trouble, and after I disciplined her, she said she was sorry. I talked to her about showing she was truly sorry by not doing it again, and then I asked her, “So what will you do next time?” She truthfully said as she sniffled through her tears, “I really don’t know!” The word “create” here is the Hebrew *bara*, which is the same word used in Genesis 1 for the creation of matter, the heavens and earth, animals, and humans. *Bara* means to create something ex nihilo, out of nothing. Only God can do this. When *we* create, we simply rearrange existing matter, but God can create something from nothing. So David is essentially asking here for a miracle. Create a pure heart. Don’t just improve what I already have. Make it new. If it’s going to be any good, it can’t come from something already existing in me, because that would be contaminated by my sinful nature.

David is asking for the heart change necessary to make him pure. I often ask for an outward change. If I’m worrying, I ask God to fix the problem that’s worrying me instead of asking for a peaceful heart. If I’m bitter, I ask God to change the circumstance to go my way instead of asking for a sweet spirit.

Verse 11 is a difficult one: “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.” Some scholars think David was asking God to not take the kingship from him as He did from Saul. That could have been part of his meaning, but I think David was verbalizing the fear he had of ending up without God—without his help, without his power, and without his presence. And so his prayer is applicable to us. We can’t lose our salvation, but it is not inappropriate to pray, “God, don’t let me live in sin so that I dull my conscience toward you and my heart grows hard. Keep me persevering to the end.”

This section ends with David saying, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” Two things come to mind. First, true joy is found not in sinning, but in obedience. David pursued adultery because he thought it would make him happy. But he found the opposite. Now he longs for the restoration of joy that can only come through salvation, through a right relationship with God. He asks for a lot in this psalm . . . because he knows how much he lost by sinning. Second thing—notice there’s not much in this psalm about David’s specific sin. Nothing about lust or adultery or deception or murder.

I think that's because lust and adultery and all those other things are symptoms of a heart problem that is more fundamental. If we lose the joy of our salvation, we will soon be looking for joy elsewhere. If we are convinced that Jesus is all-satisfying, we won't go seeking satisfaction elsewhere. If we are amazed by the gospel, we won't look for thrills on the rooftop when we should be in the battle.

****Key point--true believers seek to be changed. Passive voice--changed by God.**

Verses 13-17, then, contain a promise to teach others what he has learned through this painful process of repentance and restoration: "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you." God uses the stories of broken people who've made big mistakes. Though confession and repentance is, to an extent, private and personal, true religion can never be completely private. We have a duty to teach others what we've learned in our walk with God. We should learn from David that we don't have to have our act completely together before we can minister to others or be a witness of God's work in our lives. I mentioned that Psalm 32 is a parallel psalm. It was also written in response to David's sin with Bathsheba, but scholars speculate that it was written later, as a fulfillment of the promise in this section of Psalm 51. It has a less passionate, more instructive tone than Psalm 51, and I see evidence that God did restore to David the joy of his salvation by the time he wrote it. It begins, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him." And it ends, "Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!"

Guilt will always close our lips. We are not likely to testify of God's goodness if we are weighed down by unconfessed sin. So David asks God, "Open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise."

What does David mean by "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it?" in verse 16? Didn't God require sacrifices under the Old Covenant? Why would he not be pleased with something He required? The point of verse 16 is not the wholesale rejection of animal sacrifices, though that eventuality is hinted at, but rather to demonstrate that the efficacy of sacrifice depends on the heart of the one making the offering.

The final section of this passionate, heartfelt prayer is a prayer for Zion found in verses 18-19: "In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem." Some scholars think these verses were added by someone else later after the exile, since the walls hadn't been torn down yet in David's time. If this is true, whoever wrote this last section seems to understand that an inner attitude of sin led to the demise of the kingdom and it will only be rebuilt by inner renewal.

David could have written this, though. He may have been contemplating the bad effect his sin had on the nation and prays about it. He could've been speaking metaphorically about the walls symbolizing the nation's strength, which had been weakened by his sin. Or he could've been speaking literally, since the walls weren't completely finished until Solomon's time. Either way, the broadening of the prayer to include the nation shows that we can never sin without affecting someone else. We harm others when we sin. But when we confess and complete that restoration process, then we can help others as we share our stories with them.

I memorized Psalm 66:18 when I was a little girl: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." I was taught the importance of making things right with God, of confession and

repentance. But I'm afraid I focused on the last part—"the Lord will not hear me." I wanted God to hear me, because I was often making requests. I soon began to view confession of sin as sort of a lucky charm to getting what I wanted. I fell into a pattern of praying, "Please forgive me of my sins" and then I'd tell God what he needed to do. But I think this psalm helps us see that repentance is not a quick "God, forgive me." Rather, it's a process that begins painfully and is marked by a passion to be changed. That's a passive voice verb—be changed—the subject is being acted upon—I'm to be changed by God.

WBS is a ministry of Autumn Ridge Church – Rochester, MN 55902
Questions: email wbs@autumnridgechurch.org
www.autumnridgechurch.org