



Psalm 51 What is Repentance?

Summary: Convinced of his sin, David turns to God for cleansing, renewal, and restoration.

In Psalm 51 we find a man convinced of his sin begging God for forgiveness, cleansing, renewal and restoration.

The man is King David of Israel. The famous shepherd, who took on Goliath, became a warrior leading armies against the enemies of Israel, and later became king of the nation. He established Jerusalem as the center of Jewish political and religious life and gathered all the material so Solomon, his son, could build the Temple.

David's reign is a high point in Jewish history. But there is also a deep, black, smudge on his life. He rode the wave of popularity and success too high and took advantage of his popularity and status to indulge his selfish desires. He had an affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of his best soldiers. And it all happened while Uriah was deployed to the front lines. So, when it became apparent that the affair had led to a pregnancy, David had Uriah killed in battle in an effort to cover things up.

It was a horrendous abuse of power, a scandalous act of indulgence, and now that the dust has settled David is left with a sense of guilt that is crushing his soul.

Now, I doubt anyone among us is guilty of the *exact* same actions as David, but maybe you've gone half the distance – had the affair but didn't get caught. Or maybe it's something else - we all have our sins. We all fail. We all go astray. There are, no doubt, times when each of us have given in to a desire that seemed so intense in the moment but produced so much regret later on.

What do we do with that? Where do we go from there? What do we do with the guilt we feel, and how do we repent? We'll find some of the answers as we go through Psalm 51 this morning. Read with me as David turns back to God:

Psalm 51:1 Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your lovingkindness;
According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,
Blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I acknowledge my transgressions,

And my sin *is* always before me.

The first thing I want you to see this morning is that David is absolutely convinced his actions were wrong. You can't miss that. He comes at it from several angles, because he's not trying to hide or excuse anything.

He says **I acknowledge my transgressions**. Transgression is a compound word, beginning with the prefix trans which means across, beyond, or through. So, transgression is going across, beyond, or through the boundaries God has established. You are out of bounds spiritually speaking, and that's a foul, so there's a penalty.

He says **Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity**. Iniquity is a word we saw last week in Psalm 103. It's not a common word today because we don't like to talk too much about things we've done wrong so we don't have such a robust vocabulary anymore. But iniquity means you have twisted or mangled something, you wrecked it.

It comes from a Hebrew word that means to bend, twist, or distort. God gave you a soul that was beautiful and functional like a new phone. And He told you to be careful with it and keep it in its case, but you wanted to be cool, so you took it out of the case and one day you dropped it and shattered the screen. You've committed iniquity and there's no hiding it, even if it you try to put it back in its case, its too late, it's already mangled. You have to take it back to your Heavenly Father, admit what you have done, and ask to have it repaired. That's iniquity.

David also speaks of **sin** – which is a more common word for us, it means, literally, to miss the mark. You tried, but your aim is off. You need to score 100 to pass the class and you've never been able to get better than a 93. You miss the mark.

Now, we usually want to be kind, we want to round off the corners, we want to tell people – “Oh, that's OK, you did your best.” But that doesn't always work.

Ask a pilot trying to land on an aircraft carrier: how important is it to hit your mark? If you miss, there are consequences. Especially when you're too far from shore to land anywhere else. Well, the same thing is true spiritually – if you miss God's mark, there's no other safe landing.

So, David is confessing it all, telling God, “I've crossed your boundaries. I've mangled things, shattered things, in my life as well as the lives of others. I've missed the mark. I've broken things I can't fix and without Your help, God, I'm headed for disaster. I hate it, I'm sorry, I wish I hadn't done it. But I did. I did it. And I need Your forgiveness.”

Go back and read this Psalm sometime and note or mark all the times David speaks of his sin – I counted four times, plus two references to his transgressions and another two references to his iniquity. That's eight different ways of saying, “I blew it.” Clearly, David is not trying to hide anything or hold anything back.

Friends, the first thing we learn from Psalm 51 is: we must be willing to confess our sins.

You can't receive forgiveness until you admit you need it. You can't be forgiven if you won't admit you've done wrong.

But you have to be careful in with your admission, because this kind of self-knowledge, self-awareness, can lead in one of two directions. We can experience either condemnation or conviction. They are similar experiences, but have very important differences.

Condemnation comes from inside ourselves, or from Satan who accuses us. Condemnation can lead to remorse – "I feel bad about this, I wish it hadn't been this way." And it can lead to self-loathing, "I hate myself, I always do this kind of stuff. I trash my own life. What's wrong with me!?" You may feel bad, really bad, about what you've done, but you never actually change, in fact, you eventually go back and do the same thing again and feel condemned again.

Conviction on the other hand, comes from God. He is at work in the world and in our lives convicting us of things that are wrong; you sense that heaviness in your heart and soul. You know something you've done or something you're considering is wrong, but instead of remorse, it leads to you repentance. You turn away from what you've done or what you're considering. You say, this is wrong, it leads me away from God, I need to head back toward Him.

That is what repentance is: returning toward God when you've been moving away. And that's what we find David doing here. He admits his wrong, but instead of beating himself up over it all, instead of just feeling bad, he takes action, he comes to God.

Notice what we see next:

*4 Against You, You only, have I sinned,
And done *this* evil in Your sight—
That You may be found just when You speak,
And blameless when You judge.*

Now David sinned against Bathsheba, pursuing a married woman and using the undue influence of his position as king. He sinned against her husband Uriah and the men he involved in the plot of his death. He sinned against the country he has been trusted to lead. But he says to God

4 Against You, You only, have I sinned,

What does he mean? Well, David isn't minimizing his sin against or with others; he's actually maximizing it. He's admitting that all sin against other people is ultimately a sin against God.

You can sin against God and not sin against other people. You can resist or offend God, you can cross His boundaries, mangle His gifts, and miss His mark all by yourself in a vacuum.

But, you can never sin against another a person – lie to them, break a promise or a vow to them, steal from them, spread gossip or lies about them – you can never do any of those things to other people without also sinning against God. He’s the one that says it’s wrong to do those things to others – yes, your actions are hurting them, but they’re also breaking God’s commands.

Remember, Jesus would come along hundreds of years after David wrote this and say that the greatest commandment is to love God and love others as yourself. So, when you harm others, when you are mean to others, when you maneuver against or manipulate others, you’re sinning against God, breaking His rules THROUGH your interactions with others. David recognizes this, and that’s why he says: [Against You, You only, have I sinned.](#)

He’s going to go even farther in his next confession. Look with me at

[5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.](#)

In facing his sin David sees how deep and encompassing the issue is. He’s not criticizing his mom here; he’s recognizing his true condition – that he has been a sinner from the very beginning. He’s never had it all together. The sin that he is grieving over is not some freak event; it’s actually an extreme expression of who he really is all the time.

David sees and confesses, that he’s not a ‘good guy’ who occasionally makes some ‘mistakes,’ he admits that, left to his own devices, *this is who he is at his core.*

This is so important for us to understand. When we sin big, we want to say, “Oops, that’s not who I really am. That was totally out of character.” But actually, that’s exactly who you are, you just keep it reigned in a little tighter most of the time. You don’t usually let it out that much, but it’s always there.

Friends, there is toxicity in our souls. We have all kinds of awful thoughts and ideas that come into our minds. They don’t have to be planted there; they spring up on their own. Haven’t you ever been shocked by a thought or idea that came to you seemingly out of nowhere? What is that? Where does it come from? *It comes from within.* And David recognizes that. We need to do the same. We need to admit that we are flawed at the core, from the very beginning.

But God has a different plan for us:

[6 Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts,
And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.](#)

God's standard is holiness in heart, my mind, my soul. God wants purity and cleanliness in my imagination, in my dreams, in my thoughts and ambitions. So, how is that supposed to happen? I might be able to make restitution for something I've done wrong in the outside world, but how can I make myself clean and spotless within, in the inward or hidden parts of my life?

David sees that it's impossible on his own, so he turns to God and continues to ask Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He says:

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8 Make me hear joy and gladness,
That the bones You have broken may rejoice.
9 Hide Your face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.

David tried to contain things in the aftermath of his sin. He tried to use his power and position to get away with what he had done. When adultery resulted in an unintended pregnancy, he tried to cover things up with murder. But God exposed him through the prophet Nathan and agitated his soul – he says he felt like God broke his bones.

Sometimes, if you have enough power or enough popularity, if you're clever enough or have the right friends, you can get away with things here on earth. You can manage the consequences of your actions. But if those actions also have consequences that echo into eternity, how will you manage those? This is why David turns to God for forgiveness, cleansing, renewal, and reconciliation. He prays,

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

We've seen that David admits and confesses his sin, he doesn't try to hide any of it or soften any of it, he confesses it in all its vulgarity and consequences.

But one of the other things that stand out so clearly in this Psalm is David's sense of what I call the very Godliness of God

Do you see how desperate David is for God? Do you see how much he depends on God? David is aware of the tremendous distance between himself and God. And that's interesting to me because David is a very powerful and wealthy man. A man with status and position. A man who lives in a house too big for his actual needs. A man with servants and an army. This is a man who, you could say, has it all. And yet, he recognizes the gulf between himself and God. He recognizes his own weakness and his need for God.

Go back and re-read this Psalm on your own – notice the humility here, the dependence, the desperation. David makes an honest appraisal of his own limitations and the excellence of God everywhere you turn. In practically every line of this Psalm, David gives voice to the godliness of God - the splendor and power of God, and confesses that he needs God to do what only God can do.

Listen as he goes on:

12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
And uphold me *by Your* generous Spirit.
13 *Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners shall be converted to You.
14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
The God of my salvation,
And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness.
15 O Lord, open my lips,
And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.
16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give *it*;
You do not delight in burnt offering.
17 The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart—
These, O God, You will not despise.

God had given the Jews a system of sacrifices. They brought bulls, goats, birds, or in some cases, grain to be offered to God as an offering for sin or a fellowship offering to God.

As the king of Israel David had tremendous financial and material resources. There was practically no price he could not pay *if* payment was all that was required. David could just say, well, I've done such and such wrong, let me look that up...hmmm...OK, it's going to cost me two bulls, one sheep, and six pounds of barley and then I'm good, I'm all settled up with God.

But David understands that God is looking for a real relationship with us, not simply a retail transaction in the spiritual realm. So even King David, with so much at his disposal, so much that he could have spent to pay off his sin, had to say

16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give *it*;
You do not delight in burnt offering.

Now, some of you may ask, Why not? Didn't God give them system of sacrificial offerings in the first place? What do you mean He doesn't want it? Well, think about it – if you're making an offering, it's because you blew it in the first place. God doesn't want your offerings after the fact to make up for what you've done wrong, He wants your loyal commitment, submission, and obedience that keep you from needing to make sacrifices in the first place.

David understands, the sacrifices, the offerings, actually point to something deeper. God wants them to be offered by a man or woman with [a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise.](#)

I can't make up for my sin with a sacrifice or offering if I think it's all mechanical and derived from spiritual formula. I must, absolutely must, understand that sin in my life is a reflection of the fact that I am out of alignment with God. There is relationship involved. And that is why I can't just pay for what I've done and get it all over with. God doesn't want my money, He doesn't want my sacrifices, He wants my heart.

The sacrificial system was designed by God to help us see the effects of sin – that when I sin there is an actual cost involved with my cleansing. I have done wrong. I really have broken something. No matter how sorry I feel about breaking a glass, the glass is still shattered. I really have missed the mark and there is a cost to that. Justice must be served, wrongs must be righted.

The system of sacrifices helped drive that point home. But the biggest problem with my sins, my transgressions, my iniquities, is that they separate me from God. And if I don't understand that, I really don't understand sin.

David understood all of this, he's asking God to forgive him and restore their relationship and if or when that happens, David promises he will worship, and worship publically helping others to see – if God can forgive David for his mess, maybe He will be willing to forgive me for my mess too.

David concludes by asking God:

[18 Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion;
Build the walls of Jerusalem.
19 Then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness,
With burnt offering and whole burnt offering;
Then they shall offer bulls on Your altar.](#)

In other words, David says, 'Forgive me God, bless with me with a second chance - for Your glory and the good of others.'

David was the king, if God blessed him the whole city of Zion or Jerusalem would benefit, and he would lead others in making grand offerings rooted in righteous lives.

So let me ask: who else will benefit if you turn from your sins? Who else will be led into worship? Who could benefit from your example? Each of us has been given an opportunity to influence someone – when they see you confess your sin, recognize the godliness of God, and seek forgiveness, reconciliation and renewal, what might that provoke in their lives? It's an incredible opportunity God is giving you.

But your experience is going to be a little different than David's because David wrote this Psalm several centuries before Jesus came down as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. He made one, final, sacrifice for all time so while we still need a broken spirit and a contrite heart, no one needed to sacrifice a bull or goat before coming in here this morning.

For those who have received Christ, this has a very important and a very real impact on our relationship with God.

For instance, in the midst of his conviction David cried out to God

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

Is that something Christians should pray today? Well, yes, and no.

When you come to God, confess your sins, and ask to be forgiven in Christ, you are born-again – that's what Jesus said would happen. You receive a new life. And, Jesus said:

John 6:37 All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.

So, David prays “**Do not cast me away from Your presence**” and Jesus says, regarding the Christian: “**the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.**”

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus that if you have trusted in Christ and received the gospel, you have been

Ephesians 1:13 ... sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

So, David prays, “**do not take Your Holy Spirit from me**” and Christians are told you are **sealed with the Holy Spirit ... until the redemption.**”

When we go back and read Psalm 51 we have to remember, David lived in a time when an individual's relationship with God was much more tenuous *because* Christ had not come to be the once for all offering that brings peace between God and men.

Now, having said that, there are still consequences to sin in the life of the Christian. We have not been given complete immunity. God still desires **a broken spirit and a contrite heart.**

But,

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgiveness our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We find this morning, in Psalm 51, a man convinced of his sin who then turns to God for cleansing, renewal, and restoration. All of those things are available to you in Jesus Christ. What will you do with this news today? My hope is that you will see that you are not alone in your sin; it is a common experience for us all. But the problem isn't just with what you've done or who you've hurt, it's really about the distance between you and God. So confess your sin, confess the godliness of God, and draw near to Him today.

Let's pray.