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Learning how to

# **talk to God**

from the great prayers of the Bible

## **David's Prayer of Confession and Repentance**

**Psalm 38, Hebrews 12, Psalm 51**

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia

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## DAVID'S PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

### Psalm 38, Hebrews 12, Psalm 51

That song comes from Psalm 51, from David's prayer of confession and repentance. With deep regret, David prayed, "Have mercy on me, O God ... Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). And then he prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God ... and restore the joy of your salvation" (Psalm 51:10, 12). Sin is fun in the moment, but it always leads to regret. And those who truly love God are quick to confess it, and ask Him to forgive, cleanse, and restore. And that's exactly what He promises to do.<sup>1</sup>

Walking with God means learning how to pray, when the Holy Spirit convicts us, the prayer of confession and repentance.

The majestic creator of the universe has invited us to talk to Him. Prayer is the wonderful gift of experiencing a relationship with God and having a conversation with Him. This invitation to pray proves how much God loves us and cares about us. And nothing could be more important in our discipleship than learning how to talk to Him ... and how to listen to Him.

So this spring, we are *learning how to talk to God from the great prayers of the Bible*. Studying the great prayers of David and Solomon. The desperate prayers of Jonah and Jeremiah. The great prayer of Jesus in garden. We're going to see how Jesus talked to His Father and how Jesus prayed for us. We're also going to study the great principles of prayer like praying with faith. *But the goal is not to learn more, but to pray more!*

Today's prayer is David's prayer of confession and repentance. Walking with God requires a daily acknowledgment that we still sin and need to ask God for forgiveness. When we're slow to recognize this, God's disciplines us. The Holy Spirit convicts us and makes us feel the weight of what we have done.

Now there's something important we need to understand when God convicts us of sin. *That a father's discipline and a father's love are the same thing. Receiving one is the same as receiving the other. That's especially true when it comes to our heavenly Father.* His discipline and His love are the same thing.<sup>2</sup>

God convicts us when we say something we shouldn't, or think something we shouldn't, or do something we shouldn't. He will not tolerate sinfulness or selfishness, pride or arrogance, complacency or rebellion. He loves us too much to let us get away with it. He disciplines us because He wants to spare us the misery of sin, because He wants to conform us to the image of His Son, and because He wants us to experience His best.

Now we can't say this only applies to big sins like David's sin of adultery. No, this is not about big sins. It's about all sin. From adultery to anger, and everything in between. Because all sin, every sin, separates us from God, breaks our relationship with Him, grieves His Spirit, breaks His heart, and forfeits His presence and His blessing in our lives.

As I said last week, I not only fear that many Christians rarely pray, I fear that many Christians never allow the Holy Spirit's conviction to bring them to a place of genuine confession and repentance. I hope that's not true of you. I hope you're willing to learn from David's prayer. ***That our Father's discipline and our Father's love are the same thing. Receiving one is the same as receiving the other.*** This morning, may we learn much from David's prayer.

## PSALM 38 & CONVICTION

Experiencing God's discipline is never fun. It wasn't fun when my parents disciplined me either. But looking back, I'm glad they did. They disciplined me because they loved me. And that's why God disciplines us, because He loves us. But in Psalm 38, David honestly and vividly described what God's discipline felt like.

When he was convicted of sin, David cried out to God, "O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me" (Psalm 38:1-2, NIV). David described God as pulling back His bow and shooting an arrow straight into his heart. That's what conviction felt like to David. Elsewhere he said, "If a man does not repent, (God) will sharpen His sword" (Psalm 7:12, NAS).

We like to think of God as gentle and loving, and He is. We want a God who is safe, and He is. We want a God who dotes on us like a grandfather sneaking us a piece of candy. But God is holy, and He will not tolerate unholiness or unrighteousness, sinfulness or selfishness, especially in the life of His children. The Bible says when we sin, we offend the holiness of God and we grieve His heart.<sup>3</sup>

David honestly and vividly described the emotional and physical trauma of conviction.

"Because of your anger, my whole body is sick. My health is broken because of my sins. My guilt overwhelms me, it is a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and stink because of my foolish sins. I am bent over and racked with pain. All day long I walk around filled with grief. A raging fever burns within me, and my health is broken. I am exhausted and completely crushed. My groans come from an anguished heart" (Psalm 38:3-8, NLT).

Why such emotional and physical trauma? "Because of my sins," David admitted. "Because of my foolish sins." We hear the regret in his voice. In the moment, sin is fun. It brings pleasure. But in the end, sin is devastating, and regret causes the emotional and physical trauma David described.<sup>4</sup>

In verse 2, David described the hand of God pressing down on him. God would not give him relief until there was repentance. David knew that and he finally broke. "I confess my sins. I am so sorry for what I have done ... Do not abandon me, O Lord. Do not stand at a distance, my God. Come quickly to help me, O Lord my savior" (Psalm 38:18, 21-22, NLT). David could not bear one more moment living under the discipline of God. He begged for relief. He begged God, "Hurry Lord ... I can't take it any longer. I am so sorry for what I have done. Please forgive me!"

Do you see what was going on in David's life? He had committed a great sin, but the pleasure of that sin had faded. He knew he had messed up. He knew he had offended God. And his conscience was a wreck.

Everyone has a conscience, a built-in monitor of right and wrong. It's not only formed by family values, religious beliefs, and cultural mores. It's formed by God at birth. Every human being has a conscience, whether religious or not.<sup>5</sup> Romans 2 states that even non-religious people "know in their hearts what is right and wrong." God's moral law is written upon the heart of every human being, religious or not.

But as Christians, there is something else that shapes our conscience – the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> The Holy Spirit is like a compass, always pointing true north, always pointing to what is right.<sup>7</sup> And because it does, C. S. Lewis said the conscience "makes me uncomfortable when I do wrong."<sup>8</sup>

To say the least, David felt uncomfortable. Uncomfortably guilty and uncomfortably convicted.

This depth of conviction is rare these days, and I can prove it by citing how the Puritans prayed and confessed their sins. A classic little book called *The Valley of Vision* is a collection of Puritan prayers from the 1600-1700's.<sup>9</sup> Listen to how the Puritans confessed their sins.

- "You are good beyond all thought, but I am vile, wretched, miserable, blind ... I bring my soul to you; break it, wound it, bend it, mold it."<sup>10</sup>
- "Destroy, O God, the dark guest within whose hidden presence makes my life a hell."<sup>11</sup>
- "Under the conviction of your Spirit I learn that the more I do, the worse I am, the more I know, the less I know ... O wretched man that I am! O Lord, I have a wild heart."<sup>12</sup>
- "Lord Jesus, give me a deeper repentance, a horror of sin, a dread of it."<sup>13</sup>
- "Lord Jesus, I sin – grant that I may never cease grieving because of it, never be content with myself ... Kill my envy, command my tongue, trample down self ... Deliver me from attachment to things unclean, from wrong associations, from evil passions, from the sugar of sin."<sup>14</sup>

That's what true conviction sounds like. But there are some people who insist that Christians should never feel guilt, and they quote Romans 8:1 which declares that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." And we're glad that's true. But there is a place for appropriate guilt. When we sin, and when God convicts, something deep within us should be upset. Gordon MacDonald refers to guilt as "spiritual pain."<sup>15</sup> That's appropriate and that's what David was feeling. "Spiritual pain." Guilt is the soul saying in regret, "Oh why did I do that?" Guilt is the soul joining David and saying, "I confess my sins. I am so sorry for what I have done."

## HEBREWS 12 & DISCIPLINE

I realize God's discipline is not the most attractive part of walking with God. But it is a very real part of walking with God because, unfortunately, sin is still a very real part of us. So we must accept that *the Father's discipline and the Father's love are the same thing. Receiving one is the same as receiving the other.*<sup>16</sup>

Hebrews 12 explains this.

“Do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ... We have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:5-7, 9-11, NIV).

The point of Hebrews 12 is that “the Lord disciplines those he loves.” The father-son relationship is mentioned 7 times in this passage, and the word “discipline” is used 8 times. And the two go hand in hand. The Father's discipline and the Father's love are the same. It's inaccurate to think of discipline as God scolding us when we do something wrong. The Greek word for “discipline” includes parenting and educating, discipling and disciplining. God disciplines us to correct us and to instruct us. He disciplines us to help us avoid the trap and the misery of sin. He disciplines us so that we can experience His best.

Hebrews 12:10 says, “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.” That we may be conformed to the image of His Son.<sup>17</sup> But Hebrews 12:11 admits that “no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.” The Scripture admits that God's discipline is “painful.” When our hearts are hard and desensitized to the Holy Spirit, the Lord becomes more aggressive in getting our attention. Our theology must allow room for God to impose pain in order to purify us.<sup>18</sup>

“The Lord disciplines those he loves” (Hebrews 12:6, NIV). God's discipline proves we really are His sons and daughters! Speaking of earthly fathers, Proverbs 13:24 states, “If you love your children, you will be prompt to discipline them” (NLT). The same is true with God. *The Father's discipline and the Father's love are the same. Receiving one is the same as receiving the other.*

## PSALM 51 & CONFESSION

I repeat what I said earlier, I not only fear that many Christians rarely pray, I fear that many Christians rarely allow the Holy Spirit's conviction to bring them to a place of genuine confession and repentance.

So how do we do it? David shows us how. Psalm 51 is a template for confession. When his affair with Bathsheba became public, David was broken and convicted, and he poured his heart out to God. Psalm 51 shows us how David confessed his sin and teaches us how we should confess our sin. Again, not just big sins, but all sin. From adultery to anger, and everything in between.

A genuine prayer of confession begins with an *appeal to God's grace*. "Have mercy on me, O God," David prayed, "according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:1-2, ESV). No matter what we've done, no matter how bad it was, God is compassionate and gracious.<sup>19</sup> He is eager to hear our confession and forgive us. So appeal to His grace. "Have mercy on me, O God."

*Admit your sin.* "I know my transgressions," David said, "and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:3-4, ESV). Admit it. Don't try to hide it. The Bible says, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8, NAS). By confessing it, we are agreeing with God.<sup>20</sup> It's saying, "Lord, You have convicted me and convinced me, and I agree with You that what I did was wrong." Confession is also a realization that we have offended God. "Against you, you only, I have sinned," David said. He realized what all of us must realize, that our sin offends the holiness of God and it grieves His heart.

In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul talked about "godly sorrow."<sup>21</sup> It's the appropriate sense of guilt, shame, and regret we feel when we are convicted of sin.<sup>22</sup> Sorrow? Shame? Regret? Is that what God's children are supposed to feel? Yes! Every time we sin, we should feel sorrow, shame, and regret. Because every time we sin, it should remind us of the cross. Because every flippant, lustful, and selfish act we have ever committed cost Jesus a drop of His blood.

Admit your sin, appeal to God's grace, and *allow God to restore you*. David prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me ... Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Psalm 51:10, 12, ESV). Confession leads to restoration. One person said, "Confession may begin in sorrow, but it ends in joy."<sup>23</sup> How? Because the Bible promises, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NAS).<sup>24</sup> The Bible says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12, NAS). When we confess our sins, God promises, "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).<sup>25</sup>

One more lesson from Psalm 51 and David's template for confession. *Approach God in brokenness*. In his prayer, David realized, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17, ESV). What does God want from us? "A broken and contrite heart." When it comes to confession, never approach Him casually or flippantly. Instead, broken and humbled.

Jesus gave the example of the Pharisee and the tax collector, contrasting how each prayed to God. Pharisees were the religious elite, were self-righteous, and walked about with an air of superiority. Tax collectors were despised because they were Jews who worked for the Roman government, extorting excessive taxes from the people. Jesus said ...

“Two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed, ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people – cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’”

“But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’”

Then Jesus said, “I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:10-14, NLT).

When we approach God in brokenness, when we admit our sin, when we appeal to His grace, He promises to forgive, cleanse, and restore.

### **GUIDED CONFESSION**

Walking with God means learning how to pray, when the Holy Spirit convicts us, the prayer of confession and repentance. To be close to God, to stay in relationship with God, to be clean before God, prayers of confession and repentance are to be a regular part of our life.

So, let’s make it personal. What is God saying to you? Remember, this is not about big sins. It’s about all sin. What is the Holy Spirit exposing in your life and what do you need to confess?

Have you said something you shouldn’t? Have you done something you shouldn’t? Have you hurt or offended someone? Have you been arrogant or mean, selfish or dishonest? What about pride, lust, envy, gossip, prejudice, anger, impatience, a lack of forgiveness, a lack of faith? There’s no need to continue a long list. You probably know what it is. What is the Holy Spirit exposing in your life and what do you need to confess?

In Psalm 139, David had the humility to pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me ... Point out anything in me that offends you” (Psalm 139:23-24, NLT). I challenge you to pray that. “Search me, O God.” And when the Lord exposes it, may you pray as David prayed. “I confess my sins. I am so sorry for what I have done” (Psalm 38:18, NLT).

The song we are about to sing is “O Come to the Altar.” When we come to the altar, our loving and gracious Father always greets us. I encourage you to make your seat an altar. Just sit before God. As one the lyrics says, perhaps you’re “overwhelmed by the weight of your sin.” If you are, this song is an invitation to come to the altar with His arms open wide. Another lyric asks, “Are you hurting and broken within?” If you are, if you need comfort, this song is an invitation to come to the altar with His arms open wide.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 John 1:9.

<sup>2</sup> Theologian Millard Erickson reminds us that God “is our heavenly Father, not our heavenly grandfather.” [Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), page 965.]

<sup>3</sup> See Isaiah 63:10, Ephesians 4:30, Colossians 3:5-6.

<sup>4</sup> See Psalm 32:3, “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long” (NAS).

<sup>5</sup> See more on this from John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Vanishing Conscience* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1994), page 36f.

<sup>6</sup> See John 14:26.

<sup>7</sup> J. I. Packer warns us that “Satan’s strategy is to corrupt, desensitize, and if possible, kill our consciences.” [J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1992), page 151.]

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: A Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, originally published in 1943, first Touchstone edition in 1996), page 34.

<sup>9</sup> Edited by Arthur Bennett, *Valley of Vision – A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., page 124.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., page 127.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., page 128.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., page 134.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., page 146.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon MacDonald, *Restoring Joy to Your Inner World* (New York, NY: Inspirational Press, 1992), page 496. A compilation printing which includes *Rebuilding Your Broken World*.

<sup>16</sup> Why would God react so intensely toward David? Why would God react so intensely toward us? Because sin in the life of a believer is always out of character. It’s just not how children of God are supposed to act. And because of our new identity, it’s not how we really want to act. Sin is a contradiction of who we really are. We are now “freed from sin” (Romans 6:7). We are now “children of light” (Ephesians 5:8). We are now “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). The Bible is right when it says that when we sin, we “wage war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). And our Father can’t stand that. He can’t stand it when we act out of character or when we abuse our own identity.

<sup>17</sup> See Romans 8:29.

<sup>18</sup> God was willing to let the Hebrews wander in the wilderness for 40 years in order to discipline them. In Deuteronomy 8, Moses explained why. “Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments ... He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna ... Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, ... a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing ... Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, ... do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt ... and fed you in the wilderness with manna ... to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good” (Deuteronomy 8, NLT).

<sup>19</sup> See Psalm 86:15.

<sup>20</sup> See 1 John 1:9. The Greek word “confess” means to agree with, or to say the same. To confess sin is to say the same thing God says about it.

<sup>21</sup> See 2 Corinthians 7:9-11.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Foster says it is “the deep regret at having offended the heart of the Father.” [Richard J. Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978, 1988), page 152.]

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., page 153.

<sup>24</sup> See Psalm 32:1-5.

<sup>25</sup> See Proverbs 28:13.