

PSALMS

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Psalm 51

Ruin and Redemption Part 2

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We are going back to Psalm 51 today.

Last week, we started looking at this Psalm by telling the back-story: the story of King David's fall from grace through abuse, adultery, and murder in an attempt to cover it all up. But the Lord was displeased, so there was no covering it up. And God sent the prophet Nathan to David to confront him. And at that moment, David broke. He gave up his efforts to cover it all up and to fix his sin with more sin, he came to his senses, and went running back to God for mercy.

And he wrote Psalm 51 as a model prayer for all of us in those times of sin and failure.

He wrote it for all who are wracked with guilt that is making them sick, for all who have destroyed relationships and become isolated and alone, for all who are afraid, and for all who have lost the joy they once had in their relationship with God as they are being crushed under the weight of sin, and for everyone who wants the nearness with God that they once experienced.

Which means it is a Psalm we will all need.

Because the story of the Christian life is not that we have been great moral achievers, but we have been great sinners who have met a great Savior. And it serves as a model - not just as words to repeat, but a model of repentance, what turning to God fully and truly really looks like. And it's a model we all need to follow, and follow regularly.

It shows us how to avoid the trap of surface and phony repentance, or healing sins falsely and lightly, and guides us in how to repent in a way that's really restorative.

So today we will see in this Psalm what true, joy-restoring, song-restoring, hope-restoring repentance looks like in our lives so that we can practice it again and again.

**Psalm 51:1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.**

I. Restorative Repentance Runs to God, Not Away from Him, Anticipating Mercy

So David, realizing he had ruined everything, goes running to God for mercy.

He knows that God is a God of steadfast love, the kind of love that pursues prodigal sons, the kind of love that stays committed to His people, and for all the ways he has taken his eyes off of God and disbelieved in God's presence, he at least has the faith that God won't turn him away when he goes back for mercy.

And in our ruin, we need to cling to this faith: not that there is anything I've done that would make God want to take me back, but that God is merciful and receives the broken.

We might be tempted when we fall to **run from God**. To stay away from prayer because we aren't worthy, or church because we aren't worthy, or to feel like our guilt and defilement is enough to keep us from ever going back to our Bibles.

And we can even convince ourselves that we need to pay for what we've done with time away from the Lord - maybe time will heal this wound and then I can go back.

But David, when God's word and conviction break through, boldly throws himself on God's mercy, even after ruining his life in a way that we would all be hard-pressed to top. You can't get much worse than what David did, but he knew God is merciful and even that mountain of evil couldn't keep God from receiving Him.

With one big caveat:

II. Restorative Repentance Forsakes Sin

Our sin only keeps us from going back to God if we aren't willing to give it up.

David here wants his sin gone, he wants it blotted out. What he is not trying to do here is find some peace between his sin and God, or find some way to keep both.

One analogy that scripture often uses for all of our sin is it is all adultery: it is all cheating on God. God is like the faithful spouse, we say He isn't enough, so we go after something else to satisfy. Now again and again, God in his mercy, forgives repentant adulterers like us.

But if we pretend to be coming back to God with our arm still around our other lover, asking God, "Can she come, too?" the answer is no.

God is merciful when we give up our sin and run to Him. But we shouldn't mistake that for God being permissive of sin, or giving blanket mercy for the sins we remain in or the sins we intend to commit.

So when we are still planning on sinning, we are staying in it, we are not forsaking it, our intent is to disobey, we can't expect our prayers for mercy to bring us back into right relationship with God.

A number of years ago, Debbie and I were watching our niece around Christmas time. And she was little (probably 2 or 3.) And she picked up one of the round glass Christmas ornaments, looked us in the eye and said "I'm sorry." And then dropped it.

Her repentance didn't fool us. But sometimes we think repentance like that will fool God.

Or that maybe we can come to church, really confess our sin, knowing we're going to jump right back into it this afternoon. But you don't see any interest in jumping right back into the sin in David here.

If we really want it washed and blotted away, if we are turning from our sin in disgust, we can go running to God, confident in His mercy. But if we're flippant and not turning from it, that's not restorative repentance. That's not what David is doing.

There's nothing flippant about David here. This isn't, "Oh well, God will forgive me." This is, "God I have something that needs to be blotted out, so have mercy, get rid of it."

And David didn't hold back on acknowledging the depth of his sin and guilt.

III. Restorative Repentance Acknowledges and Owns Sin and Guilt

**Psalm 51:2 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.**

David fully owns “my iniquity, my sin, my transgressions.”

He doesn’t shift the blame or explain away or downplay it. He calls it evil, and he says “I did it.” Which we talked about a bit last week.

But to acknowledge sin and guilt in a way that’s restorative, you have to believe sin and guilt are real things. Which is not a well-received idea in our culture. Our culture often speaks like any talk of sin is regressive old religion, and all guilt is false guilt.

Now there are false forms of guilt and things we call sin today that aren’t sin and that we aren’t guilty of. There are many people, religious people especially, riddled with false guilt over things they don’t need to feel guilty of. And that’s really harmful to a lot of people.

But there’s also real sin and real guilt. And when your conscience is accurately discerning that you have something to feel guilty about, you also do a lot of harm when you try to tell yourself that guilt isn’t real. Pretending it isn’t there doesn’t cure it - you fall apart living like lies are true and truth is a lie.

So how do we discern between true and false forms of sin and guilt?

The key is in verse 4:

**evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.**

What makes sin sin is that it is sin in God's sight. That it goes against God's words. That God has judged it sinful.

It's not sin just because society says it is. He doesn't say "I have done what is evil in society's sight." Society could be right or wrong.

Feeling right about it or wrong about it doesn't make it sin or not sin. He doesn't say "I have done what is evil in my feelings." (Our conscience can be right or wrong, and needs programming from an outside source.)

It's not our feelings, it isn't the crowd, it isn't even our mental deductions that informs us about what's sin and what guilt is real.

That assessment has to come from God and God's words.

And that's what his law, or his moral commands, do for us. They tell us about God's holy nature and will, they tell us what God requires of us, they give us a clearer sight of righteousness and wickedness.

Our conscience, feelings, and culture can be right or wrong. And they all need reprogramming with God's word. And when God's word and God's judgment says we have sinned, then we are receiving the horrible diagnosis so that we can seek the real cure.

St. Augustine said, "*To desire the aid of grace is the beginning of grace.*" If God is stirring in you a desperation, a sense of need, a sense of helplessness, a sense that I've failed and can't be cured unless He's merciful, then there's good news for you.

IV. Restorative Repentance Is Humble and Doesn't Hide

**Psalm 51: 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.**

David says God wants truth way down deep in us, but senses his sin has corrupted him to the core.

And David doesn't hold back saying this stuff is true of Himself. Remember right after he sinned, he tried to cover it all up, save face, maintain a reputation. He didn't want anyone to know there was sin in the man after God's own heart, and he went as far as murdering Uriah to make sure his secret was "safe."

But now, confronted with truth from God's prophet, he stops hiding.

And there may be nothing more important for us to do as Christians who need restoration and wholeness than to stop pretending. To stop doing image management. To stop posturing. And to just admit our very deep failings and sins.

1 John 1 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he 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 deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just 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.

Contrast how we live in the light vs how we live in darkness in this passage:

(1) In the darkness we hide sin, in the light we confess it

In the darkness, we have a tendency to hide our sins and struggles (to say we have no sin - v.8), in the light we confess them (v.9) .

In the darkness, we pretend we have it all together, we have not sinned (verse 10), we call God's word a liar, we reject His word. In the light, we confess and receive real forgiveness and cleansing.

But so often, what we call Christianity is really just the behavior of darkness.

In church where we believe God has a law and high standards, we tend to cover up our sins so nobody finds out - we lie to hide them and build false, more acceptable identities for ourselves. Nobody can know us, so we feel safe.

Or the alternative, in churches that have lower standards and ignore God's commands, we hide our sins by treating them like they aren't sins at all. We just change

the rules. We say, "There's no such thing as sin," or we just ignore the idea of sin for some other more acceptable way of talking.

Both environments wear us out:

In the one environment we get worn out by pretending and hiding. We burn out all of our relationships because image-management can't be maintained. And eventually we collapse from all the pretending.

In the other we get worn out by our guilt because the law of god is written on our hearts and we just know we're not living according to what's true.

But both are forms of darkness.

But if we walk in the light, we admit what's true - we readily admit we have sin. And though that exposes the fact that we haven't been faithful, in those moments Jesus is seen as the faithful one who is faithful and just and forgives and cleanses.

In the darkness, we look good temporarily - either because we've hidden reality, or convinced ourselves that what's right doesn't matter. But neither lasts. In the light, we don't look good, but Jesus does.

Which means when we sin, we have to choose:

Do I confess and make Jesus look good? Or do I hide to make and look good - temporarily.

David walked in darkness and tried to cover his own sins. But, confronted with truth, he broke and repented and admitted the depth of his sin.

We have to choose - will I make me look good or Jesus look good?

Confession makes Jesus look good. Hiding makes me look good - temporarily and from a distance.

We are so afraid to admit the truth. We don't want our reputations to die. We don't want to admit our sins and weakness and wickedness. And as a result, we miss out on the grace that could be ours.

Robert Capon writes, **“Grace perennially waits for us to accept our destruction and, in that acceptance, to discover the power of the Resurrection and the Life.”**

“At the very worst, all you can be is dead - and for him who is the Resurrection and the Life, that just makes you his cup of tea.”

– Robert Farrar Capon, *Between Noon & Three: Romance, Law & the Outrage of Grace*

So in the light we confess our sins, in the darkness we hide them.

(2) Second contrast: In the darkness we become isolated and in the light we get closer to others

1 John 1: 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

So if we walk in the light where sin is confessed, then we can have closeness with people. If we hide our sin, we'll hide from others and settle for some acquaintances as opposed to close friendships. We'll fear getting close because what if I get found out?

If my relationships with other people are not based on my good performance, but I'm part of a community where we love and accept people because of Jesus, I have nothing to hide, so I can get close.

But if I have to hide, I can't get close, because people might find out. And if they see my sin, they'll realize this image I've been projecting is false, and they'll reject me. So I have to keep up appearances, and the only people I stay close to are those who participate in the same charade with me and help me maintain that appearance.

And people like that are always so guarded and fake, that they're impossible to get to know. You feel like you'll always get their avatar and not the real them, so they're almost not worth getting to know.

“Man was made to lead with his chin; he is worth knowing only with his guard down, his head up and his heart rampant on his sleeve.”

– Robert Farrar Capon

So the only way to be a person who can even be befriended is by walking in the light, telling the truth about yourself, and confessing your sin.

We have to choose - are we ok with a coverup, or do we want a cleansing?

We can't have both. It's a story as old as time - Adam and Eve sin, and they immediately sew fig leaves together to cover themselves, an insufficient covering. So God comes and clothes them with animal skins. A covering that works, but blood had to be shed for the covering to be made.

David, throughout Psalm 51, is asking for the real thing, for the cleansing:

V. Restorative Repentance Cries for a Cleansing

**Psalm 51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**

Hyssop was a plant that the priests in the Old Testament were told to use to cleanse lepers ceremonially. They would dip hyssop in the blood of a sacrifice and then sprinkle it on a person to make them clean.¹

And David is saying, "God, do that for me." Wash me, purify me, cleanse me.

**Isaiah 1:18 "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.**

'Restorative repentance acknowledges that God has to cleanse us if we are ever going to be right again.

And we know, on this side of the cross, that the true cleansing comes from the cross of Christ.

¹ Leviticus 14:4-7

David describes this repentance that restores, and it's so important for us to realize that nothing gets better without repentance. There is no Christian change without it, there is no freedom from guilt without it, there is no cleansing, only coverup.

But if we repent like this, clinging to the cleansing of Christ, we can repent boldly, as Luther said, with great expectations. We have to move more quickly, but look at the expected results of restorative repentance.

VI. Results of Restorative repentance:

A. Restored joy and gladness

**Psalm 51: 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.**

B. Restored cleanness

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

We are not always guilty and defiled.

C. Restored closeness:

**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.**

D. Restored effectiveness in teaching:

**13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.**

E. Restored worship

**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.

F. Restored community

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.

David's sin, like ours, ruined community. But that can be restored as well.

Prayer of Confession.