

PSALMS

August 21, 2022

Psalm 51

Ruin and Redemption Part I

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During preparation this week, I decided to change our preaching schedule a bit. I had planned on doing Psalm 51 this week and Psalm 137 next week. But I encountered so much richness in Psalm 51 and its background that I decided to stretch this into two weeks and skip Psalm 137 for now. So we will spend this week and next week on Psalm 51, we'll do Psalm 139 labor day weekend as planned, and then on to Galatians for fall and winter.

Last week we worked through Psalm 88, which is a Psalm of Lament, where God gives language for the prayers of a person whose life is a wreck and it isn't their doing. The Psalmist described the loss of friends, nearness to death, the silence of God, and darkness being his only companion. This was all despite the fact that he was faithful to God. And God inspired Psalm 88 to call us to bring that sorrow and confusion and frustration to Him rather than run away from Him in it. And though it offered no guarantee of fixed circumstances, it did offer hope in that it was an invitation to bring those miseries to God and it showed that God hears and understands those prayers.

And today, Psalm 51, is also a song for someone whose life is a wreck - but this time it is his fault. It's the song of someone who has sinned, and sinned big, ruining not only his own life but the lives of those around him. His sin brought dishonor to God's name, brought harm to the kingdom of God, and had a lot of collateral damage.

David experienced a major fall - he had previously been a heroic leader, legitimately anointed by God to be king. He had slain Goliath, conquered enemies, took the city of Jerusalem and established the worship of God there, built a palace, united the nation, literally put Israel on the map. And now he had ruined it all.

And in the aftermath, he sat and wrote this Psalm, which probably shows us the way to restoration better than any other passage of the Bible.

It's a song for us when we have fallen and need healing and restoration. If we pray the Psalms, we will likely pray this one again and again as we fail throughout our lives. And it gives real hope for healing and restoration. Sin can absolutely ruin us, but this Psalm shows that there is a way forward so that it doesn't have to have the final word.

And to really get this Psalm, we need to know the backstory. And your bible probably has a caption at the beginning of this Psalm that reads:

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

So we will spend most of today telling this story behind the Psalm, and then working through a little of Psalm 51 today, with the bulk of next week being spent in the Psalm itself.

2 Samuel 11:1 "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. 2 It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. 3 And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" 4 So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house. 5 And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

So it's springtime. David would typically go out to battle in the spring to continue to fortify the kingdom, but this year he sends his soldiers out instead and he stays back for some me-time at the palace. He's not engaged in meaningful endeavors right now, but he has sent all of the men of Israel (verse 1 - "all Israel") out to fight while he rested.

(And just a quick note here, for those who are striving for sexual integrity, as Christians should be, one of many facets of our strategy should be occupying our time working and building something good. The Bible certainly calls us to rest, and sets the rhythm of working 6 days and resting one from the very beginning. But excess leisure time can bring with it excess aloneness with our thoughts. And all forms of temptation, whether its

the temptation toward self-pity, or sexual temptation, or temptations toward excessive worry and doom-scrolling the socials, can all mount when there's more time for those things.

And filling our time with worthwhile endeavors and building for the future can help a great deal - we work on building into our family, or we work on college and work, or we start businesses, or serve the church and community, spending our lives in good endeavors and going to bed tired - we can't just sit around and try not to sin if we want to stay out of it.)

There's also something to be said here about contentment. David, at this point, had it all. He was married, he had a name for himself, he had wealth, he had security. We would look at David's life and think, "there's nothing more anyone could want."

But he still wanted more. The whole world doesn't satisfy. And whatever we've attained or haven't attained yet, we need to be cultivating a deep contentment in the life God has given us. Not the kind of contentment that doesn't work to produce more good, we should always be discontent with our own holiness or with the needs around us.

But a contentment that says, "My life is enough." Jeremiah Burroughs (minister in England in the 1630s) wrote a tremendous book called the Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment. There he defines Christian contentment as "that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."

It's a deep satisfaction and peace about the life God has given you, and a joy in God's will for you. A deep satisfaction in God. And Paul says we can learn it:

Philippians 4:11 "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content."

It means we stop looking for more for me, because I have enough for me. It means dying to looking for more - other possibilities and other lives.

David here isn't pursuing great endeavors, he isn't content, he is out looking for more. He's also away from accountability - most of the able-bodied men are off in battle, so he's mostly alone in the palace.

And he goes for a walk on the roof of his palace, and he sees off in the distance a woman bathing. I've read some people who wrote she was trying to seduce him, but I don't see any evidence in the Bible for that, and I don't see any evidence for that in what David says about it all after the fact. She was probably engaged in a common bathing ritual, and David was sinfully peeping through the foliage from his roof.

So David sees her and sends messengers to find out who she is. And one says, "She's Bathsheba, and she's the wife of Uriah."

Uriah, we'll soon see, was a man of integrity. And he was listed as one of the mighty men of David, a man who constantly put his life on the line for David. He was part of David's secret service. He was a deeply loyal friend to David. David has everything, Uriah doesn't have much, but does have his beautiful wife.

So you'd think that at least David's sense of loyalty would keep him from looking any further. But David doesn't care. He calls for her, she comes to him, and he took her to bed.

Some have suggested this was forcible, but the Bible had words for rape that weren't used here. But on the other hand, this isn't just simple adultery (as wicked as that would be.) This is the king, taking what he wants, and whether she was a willing participant or not, there's certainly a power dynamic at play that makes it incredibly difficult to say no to the king. And there is the possibility in the text that this was the worst-case scenario: David was in a state, as we will see soon, where he justified murder. He could have justified the worst of mistreatment of Bathsheba. So regardless of some of the nuances here, this is really bad, worse than adultery, it's sexual abuse, the abuse of power.

David only cared about David. And he took what he wanted.

But then Bathsheba sends a message to David, "I am pregnant."

So David is caught. This is going to look terrible - the king steals his loyal friend's wife. The man after God's own heart was after something else. The king would be known as a wicked man, the loyalty in his ranks would be broken, the image of perfection would be shattered. This is a bad day.

And David decides to cover it all up. He calls for Uriah, has him come home, wines him and dines him and encourages him to go home where he will sleep with his wife, he'll

think the baby will be his, and the coverup will be complete. But Uriah, even after the king successfully gets him drunk, refuses to go home and enjoy the pleasures that his men on the front lines can't enjoy right now.

So notice the contrast here - David's not going to battle, and while his men are risking their lives he's at home stealing their wives. Uriah refuses to even see his wife when his men are on the front lines. So Uriah is all integrity, David is all lust and craftiness.

So with David's plan A a failure, he goes with an even more atrocious plan B:

2 Samuel 11:14-15 “14 In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. 15 In the letter he wrote, “Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die.”

So David hands Uriah a sealed letter to the captain of his army, ordering the murder of Uriah. And he knows Uriah has the integrity not to open that letter on the way, so he knows this will work. And, it does work. Uriah is sent to where the valiant enemy soldiers are, he is killed in battle.

So Joab, the captain, surely is upset by this - why would the king order me to do that? To Uriah of all people? And David's response is:

2 Samuel 11:25 “25 David said to the messenger, “Thus shall you say to Joab, ‘Do not let this matter displease you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it.’ And encourage him.”

David, obviously hard in his heart, says, “Be encouraged, Joab, these things happen.”

There's no, “I have sinned,” just a calloused “these things happen in war.” He blames the circumstances, insults Uriah's intelligence, because he has to manage his image at all costs. The only thing he is feeling is the threat to his ego.

2 Samuel 11:26 When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. 27 And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son...

Now at this point, the plan has worked flawlessly. Uriah is gone, and news spreads throughout the nation of the kindness of king David. He has gone to this bereaved widow who is now destitute, but he marries her, and now her son will be raised as a prince.

What a great king! What a kind man.

David looks very good in this whole thing. He is the hero of this story to most observers. He's a little bit of a savior, really. David has schemed his way out of his sin, he has come out on top, he has gotten what he wanted. He looks great. And nobody needs to know.

But that's not where verse 27 ends.

2 Samuel 11:27b "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD"

Even though David thought he had managed the situation and managed perceptions and made everything turn out just right for himself, the Lord saw it, and the Lord was displeased.

Because we believe God is just, we can know for sure that nobody gets away with anything, ever, and none of us are the exception to that:

Proverbs 15:3 "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good."

Numbers 32:23b "be sure your sin will find you out."

David thought he had schemed his way out, he had talked his way out, he had removed the threats and gotten what he wanted. But the Lord was displeased, and his sin would find him out.

It's also worth noting here that David was the real deal.

1 Samuel 13:14 called him a man after God's own heart. He really did love the Lord. He wrote inspired words and sang inspired songs. He was used by God, chosen by God. He genuinely loved the Lord. He knew God's attributes, he wrote Psalms celebrating what God was like, he genuinely led the nation toward the Lord.

And here he had developed a calloused heart, and a deep and dangerous failure to fear the Lord.

And if he could fall that far, we could, too.

Somehow he convinced himself that he was the exception, that he could manage this, that he would be the one who really got away with it.

And we do this as well. We think, “I know this is wrong, but it will work for me. I’m going to be the one who makes disobeying the Lord go well. Lesser people than me have not been able to manage their sin, but I can manage it, and I can make it work.”

Doing what displeases the Lord never works. Not ultimately.

We don’t know how many months of peace David got after orchestrating this plan. But it turns out he wasn’t the maestro that he thought he was, conducting his life toward the outcome he wanted and managing his image to perfection.

So the Lord sends a prophet to David. The prophet, Nathan, who had been faithful to speak the word of the Lord to David in the past, comes to him and speaks this parable:

2 Samuel 12 “1 And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds, 3 but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. 4 Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” 5 Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, 6 and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

2 Samuel 12:7 Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. 8 And I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. 9 Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his

sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. 10 Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.'

He goes on to describe the judgment that was coming from God, and the huge pain that would come into David's life as a result of his sin, including no peace in his house again, as well as the death of the child.

Notice a couple of things here:

1) Nathan's Courage to Correct.

David was not in a good place, and Nathan knew that. David was on a murderous tear, thinking only of himself. He had just had a loyal friend killed to try to keep his secret.

But now Nathan approaches David, and this had to take courage.

David could have said, "Do me a favor, Nathan, bring this letter to Joab..."

David was taking out the people who knew his secret, but Nathan, out of faithfulness to the Lord's word and love for David, comes to David to correct him. And it took real courage.

As it will for us at times.

Sometimes we see a brother or sister in a fault, and we want to see them restored, but we know they're in a bad place. We know they've slandered all the others who went to them before, we know they're accusing anyone who brings them truth, we know they're mistreating those who come to help.

But we're called to courage. Courage enough to take a risk and correct.

James 5:19-20 "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

This is good to do, but it takes courage.

2) David's Humility to Allow Nathan's Correction

David was an absolute mess. He had turned his whole life into a dumpster fire. He was lustful and murderous and abusive.

But still by God's grace, there was the openness to Nathan's correction. And that shows there was at least some humility left in him.

Leaders especially sometimes can be frequently criticized and opposed. And they can get used to ignoring all the criticism. We hear all the time how people who are doing things need to "ignore the haters." And to a degree that's true - leaders should ignore the people who only criticize, the people who love to tear down but never build, who only speak to them when they have a problem.

But the big risk is that we start to treat everybody like a "hater." Anyone who would challenge me, or correct me, or kindly call me back to belief must be an enemy.

But then we miss out on so much growth, and we don't learn from the people God sends to keep us on the right path. So we have to have people that we will allow to speak even hard words into our lives.

And it's good to identify them now, before we have to be corrected. There are plenty of haters to ignore. But that isn't everybody.

There are some who have spoken the word to us before, shown their good heart to us, been partners and friends, who need to be able to say "you're not ok, what you're doing is not ok, the Lord is displeased." We need to cultivate those friendships and identify those Nathans in our lives so that we have people that are wise in God's word, who are godly, who have permission in our minds to call us to repentance.

David had a genuine walk with God and fell this far and needed this. Who am I to assume I don't? Resolve now: these are the people I'll listen to. If these people ever come to me and say "you're on a bad path, you're in a bad place, you've sinned" I will stop and listen.

So Nathan corrects David, and he repents:

2 Samuel 12:13-15 “**13 David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. 14 Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD,2 the child who is born to you shall die.” 15 Then Nathan went to his house.**

And according to that caption in Psalm 51, this is the moment that David writes this Psalm as his Psalm of repentance. And we know that what happens in David’s heart here is sincere, it gets to the root of the problem, because Nathan says God puts away his sin.

So today we’ll look at just two realizations David had that put him on the road to redemption, and we’ll unpack the rest next week. So let’s read verses 1-6 first:

Psalm 51:1-6

**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.**

The two major realizations he had here were the dreadfulness of his sin and the mercy of God.

First, he completely owned his sin:

Complete ownership of his sin:

'my transgressions'

'my iniquity'
'my sin'
'I have done evil'

There's no mention of Bathsheba. There's no mention that life has been hard and of course he fell. There's no mention of his needs.

He completely owns what he did, and he calls it sin.

There's no self-pity. There's no using euphemisms to soften the sin or make it seem not-so-bad.

This is a real change from "these things happen" to "I have sinned."

Which is an important part of redemption: seeing the problem as God sees it, calling it what God calls it, and not softening it at all.

This isn't to deny that sins have causes and sometimes they're outside of us. There are occasions for our sins, things that happen to us that make us prone to them. But still the big reason is me.

And the one who is most offended is God.

In fact he even says "I've sinned against you and you only." (verse 4)

Which is strange - he certainly sinned against Bathsheba. He wasn't exactly nice to Uriah.

But he recognizes that every person is made in the image of God. And to sin against a person is to sin against God. He doesn't just have to get some things right with the people around him. Sin breaks fellowship with God, and David sensed the seriousness of that.

Do we?

Or do we explain it away: "I sinned because they sinned against me." Or we excuse it away: "Yeah I'm an angry person. My dad was angry, so I'm angry."

Or do we not even have a category for sin? We shouldn't talk much about that because it feels harsh. But scripture talks about the sin that breaks our relationship with God as our biggest problem, and the consequences for sin couldn't be more serious.

So he sees his sin.

But the other thing he knows, and the thing he totally throws himself on, is the mercy of God.

Psalm 51:1

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

He says "have mercy according to your steadfast love", the Hebrew word *Hesed*.

It's devoted love, covenant love, the kind of love that God pledges to His people.

Paul Miller calls this "one way love," or "love without an exit strategy." The kind of love that causes you to bind yourself to another person even if it means you lose out on the deal.

And he says, "I can't say enough how wicked I've been, but I also know that you are a God of mercy who pursues us with devoted love. You are a God who loves wicked people like me. You are a God who loves at great cost.

So I'm not making light of anything I've done. But I can't make light of your mercy and your lovingkindness either. I believe there's enough of that in you, God, for someone who has fallen like me.

And though there is more to repentance in this Psalm that we'll unpack next week, David knew two things we need to know: the seriousness of his sin, and the abundant lovingkindness and mercy of God.

And rather than run away from God in his shame, he ran toward God, throwing himself on his mercy.

Ligon Duncan points out that there are similarities between David here and the prodigal son. The prodigal son came to his senses and Ligon Duncan: "You know, there's something similar, isn't there, between David and the prodigal son? Remember when the prodigal comes to his senses, he realizes two things simultaneously? First of all, he realizes that he doesn't deserve to be a son. And secondly, he realizes that his father is compassionate. And those words that the prodigal speaks to his father, they speak volumes, don't they? "Father, I don't deserve to be your son." And there you see it in David, 'God I don't deserve to be forgiven, but You're a compassionate God and You're a gracious God and You're a God of lovingkindness, so You forgive me, I beg You. O God, not because I deserve it, not because there's something in me that compels Your love, but because I know what You're like.

John Newton, who had been a slave trader who repented and renounced that evil practice, and later went on to write the song Amazing Grace, said, toward the end of his life: "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior!"

Lord's Supper