



THE VOICE OF A CONTRITE HEART

SERIES: GIVE ME AN AUTHENTIC VOICE

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Psalm 51

Sixth Message

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In this series we are studying the shape of David's voice in the psalms, taken together with his story in the books of Samuel. David was on a mountaintop of praise in our last study, overwhelmed with appreciation for the grace of God revealed in the New Covenant. Up until that moment, his every advance seemed marred in some measure by grief. But on that occasion he spoke with unadulterated joy, completely free of sorrow. From that lofty height we come now to David's great fall. God's king is caught up in sexual entanglement, betrayal, treachery, and a cover-up involving multiple murders.

The whole sordid story begins with the words, "In the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle...But David stayed at Jerusalem" (2 Sam 11:1, NASB). Alone on his rooftop one evening, David caught sight of a beautiful woman bathing. The woman was Bathsheba, the wife of his loyal friend Uriah the Hittite. Overcome by lust, David took Bathsheba and lay with her. Weeks later, she sent him a two-word message, two words that would send shock waves through any man: "I'm pregnant." Rather than facing the guilt of his sin, David tried to cover it up by summoning Uriah home from the battle. After receiving a quick battle report, he encouraged Uriah to relax and go home to sleep with his wife. To prepare the way, David even sent a little romantic gift to Uriah's house. But this soldier would not be distracted from his sacred charge, choosing instead to sleep outside David's palace with the servants. When David asked him why he did not enjoy the comforts of home, Uriah replied:

"The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in temporary shelters, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? By your life and the life of your soul, I will not do *this thing!*" (2 Sam 11:11)

Uriah could not possibly bring himself to do "*this thing.*" His passionate concern about the ark is an echo David's earlier concern (2 Sam 7:2), and a mirror of David at his faithful best. Instead of making a full confession, however, he hardens his heart and delays his friend one more night. This time he applies a little alcohol to the situation, hoping a drunken Uriah will lose his resolve. But a drunken Uriah is a better man than a sober David, and once more he refuses to sleep with his wife.

The determined David then sends Uriah back to the battle with a sealed message to Joab, his general, directing the commander to place Uriah in the midst of the fiercest fighting and then withdraw, leaving him exposed. The loyal servant carries his own death warrant in his hands. The plan succeeds, but goes awry when other innocent lives are lost as well. Upon receiving the news, David glibly tells his general, "Do not let *this thing* displease you (be evil in your eyes), for the sword devours one as well as another" (2 Sam 11:25, NASB). Now "*this thing*" is the murder of the innocent.

The cover-up was successful, except for one loose end: "*The thing* that David had done was evil in the sight of the LORD" (2 Sam 11:27). The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront Da-

vid, and through the guise of a ruling on a court case involving a stolen lamb, David proclaims his own guilt:

"As the LORD lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did *this thing* and had no compassion" (2 Sam 12:5-6).

Nathan answers with that penetrating charge, "You are the man!"

The magnitude of David's fall is truly enormous, especially after he had received the most amazing promises of God. One senses that years of riding a tidal wave of success had isolated him from true male friends who would challenge him with the truth. This isolation, coupled with his idleness, made him an easy target for the enemy.

What will David say now? When it came to grief, like the time when his best friend was brutally killed, the master poet was able to use metaphors to draw out his deepest sorrow. But how will he give grief a voice when he is the one responsible for the death? What can he possibly say to come back home to a heavenly Father he has spurned?

David's situation reminds me of the movie *Apollo 13*. Following the explosion in space, we all remember the historic words from the spaceship, "Houston, we have a problem." Back at mission control, as the engineers were resigning themselves to the absolute impossibility of getting the astronauts home, the director cried out, "We've never lost an American in space. We're sure as hell not going to lose one on my watch! Failure is not an option!" Pressed up against the wall of certain death, these engineers threw the rule book out the window and become infinitely creative in making and reshaping the remaining parts of the wounded spacecraft to do the impossible: bring the Apollo astronauts safely home.

In like manner, David, pressed up against the wall of certain death, composes Psalm 51. This psalm pushes the envelope of grace to heights that had never before existed. It is a poetic masterpiece of creative genius that is designed to bring the worst of sinners safely home. The psalm begins with the superscription:

For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

The superscription became a permanent public reminder that God sent the prophet Nathan to enter David's soul, just when David entered into Bathsheba. We can't be certain whether it was David's, or a later editor's, idea to keep his sin in the public eye. But we do know that every time this psalm was sung it became a public reminder of the king's sin and the prophet's word. In our culture, the media makes our sins public; in David's day, the humble displayed their own sins for all to see. This is an important step for healing.

Psalm 51 has four major divisions: an appeal, a confession, a prayer of restoration, and then these three are climaxed by the king's vows. Tacked on at the end (vv 18-19) is an addendum, written by an unknown poet during Israel's exile. The

psalm opens with David's appeal to God.

I. The Appeal (51:1-3)

**Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me. (NASB)**

During the Apollo mission there were times when the astronauts lost contact with mission control. Cut off from all communication, they felt vulnerable and alone. This becomes our plight when we deliberately turn away from God and live alone in the darkness of our sin. How do you reconnect after you have betrayed the living God with lies? How do you approach a Holy Being who has treated you with grace, but whom you have despised? How do you begin to speak?

David's first word (in Hebrew: *honneni*, "Be gracious to me") signifies that he has nothing to give, so he asks God to give him something he does not deserve. What does David appeal to within the heart of God that might move him to be gracious? He draws upon the deepest part of God's heart, appealing to his loyal-love and compassion. You can always get God's attention when you speak to him about his covenantal promises. He will respond with tender warmth (Luke 15:20).

Secondly, notice how David takes full ownership for his sin. He uses the whole range of Hebrew vocabulary for sin, grasping each word unequivocally as his own, using the personal possessive pronoun "my": *my* transgressions, *my* iniquity, *my* sin, *my* transgressions, *my* sin.

Thirdly, David confesses that what is really driving him is his need. Sin is having a terrible effect upon him. He cries out in his pain that though his acts of sin are over, their memory is very much alive. He cannot escape it. This is what terrorizes him and drives him to appeal for grace. When a needy, desperate sinner takes full responsibility for his sin and approaches God in this way, God is always moved to help.

David's appeal is followed with a confession that comes from a new understanding.

II. Confession With a New Understanding (51:4-5)

**Against You, You only, I have sinned,
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.**

David's terrible memories of his adultery and murder have left him with a deep understanding about God and himself. God was fully in the right; he was fully in the wrong. Therefore he will submit to any judgment, for he knows he deserves to die.

In the poem, David uses every Hebrew term for sin to describe his depravity: sin, transgression, iniquity, and evil. He had sinned. He had missed the mark and did not do what he should have done (i.e. gone to battle). He had also "transgressed." He had done what was wrong, flaunting his wrongdoing in a high-handed manner, in the eyes of his God (adultery and murder). His use of the term "iniquity" speaks of the perversions and twisted wreckage of lives and relationships left in the wake of his sin. He had perverted the office of king for personal gain, and the office of commander-in-chief to

cover up a murder. He had twisted the sacred bonds of friendship to shed blood. But finally, when he glibly said to Joab, "Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes," he had reached the depths. Renaming that which was evil and calling it good provoked all heaven to decisive action. His tragic experience taught him with poignant severity that he was capable of anything.

But even more painful to David was this new realization that his propensity to sin was not the exception; it was not a rare fit and flurry of unbridled passion and anger. Sin was always present with him. Living just below the surface, it had been with him since birth. All that was needed was the right set of circumstances to bring it to the surface. Sin was part of his character. He was inbred with it. Thus, he moves from saying, "I sinned" to "I am a sinner." This is the same understanding that dawned upon Martin Luther and the Reformers. When we come to the same knowledge, then we, too, become candidates for new revelations of grace.

In the third part of David's poem, the prayer of restoration, this sobering knowledge of the depth of his depravity, coupled with an imminent death sentence, force him to new heights of creativity.

III. Prayer of Restoration (51:6-13)

The heart of David's poem is comprised of four couplets. In these verses he reaches the pinnacle of greatness, receiving a doctoral degree for new developments in the theology of grace. Here he makes daring, outrageous statements that had never before been attempted. He utilizes only four words for sin, but more than twenty metaphors for how God cleanses the sinner from sin and its effects. With astonishing freedom, he pushes the limits of grace to infinity. David, the Einstein of grace, a thousand years before the time of Christ, anticipates the New Covenant in all its majestic beauty. His prayer is profoundly simple, like Einstein's $E=mc^2$, yet it is a work of absolute genius. He throws himself headlong upon the mercy of God, risking everything in the process.

The first of his four petitions is, "Wash me."

A. Wash me (51:6-7)

**Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.
Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**

God desires truth "in the innermost being." But as David probed the hidden parts of his soul he saw that he was a spiritual leper. The image, "Purify me with hyssop," was used for the purification rites of a leper (Lev 14:6-7; Mark 1:40-45). David needed to be opened up, to be washed and scrubbed clean by God. Then, he says, "I shall be whiter than snow." This is a new metaphor for cleansing, a David original. Isaiah would later adopt it and turn it into a prophetic hope, saying, "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow" (Isa 1:18). It is significant that in Mark 1:40-45, Jesus cleanses a leper; and following the Lord's resurrection, an angel sat on the stone which had sealed the tomb, and his appearance was like lightning, his clothes were "as white as snow" (Matt 28:3).

If that were not enough, David asks for more. Once God had washed him, he asks God to take the initiative to teach him wisdom in his innermost being. He had given up hope that he could ever get truth into his heart, so he asks God to take the initiative. What a bold request!

David's second request for restoration is for God to heal him.

B. Heal me (51:8-9)

**Make me to hear joy and gladness,
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.
Hide Your face from my sins
And blot out all my iniquities.**

His sins have made him deaf to joy, and lame, so that he has no delight in his step. He needs God's miraculous, healing touch to make him well again. Yet, in asking to hear the world "forgiveness," he makes a bold request, "Hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquities." Up to this point in Old Testament history, the verb "to blot out" was used to describe what God does to sinners.¹ In Gen 6:7, God said he would "blot out" all mankind in the flood. "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot him out of My book" (Exod 32:33). David even used this verb in his prayers: "may [the wicked] be blotted out of the book of life" (Ps 69:28). But here, in Psalm 51, he is the wicked one. Now what does he do?

Notice the change. Here he says to God, in effect, "Instead of blotting out my name from the book of life, will you redirect your energy and holy passion to blot out my iniquities?" This is daring stuff. David was the first OT author to use the term this way. Later, the prophet Isaiah would use it to anticipate the New Covenant in Christ: "the Lord GOD will wipe (blot out) tears away from all faces" (Isa 25:8).

So David prays, "wash me and heal me." Thirdly, he petitions, "recreate me."

C. Recreate me (51:10-11)

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

David knows full well that he deserves the same fate as Saul. There was a time when the Holy Spirit rushed mightily upon Saul, but because of repeated disobedience, he was cast away, permanently removed from the presence of God. David confesses that that is what he deserves; yet he boldly asks God to work a miracle so that he may not suffer the same fate.

David reaches to the most powerful, God-activating verb in the Bible (*bara*, "create") to make his request. This is the very first verb used in Genesis to describe God's creation of the world out of chaos and void. David knew that his heart could not be reformed. He was doomed if God did not perform in him a new, creative work on par with his work in the original creation. If God granted his prayer, then his inner spirit would be permanently revitalized, and established to participate in eternal life.

Later, the prophets would pick up, anticipate and detail what David longs and prays for (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:17-20; 36:25-27). The apostle Paul refers to this creative act as having been fulfilled in Christ, so that it becomes the life-giving miracle of every conversion: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17, NIV). And David's longing for this creative act to have permanent results on our spirits is fulfilled, when Paul says that believers are "sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph 1:13).

Thus David prays to be washed, healed and recreated. Finally, he prays for restoration.

D. Restore me (51:12-13)

**Restore (*shuv*, "turn, return") to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,**

And sinners will be converted (*shuv*, "turn, return") to You.

Soon after the assassination of President Kennedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was part of Kennedy's administration, was asked about resuming life after that terrible event. He replied: "We may laugh again, but we will never be young again."² Restoration can only go so far. But that is not enough for David. Remembering the joy of his youthful, eager spirit, he prays that he might laugh again, and that he might be young again. David has vivid memories of what it was like to rush headlong into the thick of the battle, anticipating Yahweh's salvation. So he asks God to restore that consummate joy to him. But not just for his satisfaction: he prays to be restored so that he could restore others; then life would be meaningful again. Knowing what life was like when he was a broken sinner himself, he would have even more to offer.

After three thousand years, God is still answering that prayer. Who teaches you the road to recovery? Who gives your soul words to shape your grief? Who grasps your thoughts and places them on the sacred page so that when you read them they become wet with your tears? It is this man, David. He had the courage to pray for the impossible, to dream the improbable, and now he leads millions of others safely home.

David's ends his prayer with vows of thanks.

IV. Vows of Thanks and a New Orientation (51:14-17)

**Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation;
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
That my mouth may declare Your praise.
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.**

David finally is able to bring himself to mention the specifics of his sin. Like Cain, he has shed innocent blood. From that death sentence he asks to be delivered, for the very purpose of giving public praise. David asks God to not let him die in his sins, and for the opportunity to praise God before the nation. Normally, completion of a vow of thanksgiving consisted of two parts: a poem of praise and an animal sacrifice. The king would write a poem of thanksgiving, a work carefully crafted to unlock emotions of joy and jubilation, memorializing the event for all time; and this was followed by an animal sacrifice, usually the peace offering. One-third of the sacrifice was placed on the altar, one-third was given to the priest, and one-third was dedicated for three days of feasting in celebration for what God had done. So David keeps his vow and crafts a poem, Psalm 51.

But, as David approaches the place of worship, carrying his lamb, he is struck with a lightning bolt of insight that unlocks the significance of Israel's sacrificial system. The insight is this: What God was primarily seeking through animal sacrifice was a broken spirit! His spirit crushed, David chants his poem and leaves the lamb and goes home. There was no need for sacrifice. This was a first. Notice the play on words from 2 Sam 12: David *despised* God's word (12:9), and God broke his spirit. Now David offers that crushed spirit on the altar and God *does not despise it*. At the very moment that his spirit is crushed and broken, God creates a new spirit, by his Holy

Spirit.

Like the astronauts of Apollo 13, David had traveled a great distance from his home. There was the terror that indeed he had gone over the edge and would not survive the heat of re-entry. But now, having offered his broken heart on the altar, he walks away in the absolute confidence of acceptance, and in that rare freedom anticipated by Jesus, he worships God "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). It is difficult for us who live in the age of the New Covenant to comprehend what a radically new orientation this was for a Jew.

Now we come to the addendum to Psalm 51, written by an unknown poet during the time of the exile.

V. Addendum from Exile (51:18-19)

**By Your favor do good to Zion;
Build the walls of Jerusalem.
Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices,
In burnt offering and whole burnt offering;
Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.**

In these verses we see how powerful David's psalm was to the Jews. Almost five centuries after he wrote these words they were picked up and appropriated as being the exact sentiments of the Jews who were living in exile during the days of Haggai and Zechariah. The words of the king became the words of the nation in its darkest hour, expressing its yearning for national restoration from exile and the rebuilding of God's temple and city. These forsaken exiles found David's penitent words so fitting to their own condition that they appropriated Psalm 51 for the circumstances which they were facing, and then added a prayer of their own. In doing so they set a wonderful example for how we should appropriate these psalms in our own lives: we should first memorize them and then personalize them.

But, notice that David's freedom may have been too much for the exiles to handle. They placed "righteous sacrifices" back into the poem, making it orthodox once more. Indeed, so radical was David's freedom, not many were able to fully enter into it in the Old Testament. Yet, it is to be the standard of the New Covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. If we should add anything to the faith of a contrite heart, we make a mockery of the cross. The sacrifices of God are still a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart.

And the good news is that we do not have to commit the terrible sins of murder and adultery to obtain a broken spirit. No, we do not. All we have to do is look at the cross. There is no way to look at our Lord hanging on the tree, his body pierced for our iniquities, blood streaming down, and not weep at the terrible consequences of our sins. Is there anyone here who is carrying on his conscience the load of unforgiven sin? Do you miss your father's home? Do you feel you are too far gone to come home? Then,

*Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
and the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon. (Isa 55:6-7, NIV)*

1. For "blot out," see Gen 6:7; 7:4, 23; Exod 7:14; 32:32, 33; Deut 9:14; 25:19; 29:19; Isa 25:8; 43:25; 44:22; Ps 9:6; 69:28.

2. Quote taken from Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth In Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 63.

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