

PSALM 51

THE PSALM OF REPENTANCE

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Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions (Ps. 51:1).

Certain chapters in the Bible are famous for particular doctrines or themes. 1 Corinthians chapter 13 is known as the “love” chapter, and Hebrews 11 is famous for its portraits of faith. Psalm 51 is renowned as the classic prayer of repentance. The superscription tells us it was penned by David after the prophet Nathan confronted him for his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. David responded to Nathan by doing what God calls us to do when confronted with our sins: “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD’” (2 Sam. 12:13). It was not to Nathan that David needed to confess, but to God, and Psalm 51 records David’s prayer.

Repentance is the stepchild in the family of Christian doctrine – neglected, unwanted, and unappreciated. We are eager to talk about grace, forgiveness, and other seemingly more positive themes. But repentance is often left out. Some Christians consider repentance to be a legalistic offense to gospel grace. However, repentance is so necessary to salvation that Jesus began his ministry on this keynote. “‘The time has come,’ he preached. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mk. 1:15). The Westminster Confession says repentance “is of such necessity to all sinners that none may expect pardon without it” (XV. 3).

What is repentance? Simply put, repentance is turning from sin and turning to God. Repentance and faith are inseparably joined; Jesus said we must “repent and believe.” Sinclair B. Ferguson explains: Faith cannot exist where there is no repentance... I cannot come to

Christ in faith without turning from sin in repentance... They are two sides of the same coin of belonging to Jesus.”¹

Repentance is therefore of great concern to Christians, and this psalm is a most helpful guide. Psalm 51 presents four vital matters regarding this doctrine: repentance requires confession of sin, repentance relies on God’s mercy, repentance finds cleansing in Christ’s blood, and repentance produces new obedience by the power of the Holy Spirit.

REPENTANCE REQUIRES CONFESSION

First, Psalm 51 shows that *repentance requires confession of sin*. David’s first two verses speak of his need for forgiveness and cleansing, and in verses 3 and 4 he explains why: “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.”

This statement offers a classic confession of sin as David admits his guilt before God. Many a convicted criminal is sorry he got caught. Repentance, however, means being sorry for the sin itself and the harm it has caused to others. Hugh Martin explains, “True confession is taking guilt to ourselves before God. It is the unreserved acknowledgement of the heinousness of sin, and our consequent, inexcusable ill-desert, our righteous liability to the wrath of God.”²

To confess sin, we need to know what it is, and verses 1-5 employ three verbs that present different aspects of sin and its nature. First is *transgressions* (Hebrew, *pesha'*), in verses 1 and 3. This means to cross a boundary or to break a rule. Julius Caesar transgressed when he took his army across the river Rubicon, becoming an outlaw against Rome by crossing the forbidden line. We all have transgressed against God by violating his law. Simply peruse the Ten Commandments and you will find that you, like David, are a law-breaking transgressor.

¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Grace of Repentance* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2000), 17.

² Hugh Martin, *Christ for Us* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 41.

The second term is *iniquity* (Hebrew, *‘awon*), meaning perversion or corruption (Ps. 51:2). As David points out in verse 5, his nature is depraved and has been since the moment of his conception.

Third is the word *sin* (Hebrews, *chattath*), in verses 2 and 3. This means to fall short or miss the mark. David realized that he was not the man he should have been. Paul applies this situation to everyone: “We all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

When we talk of confessing our sin, all three of these ideas are involved. We must admit the things we have done wrong, the specific ways we have transgressed God’s holy law. David’s concern to confess transgression is seen in verse 4, where he admits that he has violated God’s justice and offended God’s holiness: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” David is not denying that he has sinned against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. Rather, what most grieved him was the knowledge that he had sinned against God. He had dishonored and angered God. God was right to judge him, David says: “You are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

It is one thing to say, “I did something I shouldn’t have done.” But true repentance says, “I have given personal offense to God by breaking his holy law.” Many of us stop short of true repentance, and therefore of God’s renewed blessing, because we will not admit our guilt. We shift the blame. We attack anyone who accuses us. But David shows that when our sin is found out – by ourselves or by others – we ought to admit, “I have sinned against God. He is right to condemn me. My actions were wrong and should be judged.”

Since sin includes having a corrupt nature and falling short of God’s mark, these should also be confessed. David prayed, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5). This verse does not suggest that there was something particularly wicked with regard to David’s conception. Rather, David acknowledged the problem known as original sin. Original sin does not refer to the actual sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, but rather to the effect of their sin. Because of this condition, Paul says, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). Adam’s sin brought God’s curse upon our race so that we are all born in a fallen state of moral corruption. In noting his inherited depravity, David

acknowledges that did not just happen to sin that one time. Rather, sin was engraved into his nature. He was a sinner and that is why he sinned. David confessed his sin to God not as a small or fleeting problem that could be easily brushed aside. Rather, he presented sin as a colossal defect in his very nature.

You, too, must realize that sin is the great problem of your life. Sin dwells in your nature just as blood flows through your veins. You therefore need a radical solution and a thorough cleansing: you need to be born again and renewed. You are unworthy before God, far beneath what he intended and expects. Worse still, sin has made you a law-breaker. Your sin has brought you under God's just condemnation and there is no redress available on your part. If you have a hard time accepting this dreadful reality, and are prone to deny your sin and minimize your guilt, then you should pray for God's Spirit to enliven your conviction, just as God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David and soften his hardened heart so as to confess his sin.

REPENTANCE RELIES ON GOD'S MERCY

Confession of sin is necessary to repentance in the same way that algebra is a prerequisite for higher math. It is facing the reality of our sin and the shame of our guilt that makes us want to repent. Sadly, many people do not proceed from conviction of sin to true repentance because they fail to realize a second point of Psalm 51, namely, that *repentance relies on God's mercy*.

The mercy of God is perhaps the most important thing for us to know about repentance. The obligation to repent unnerves people, because they assume that repentance relies on their own works. To such people, repentance means turning their life around before they can come to God. The problem is that they can never change themselves sufficiently because the power of sin is simply too strong. Sin's claws are in the sinner's flesh and hold him in a bondage he cannot himself escape. As David realized, sin corrupts the sinner's very nature, so that his desires run toward evil. Discouraged and disgruntled, the self-reliant sinner thinks of God as the problem rather than the answer. If the sinner hates his sin, he hates God even more for requiring a repentance he cannot perform. This was Martin Luther's experience before he discovered gospel mercy. Luther was terrified by the guilt of sin. He confessed his sin regularly; in fact, he drove the priests

mad with endless sessions in the confessional booth. Then Luther would set out to do better, only to find that he could not. He once was asked, “Martin, don’t you love God?” Luther honestly replied, “Love God? I hate God!” Many are like him today.³

Notice, then, how David begins Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God” (v. 1). This plea makes all the difference to the convicted sinner: the difference between sorrow and joy, despair and hope, resentful anger and loving worship of God. Repentance relies not on our works, David knew, but on God’s mercy. James Boice explains:

Mercy is the sole basis of any approach to God by sinners. We cannot come to God on the basis of his justice; justice strikes us with fear and causes us to hide from him. We are not drawn to God by his wisdom; wisdom does not embolden us, though we stand in awe of it. No more does omniscience, omnipotence, or omnipresence. The only reason we dare come to God and dare hope for a solution to our sin problem is his mercy.”⁴

Here is the good news that Christianity proclaims to the world: God has mercy for sinners who need to repent. Psalm 86:5 says, “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.”

God’s mercy is most vividly shown in the coming of Jesus Christ. Think how often Jesus is seen in the Gospels healing multitudes of sick people. This was God’s mercy for a sick and sinful world. Mark tells of a leper, the ultimate symbol of corrupt humanity, coming to Jesus. Though everyone else scattered when they saw the leper, Jesus remained. Falling to his knees, the wretched man begged Jesus, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Mark tells us, “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured” (Mk. 1:40-42). This is the mercy that is willing to receive and heal you so that you are able to repent. While sin is far stronger than our strength of will, it is still only the second greatest power in the world. There is a greater power: the grace of God extended to sinners who cry to him as David did, “Have mercy on me, O God!”

We cannot overemphasize the importance of this gospel truth. If you want to remove darkness, you can only do it by shining a great light. The light that empowers our repentance is the mercy of God. When

³ Cited from Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1955), 43-44.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, ?), 2:425.

you see how ready God is to save and cleanse you, then you realize that God is the answer and not the problem. Repentance, therefore, does not mean begrudgingly giving up sins that we love and cherish, but rather seeing our sins as the evil slave-masters they are and turning in faith to God for the mercy that sets us free.

REPENTANCE FINDS CLEANSING IN CHRIST'S BLOOD

How can it be, you may ask, that a holy God can show mercy to guilty sinners? If God is a righteous judge and if we have transgressed his law, how can he simply blot out the record of our sins? The answer is found in the third point of Psalm 51, showing that *repentance finds cleansing through Christ's blood*. David prays for this washing, saying, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Ps. 51:7).

Hyssop was a spongy plant that grew in crevices, often on walls. Because of its shape and texture it was used as a small brush. In Israel's sacrificial system, the hyssop brush was used to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the one to be cleansed. We remember the leper who came to Jesus, as a picture of one corrupted by sin, and we should note that the hyssop brush was especially mentioned in the cleansing rite for those cured of leprosy.

This ritual, taught in Leviticus 14, involved two live birds. One was killed, and the hyssop brush was dipped in its blood, which then was sprinkled on the leper to be cleansed. This is what David sought: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean" (Ps. 51:7). The second live bird was then dipped in the blood and released to fly away into the sky. This symbolized the complete removal of sin and guilt. The red stain flew upward until it could no longer be seen. Psalm 103:12 tells us, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." The rite concluded with the former leper washing his body and clothes, just as David prayed, "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Ps. 51:7).

This ritual foretold the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Like the first bird, Jesus was put to death for our sin. He died to pay the penalty of our sins under God's law. When we trust in Christ's death, his blood is applied to us so that we are made clean. Jesus has sent our guilt away, just as the live bird flew away with the red stain of sin. The

apostle John explained, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9).

Notice how complete and thorough this cleansing is. David prayed, “Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Ps. 51:7). This is a righteousness of which we can hardly conceive, having so little practical experience of it in this life. But if we come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible says that we stand perfectly cleansed before him. John tells us, “The blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7).

While some people find it hard to admit their sinfulness, there are others who condemn themselves all too readily. These find it difficult to believe that anything could really cleanse them. But God says that if you come to Christ to be washed clean, his blood will make you not a dingy brown but a gleaming white, like snow. Isaiah 1:18 tells us, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

Have you found this cleansing through Christ’s blood? This room is filled with great sinners who have offended God in gross and terrible ways. Some of you may have committed murder or assault or adultery. Some of you have been vandals and thieves. Most of you have lied and slandered, used your tongue to destroy and sow discord, have cheated, and blasphemed God’s holy name. Every one of us is guilty of these kinds of terrible sins, and the sins we have not committed with our hands, we have committed in the desire of our hearts. We have been rebels who fall far short of what God desires and demands. For some, our great need is to confess that we have sinned against God and are rightly condemned. Others are being crushed under the burden of unforgiven sins and an uncleansed soul. If you will look to Jesus Christ, you will find a God who loved you enough to send his Son to bear the guilt of your sins. You will be cleansed whiter than snow, washed and renewed. Jesus will clothe you in the perfect robes of his own righteousness, having nailed the record of your sins to the cross and redeemed you with his own precious blood.

REPENTANCE PRODUCES NEW OBEDIENCE

The Christian life does not end with forgiveness, but rather begins there. Likewise, repentance not only finds cleansing in Christ's blood but also *produces new obedience in the power of God's Spirit*. Repentance is not merely *turning* away from sin, but also *walking* with God in holiness. David therefore prayed: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (Ps. 51:10-12).

David's plea shows all the blessings that sin steals from us: purity of heart, steadfastness of spirit, and the joy of salvation. These same blessings are restored by repentance. Your repentance is not complete without them; indeed, repentance is not sincere and genuine unless it produces the gospel joy and godly resolve we see in David. Salvation is by grace alone: we do not live a godly life in order to achieve repentance. But the one who knows himself cleansed by Christ's precious blood, and rejoices in the priceless gift of salvation, goes on to lead an increasingly godly life out of gratitude to God.

A biblical example is Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in Jericho, who had enriched himself by robbing and cheating the poor. When Zacchaeus came to faith in Christ and received salvation, it was only natural for him to rejoice in making restitution: "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor," he said. "And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Lk. 19:8).

David had similar motivations. His sin against Bathsheba had terrible consequences for the life of the nation. As king, David's bad example reverberated throughout the kingdom. He prays for God's Spirit, therefore, not just for his own spiritual uplifting but so that he can be busy undoing some of the harm he had done. In verse 13 he wants to "teach transgressors your ways," so that "sinners will turn back to you." Verses 14 and 15 tell of David's desire to sing praise to God. David wants the Jerusalem he has torn down by sin to be built up by his godliness; he wants the spiritual life of the nation to be restored, as he concludes in verses 18 and 19: "Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will you delight in

right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.”

Verses 16 and 17 make a vital statement that applies to every sinner who turns to God and now wants to give back to him. David writes, “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.” This is an important declaration of what Old Testament religion was really about. God was never interested in mere rituals but in the heart response of faith. So David wanted to offer God a heart that now was pierced by the gravity of sin, pliable in God’s hands, and sensitive to God’s truth.

“The sacrifices of God,” David says, “are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). Likewise, the highest and best offering we can give to God is our heart, broken over sin and responsive to his grace. The proper fruit of repentance is nothing less than this self-offering to God, with the inevitable result of restitution for prior sin and new obedience to God’s Word.

REPENTANCE: A WAY OF LIFE

If you have never experienced the blessings of forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal, Psalm 51 urges you to repent and turn to God in faith through Jesus Christ. Confess your sin and come to God for mercy, through the cleansing of Christ’s blood.

Yet we are mistaken if we think repentance is something we do only to become Christians for the first time. Nor is repentance only for Christians who have sinned grossly, as David did with Bathsheba. The truth about repentance is what Martin Luther proclaimed as the very first of his famous *Ninety-Five Theses*: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent’, he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”⁵ Luther was arguing against the mechanical system of penance taught then (as now) by the Roman Catholic Church. Repentance was little more than saying a few “Our Father’s” and “Hail Mary’s” after leaving the confessional booth, or

⁵ Martin Luther, *Ninety-five Theses*, Stephen J. Nichols, ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 23.

handing over money to buy an indulgence. Luther would argue just as vigorously against today's attitude that repentance is an unpleasant necessity to do once and put behind you. Instead, repentance is the mode in which Christians humbly live their whole lives. Sinclair Ferguson writes, "Repentance is characteristic of the whole life, not the action of a single moment... Salvation means we are actually being saved."⁶ Repentance requires confession of sin, it relies on God's mercy, it finds cleansing through Christ's blood, and it produces new obedience through the Holy Spirit. This is to be the believer's daily experience.

We can work out this calling to repentance in a number of areas, beginning with worship. One of the worst things that happens when people fall into sin is that they stop worshiping God. They forget that they can bring their sin to God, who in his mercy offers to forgive and cleanse them. A problem that is almost just as bad is when people do come to God for worship, but come without repentance.

Psalm 51 tells us how to approach God, depicting the attitude we should have in worship. The way to begin worship is not to come in our own righteousness, but to come with David's words: "Have mercy on me, O God" (Ps. 51:1). We must worship as sinners, coming to a God of mercy through Christ's cleansing blood, offering our hearts contritely to him and looking to his Spirit for help.

Repentance also describes the way we should study the Bible and seek to grow in Christian truth. The problem with so many professional theologians is that they do not study with repentant minds!

Repentance is the way we give our minds to God. How should you approach your Bible to receive God's Word? How should you prepare to hear a sermon? The answer is by humbly opening your heart, being eager to have your errors corrected and your faith built up. One reason why so many people get so little out of the preaching they hear is that they sit before the minister with hearts that are not broken and contrite, they have already decided what they want to believe and are not prepared to yield to God's Word. We should always approach God's Word by confessing the sinfulness in our thinking and the corruption that keeps us from truth. Then we should ask for God's mercy, plead the cleansing of Christ's blood, and pray

⁶ Ferguson, *The Grace of Repentance*, 11.

for God's help through the enlightening work of his Holy Spirit. Christians, and especially preachers, must approach God's Word with repentance.

Finally, how should you approach the challenges that face you day-to-day? The answer is repentance, coupled with faith. You should receive every trial and every opportunity as a sinner, guilty of transgression and worthy to be condemned. What a cure repentance is to self-pity! You then should remember the mercy of God, who is graciously willing to receive your prayers and help you. You should offer your works, your ministry, and your labor through the cleansing blood of Christ – undaunted by their imperfections and the residue of your sin, but asking Christ to receive them with his blessing. You should ask God for the Spirit to empower you to trust and glorify him.

If you will offer your whole life through repentance and faith, God will do more than just cleanse and forgive you: he will do a lasting work through you. In the terms of David's concluding verses, the Lord will make Zion prosper and build up the walls of his holy city. God will gain sacrifices that are pleasing to him and worshipers who come in spirit and truth. Repentance, joined with faith, is the Christian's whole way of life, his or her path of blessing, to the glory of the holy God of mercy and grace.