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PSALM 51

4th Message

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A BROKEN AND CONTRITE HEART

SERIES: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

We are in the fourth of a nine-week series examining David's life as a model of repentance. After Saul's death, David's faith and loyalty to the Lord continued on a positive trajectory and reached its climax in 2 Samuel 7, when God promised David an everlasting dynasty of sons. If they sinned, God would discipline them, but he would never take his loyal-love from them like he did Saul (vv. 14-16). God concluded by saying, "your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16). Was there ever such an individual whom God so exalted? From that lofty height we come now to David's great fall. God's king is sadly caught up in sexual entanglement, betrayal, treachery, and a cover-up that involved multiple murders.

It happened in springtime, when kings normally went out to battle. David's general and his loyal troops were risking their lives on the battlefield, but the king himself "remained at Jerusalem" (2 Sam 11:1). In a world where kings are judged by "fighting the battles of the Lord," it is unsettling to see the spotlight on David taking leave of his troops. The ironic oppositions are heightened in verse 2, when "In contrast to the nation fighting at Rabbah, the king is leading a life of idleness in Jerusalem, taking his leisurely siesta, getting up in the evening, and strolling about on his roof."¹ From that high vantage point the king had a view into the courtyards of the homes in the valley below. Early evening was the time for ritual bathing and, out of respect for privacy, it would have been highly inappropriate for the king to look down from his high perch at that hour. On two counts David violated his conscience and "made provision for the flesh to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:14).

With the trap set, David takes the bait. Seeing Bathsheba bathing, he lusts after her body. When he inquires as to her identity, he is told that she is the wife of his loyal friend, Uriah, a Hittite convert whose bravery made him one of David's elite corps of "Thirty" (2 Sam 23:39). Her father, Eliam, was also a member of David's elite circle of warriors.

Sadly, the lust in David's eyes makes him deaf to the report that she is Uriah's wife ("wife" is found 10 times in 2 Sam 11-12). Overcome by lust he succumbed to desire and took her and lay with her. Weeks later Bathsheba sent David a message of just two words – words that send shock waves through any man: "I'm pregnant."

Rather than admitting the guilt of his sin, David tried to cover it up by summoning Uriah home from the battle. After a perfunctory battle report, he encourages Uriah to relax and go home to sleep with his wife. To prepare the way he graciously sends a little romantic gift to his house. But this soldier will not be distracted from his sacred charge and instead chooses to sleep outside David's palace with all the servants. When David asks him why he did not enjoy the comforts of home, Uriah replied:

"The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, 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? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do *this thing*." (2 Sam 11:11)

"This thing" was unthinkable to this soldier. Uriah's disciplined devotion to his Lord is a painful mirror of David at his faithful best (2 Sam 7:2). But rather than breaking down and making a full

confession, David hardens his heart and delays his friend one more night. This time he applies a little alcohol to the situation, hoping a drunk Uriah will lose his resolve. But Uriah drunk is a better man than David is sober. He again refuses to sleep with his wife.

Still determined, David then sends Uriah back to the battle with a sealed message to Joab, his general, to place him in the midst of the fiercest fighting and withdraw, leaving Uriah exposed. David's loyal servant carries his own death warrant in his hands. The plan succeeds, but there is collateral damage as other innocent lives are lost as well. But when David gets the news, he replies glibly to his general, "Do not let *this thing* be evil in your eyes, for the sword devours one as well as another" (11:25). "This thing" has now escalated from adultery to the shedding of innocent blood.

The cover-up was successful except for one loose end, "But 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 David, and through the guise of ruling on a court case of 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)

With David's neck in the noose, Nathan tightens the rope: "You are the man!"

When we consider the magnitude of this fall it is mind-boggling, especially after receiving the most amazing promises of God (2 Sam 7). I suspect that after years of riding a tidal wave of success, David started believing his own press, which infected his ego with that deceptive spirit of entitlement. That damning spirit coupled with isolation and idleness made him an easy target for the enemy. Israel's icon of faith is quickly transformed into Saul's former self – an outright abuser.

Caught and exposed, what will David do now? Are there words? When Jonathan was brutally killed, David was a master poet, able to shape metaphors to draw out his deepest sorrow. But how will he give voice to grief when he is the one who pulled the trigger?

David's situation reminds me of the Apollo 13 mission to the moon, when an oxygen tank exploded, severely damaging the spacecraft's electrical system. If you saw the movie you may remember those historic words after the unexpected explosion: "Houston, we've got a problem." Back at Mission Control, as all the flight engineers are resigning themselves to the impossibility of getting the astronauts home, the director cries out, "We've never lost an American in space; and 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, the engineers throw the rulebook out the window and become infinitely creative, making and reshaping the remaining parts of the wounded space craft to do the impossible: to bring the Apollo 13 astronauts safely home.

In similar fashion, David's sin has catapulted him into the outer stratosphere of darkness. Pressed up against the wall of certain death, he is forced to push the envelope of grace to new heights. Ironically, when David lies in the gutter awaiting God's verdict (between v. 13a and

13b),² he crafts his finest psalm. The psalm is a poetic masterpiece of creativity and intricate symmetry that is designed to bring the worst of sinners home. Throughout the centuries, the church has recognized its greatness. James Houston writes,

“The Psalm of All Psalms” is the title the Anglican liturgist J. M. Neale ascribed to this psalm! In the medieval Roman Breviary, Psalm 51 was recited every hour at the conclusion of each monastic service. For some thirteen centuries, it was repeated seven times daily. As *De Miseré* it was selected for Ash Wednesday, to become pivotal within the Church’s calendar.³

The psalm has four major divisions: an introductory appeal, a confession, petitions for restoration, and the king’s vows. It begins with the superscription: **A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.** (Bruce Waltke’s translation⁴)

In our culture the media makes our sins public; in Israel’s day, the humble displayed their sins for all to see. This is the first step to healing. “True confession, as Augustine saw, is as public as the sin in order to develop a person’s spiritual life and to teach others of God’s grace.”⁵

I. Introductory Appeal (Ps 51:1-2)

**Be gracious to me, God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your abundant compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Thoroughly wash me from my iniquity
and pronounce me clean from my sin. (vv. 1-2)**

During the Apollo mission there were times when the astronauts lost contact with mission control. Cut off from all communication they felt very vulnerable and alone. Such becomes our plight when we deliberately turn away from God and take cover in the darkness of our sin. How do we reconnect with a Holy God after we have spit in his face?

David’s first word, “Be gracious to me” (*channeni*, “bestow a favor that cannot be claimed”), is a comprehensive appeal to God for grace to rescue him from the punishment he deserves (“pronounce me clean”) and to cleanse him (“wash me”) from the stain sin has left on upon his heart. What does David appeal to within the heart of God that might move him to be gracious? David knows that at the very bedrock of God’s heart is a tenderness and warmth that transcends justice – his covenantal love and compassion. As God revealed to Moses, we serve a God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6-7). God’s compassion is “abundant” exceeding the deepest natural bonds of affection. As Waltke observes, “Standing in the deep, dark hole of his sin, David looks up and sees stars of God’s grace that those who stand in the noonday sunlight of their own self-righteousness, never see.”⁶

Standing face to face before a compassionate God, David takes full responsibility for his crimes. He uses the full range of Hebrew vocabulary for sin and grasps each term unequivocally as his own: my transgressions, my iniquity, my sin. His admission of sin means that he had missed the mark and fallen short of what was required of the king in forsaking the battle. “Transgression” implies he went further and betrayed covenant relationships in a willful and high handed manner. “Iniquity” speaks of the perversions and twisted wreckage of lives and relationships left in the wake of sin and the resulting guilt. David had perverted his office as king to serve his lusts, and the office of commander-in-chief to cover up a murder. He had also betrayed the sacred bonds of friendship to shed innocent blood. But finally, when he said glibly to Joab: “Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes,” he had reached the depths. When David renamed that which was evil and called it good, it was then that all heaven was provoked into decisive action.

David’s appeal is followed by his confession that is shaped with new understanding.

II. Confession With a New Understanding (Ps 51:3-6)

A. Confession of sins (v. 3-4)

**For my transgressions I know,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned,
and what is evil in your sight I did;
so you are just when you speak,
and blameless when you judge.**

David confesses that what is really driving him is his need. Sin is having a terrible effect upon him. Though his acts of sin are over, their memory is very much alive and 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. Paul calls this “godly grief” that “produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret” (2 Cor 7:10).

David’s terrible memories of his adultery and murder have left him with a new understanding about God and himself. God was fully in the right. David was fully in the wrong. Therefore he will submit to any judgment, for he knows he deserves to die. His tragic experience taught him with poignant severity that he was capable of anything.

B. Confession of moral impotence (vv. 5-6)

**Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin my mother conceived me.
Behold, truth you desired in the covered place;
And in the bottled-up place you were teaching me wisdom.**

But even more painful to David is the realization (“behold”) 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. It lived 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, David moves from saying, “I sinned,” to “I am a sinner.”

What heightens his pain is the fact that he knew better: in that covered place of the womb God was active, teaching him wisdom. “Both David’s sin and his knowledge of truth/wisdom are ever before him; this is the dilemma of every person.”⁷ No one can claim ignorance before a holy God, for we have all sinned against that inner voice that distinguishes between right and wrong. How do we resolve the tension?

This sobering knowledge of the depth of his depravity coupled with an imminent death sentence lead David to new heights of creativity.

III. Petitions for Grace (Psalm 51:6-12)

At the heart of David’s poem are his petitions for forgiveness and restoration. In these verses the poet reaches the pinnacle of greatness and gets a doctoral degree for new developments in the theology of grace. While using three terms for sin, he uses “twenty images of forgiveness or cleansing in this psalm.”⁸ With astonishing freedom he pushes the envelope of grace to new heights, throwing himself headlong upon the mercy of God. 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.

A. For forgiveness and cleansing of sins (vv. 7-9)

**Purge me with hyssop that I may be clean;
wash me that I may be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins
and all my iniquities blot out. (vv. 7-9)**

God desires truth “in the innermost being” but, as David probed the depths of his heart, he saw that sin had taken root, metastasized and spread like leprosy. The image, “purify me with hyssop,” was used for the purification rights of a leper (Lev 14:6-7; Mark 1:40-45). David confesses that he needs 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 of cleansing, a David original. Isaiah would later adopt it and turn it into a prophetic hope, saying to the nation: “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).

David’s sins have made him deaf to joy and psychologically crushed so that he has no delight in his step. He longs for God’s tender voice of absolution to restore him back to health. Hearing it, he knows, will ignite his heart in enthusiastic joy.

In asking to hear the word “forgiveness” he makes a bold request, “Hide your face from my sins, and blot out my iniquities.” Until now, the verb “blot out” had been used to describe what God does to sinners.⁹ In Genesis 6:7, God said he would “blot out” all mankind in the flood; and in Exodus, “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 what do you do now when you are the “wicked”?

Notice the change: he asks God in effect, “Instead of blotting out my name from the book of life, will you avert your gaze at my sins and redirect your energy to blot out my iniquities?” Daring stuff! David is the first to use the term this way. Later, the prophet Isaiah uses it in similar fashion to anticipate the New Covenant in Christ: “the Lord GOD will wipe (“blot out”) tears away from all faces” (Isa 25:8).

When our conscience has been deeply stained by sin, forgiveness alone is insufficient for us to press boldly on as servants of our King. As Waltke says, “He [David] needs from God an inward spiritual grace to accept his forgiveness and to build on it. And so he petitions God to give him that spirit.”¹⁰

B. For spiritual renewal (vv. 10-12)

**A clean heart, God, create for me,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Do not cast me from your presence,
nor take your spirit of holiness from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and let a willing spirit sustain me. (vv. 10-12)**

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 is what he deserves; yet he boldly asks God to work a miracle so that he may not suffer the same fate. Thus, David reaches for the most powerful, God-activating verb in the Bible (*bara'* - “create”) in order that something brand new might come into existence. David wants a “clean” heart, one with a brand new inclination and disposition that doesn’t repeat his past failures again and again. David’s sin with Bathsheba had undermined his spirit of complete surrender to God’s purposes. David knew that his resolve had been so

damaged by his sin that it could not be humanly repaired. Apart from a “new creation,” David was doomed. But if God granted his prayer, then his inner spirit would be revitalized and firmly reestablished to serve God with his whole heart once again.

David’s prayer was later picked up by Israel’s prophets and reframed as a promise to the nation as a vital aspect of God’s New Covenant with his people (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:17-20; 36:25-27). The apostle Paul explains that the promise was fulfilled in Christ, and that it becomes the life-giving miracle of every conversion:

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 4:6; 5:17).

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.”¹¹ 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. Our spirit is fortified to persevere when we experience the joy of God’s salvation. 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 joyous spirit so that he won’t quit the game.

David’s prayer for restoration is more than personal; he has another generation in view. With his vow of praise, David anticipates the glorious day when he will be given the privilege of giving public testimony to God’s glorious grace that forgave his sin.

IV. Vows of Praise with a New Orientation (Ps 51:13-19)**A. Personal praise (vv. 13-15)**

**Let me teach transgressors your ways,
that sinners may turn back to you.
Save me from bloodguilt, God, the God who saves me,
my tongue will shout out loud your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.**

David is finally able to bring himself to the place where he can name his sin. Like Cain, he has shed innocent blood. David asks God to not let him die in his sins, and for the opportunity to praise God before the nation. David prays to be restored so that he can restore others, then life will be truly meaningful again. Knowing what life was like when he was a depraved and broken sinner allows David the opportunity to be held up as a trophy of God’s grace. But David is careful not to presume on God’s grace and knows his forgiveness will be pure gift, one that will open his lips and bring shouts of acclamation to God’s glory. As Waltke writes, “Praise transforms petition from self-absorption to God’s exaltation. True repentance concerns itself with God’s reputation, not the penitent’s.”¹²

I find that David’s vow of praise is instructive for our healing. Perhaps the ultimate evidence of genuine repentance is not just public confession, but taking on the responsibility and joy of teaching others from the hard and painful lessons of our past.

B. Sacrifice of praise (vv. 16-17)

**Surely, you would not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer it;
a burnt offering you would not favor.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, God, you will not despise.**

“Typically a festive sacrifice and communal meal of celebration accompanied verbal praise.”¹³ But David, knowing that such a meal would be abhorrent to God and the nation given the circumstances, wisely offers an alternate menu for the congregation to feed upon. Instead of a sacrificial bull, he offers the covenant community a more appropriate sacrifice, his broken spirit and contrite (lit. “crushed,” “pulverized”) heart.

When the astronauts of Apollo 13 attempted to re-enter the earth’s atmosphere with their damaged spacecraft, there was significant doubt whether they could survive the heat of reentry. For four agonizing minutes of radio silence, their fate seemed to hang in the balance. But then Apollo 13’s parachutes were spotted, and the astronauts splashed down safely into the Pacific Ocean to the acclamation of the nation.

A similar tension resides within Israel’s congregation. Have David’s high-handed sins cast his soul outside the protective limits of God’s grace? Will Israel’s king survive the heat of re-entry? To the congregation’s utter surprise, David turns to them and confidently affirms that “a broken and contrite heart,” God will “not despise.” When we have been crushed under the mighty hand of God and publicly affirm that we have no hope apart from God’s grace, it is like holy oil upon the sacrificial altar. Note the play on words from 2 Sam 12:6: David despised God’s word (12:9) and God broke his spirit. Now David offers that crushed spirit on the altar knowing God will not despise it. The repentant king 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).

With God’s acceptance of the king’s offering, David concludes the psalm with the fruit of his repentance and the implications for the nation’s growth and praise.

C. National praise (vv. 18-19)

**Prosper, in your favor, Zion;
let the walls of Jerusalem be built.
Then you will delight in the sacrifices of righteousness,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar. (vv. 18-19)**

As Israel’s leader, David is keenly aware that his personal life is no private matter, for the king’s sins deeply impact the nation. Thus he concludes by praying that the Lord prosper Jerusalem by his good pleasure, so that the city will one day expand and its fortifications extend beyond the ten-acre mound “called the ‘City of David,’ to the northern hill of Zion, where David pitched the tent for the ark.”¹⁴ David envisions Jerusalem someday having worldwide influence as a consequence of God’s blessing, a vision which his son, Solomon, witnessed. When God’s name is so glorified, that will be the appropriate time for God’s people to offer their best sacrificial animals and take part in communal meals of celebration.

V. Postscript: David’s Repentance an Example for All (Ps 52:1)

For [James Garcia] the director of music. (Ps 52:1)

Bruce Waltke has demonstrated that “for the director of music” was originally a postscript to the preceding psalm, not an original part of the superscript.¹⁵ By handing the psalm over to the chief musician, David becomes the example for all of us. When we humbly confess our sins and trust God’s grace based on the sacrifice of Christ, we not only receive forgiveness of our sins, but also the empowering presence of God’s Spirit to further his kingdom.

And the good news is that we do not have to commit the terrible sins of murder and adultery to obtain a broken spirit. All we have to do is look at the cross. There is no way to look at our Lord hanging on the tree, body pierced for our iniquities, blood streaming down, and not weep at the terrible consequences of our sins.

**Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isa 55:6-7)**

1 Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 197.

2 In his unpublished notes Bruce Waltke comments that “A Qumran scroll of Samuel has a blank space at the end of 2 Sam 12:12 which, according to S. Talmon, directed the reader to Psalm 51.”

3 Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, *The Psalms, A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 446.

4 I have used Waltke’s translation for my text. Waltke, *The Psalms*, 462-464.

5 Waltke, *The Psalms*, 467.

6 Waltke, *The Psalms*, 468.

7 Waltke, *The Psalms*, 475.

8 Waltke, *The Psalms*, 475.

9 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.

10 Waltke, *The Psalms*, 475.

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

12 Waltke, *The Psalms*, 478.

13 Waltke, *The Psalms*, 480.

14 Waltke, *The Psalms*, 482.

15 Bruce K. Waltke, “Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both,” *JBL* 11 (1991): 583-596.