

A Song For Sinners, Psalm 51
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Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. This is our second to last sermon in our series in the Psalms, which we have subtitled "Seeing All of Life Through the Lens of the Gospel". Our effort here has been to grow in our identity as Worshipers of God. Certainly when we think of worship, we think of the Psalms, the hymnbook of God's Old Testament people. But let me ask you a question: when you think of worship, do you think of sin? How can we be both worshipers and sinners? How can we worship even in the midst of worst sin?

To answer those questions, I invite you to open your Bibles with me to Psalm 51, which you can find it on page 474 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. The title of today's sermon is "A Song For Sinners," and the main idea is this: Seeing our sin through the lens of the gospel—that's what makes a worshiper. Here's what I believe we will see in today's passage:

- 1) An Example of Godly Sorrow - vv. 1-12
- 2) An Example of True Repentance - vv. 13-19

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Psalm 51. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

*¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.*

*² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!*

*³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.*

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.

⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.

⁶ Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

¹¹ Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸ Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;

¹⁹ then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar. Psalm 51

The Lord has spoken to us. [Congregation:] Thanks be to God! (You may be seated.)

Exposition

Consider with me for a moment the cultural significance of “posting”. We might begin in 1775 when Benjamin Franklin appointed the first Postmaster General to regulate posting, or in 1860 when the Pony Express was established to speed up posting—both of these representing an age when posting was still very much a private matter. Track advances in telecommunications, however, and you eventually reach an age in which, though posting can still be private through “snail-mail” and email, it has become a very public activity. Let me use some different terms and you’ll understand what I mean: instead of “posting” think profile or status or story. Between LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram alone, posting is as normal to us as breathing; even the posting of very personal information. And what it cultivates in us, often without us even realizing it, is to project that which is good about us, and to hide that which is bad.

That said, here’s a question for you: can you imagine if the worst things you’ve ever done were posted for all the world to see? Horrifying to even think about, right? Well, that’s the reality of the psalm we come to today. Here, read just the title of the psalm with me:

To the choirmaster. [Get that? Nothing about this is private. It’s not even just a narrative for God’s Old Testament people to learn from—no, it’s a *song they sang!*¹ A song about what?] *A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.* [Wow, right there it is in the title. It could’ve just said, “A psalm of repentance” or something—but there is nothing held back in this psalm; and really, that’s the gift of it. In it we are invited to explore both the depths of David’s sin and the heights of God’s salvation; and along the way find hope for ourselves, even at our worst.²]

In order for us to fully understand this psalm we must know the story that led up to it. So keep your finger in Psalm 51 and turn back to 2 Samuel 11. There we read, beginning in v. 1,

¹ Charles Spurgeon, “Psalm 51,” Treasury of David, <https://archive.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps051.php>

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 206-207

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

² It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. ³ And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" ⁴ So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house. ⁵ And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." 2 Samuel 11:1-5

From there David conspires to cover it up by calling her husband Uriah home on leave so that he will sleep with his wife and appear as though he got her pregnant. But Uriah is a man of character and he refuses such luxuries while his fellow soldiers are laying down their lives for the kingdom—and the king. So David has him killed and takes Bathsheba as his wife. And, as is often the case, one sin piles on top of another. At the end of chapter 11 we read this: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord."

So, the Lord sends his prophet Nathan to confront the king. As David has come into Bathsheba's life to wreak havoc, now Nathan is sent to wreak havoc in David's.³ And the Lord gives him the wisdom, at the beginning of chapter 12, to do it in the form of parable that tricks David into condemning himself. We pick up the story in v. 5,

⁵ Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, ⁶ and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

⁷ Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. ⁸ And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. ⁹ Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? 2 Samuel 12:5-9

That last sentence is a reference to Numbers 15, a law about how those who commit unintentional sins can be forgiven. It also says, however, if someone sins intentionally with a high hand (that is, deliberately, like an apostate), he should be utterly cut off from

³ Spurgeon, "Psalm 51"

his people, and his iniquity shall be on him (in other words, killed)—because he has despised the word of the Lord.⁴ Nathan is saying nothing less than, “David, you are the man *of Numbers 15*.”

He then goes on to describe to David the devastating consequences of his sins, including a sword and evil that will never depart from his house, as well as his wives being slept with publicly (which is later fulfilled by his own mutinous son, Absalom⁵). And this is where if you’re an ancient Near Eastern king, and a warrior like David, you cut out this prophet’s tongue. But instead,

¹³ David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” 2 Samuel 12:13a

He was *shattered*. How do we know? Well, in large part because of Psalm 51, a psalm historically referred to as “The Sinner’s Guide”.⁶

1) An Example of Godly Sorrow - vv. 1-12

Well, fellow sinners, let us be guided together this morning. The first sacred lesson for us today from Psalm 51 is an example of godly sorrow. Read with me beginning in v. 1:

*¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin! Psalm 51:1-2*

To begin with “Have mercy on me, O God” is essentially to say, “God, I’m ruined unless you forgive me”; or to quote the old hymn Rock Of Ages, “Wash me, Savior, or I die.”⁷ David owns it. To follow that up with “according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy,” that’s an appeal. Standing condemned before a righteous judge—what are you going to appeal to? When God is that Judge, you appeal to his character: his steadfast love, his abundant mercy, his cup of salvation (to return to last week).⁸

⁴ Numbers 15:31

⁵ 2 Samuel 16:22

⁶ Plumer, 555

⁷ Augustus M. Toplady, “Rock Of Ages,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKRdhBK_fts

⁸ W. S. Plumer, *Psalms*, Geneva Series Commentaries (Chelsea: Sheridan, 2016), 555; Kidner, 207

To say “blot out my transgressions” is to cry for the erasing of sins like the erasing of words from a book. To say “Wash me thoroughly...and cleanse me” is to describe yourself like a garment soiled from an oozing, cancerous sore, and it needs to be cleaned over and over before it’s safe to use again.⁹

These are graphic descriptions! You can’t think about yourself this way unless you’re feeling the weight and rot of your sin. And here’s the thing—David had already been pardoned. Samuel went one to tell him, “The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die”. You know what my temptation would be in that situation? One, not to be so upset because I know I’m already pardoned. Or two, to be really upset that I got caught, and that I have to suffer some temporary consequences. Neither of those responses are godly sorrow by the way! Instead, what we see in David is a sinner *and* a worshiper, someone who says, ‘It’s not enough for me to just be forgiven—I want to be holy’.¹⁰ To quote again from Rock Of Ages:

*Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure*¹¹

This is because a heart that has been claimed by Jesus does not so easily belong to another. David speaks to this in v. 3,

³ *For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.* [David’s sin confronted him day and night¹² because godly sorrow and true repentance isn’t a transaction. It’s a process.¹³ For example, throughout the early years of my marriage, Katie would kindly confront me about the same thing. Over and over I would quickly apologize to smooth things over, but nothing ever changed—I would just go right back to doing it. Why? Because I wasn’t open to the process of God breaking my heart over my sin and changing me—I just wanted a quick fix in the conflict. We all need time and space to let God do the miracle of breaking our hearts, and convincing us that (v. 4)]

⁴ *Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words*

⁹ Kidner, 207-208; Leviticus 15

¹⁰ Plumer, 556

¹¹ Toplady, “Rock Of Ages”

¹² Kidner, 208

¹³ Plumer, 562

and blameless in your judgment. [David wasn't saying he hadn't sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah and the baby and all of Israel—of course he had! But the most grievous part of it all was that he had offended the Lord his maker, and maker of all the people he had sinned against. And until we see sin that way, we don't even know what sin is.¹⁴ This deeper knowledge of his sin leads David to a deeper knowledge of himself. He says in v. 5,]

⁵ *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me. Psalm 51:3-5*

This isn't David making an excuse for his sin—"Oh I was born this way"—but owning it to a whole new depth. It's the doctrine of original sin applied rightly. Growing as a Christian doesn't mean feeling less awareness and weight over our sin, but more.¹⁵ It's not a journey of saying, "Wow, I didn't realize I was that bad" every time we mess up (which is basically a way of saying, "I think I'm pretty great"). But instead it's learning to say, "Yes, I can believe I'm that bad—and far worse. From the womb I've been this way." In fact, to embrace a deeper knowledge of our sin is the only way to embrace a deeper knowledge of God's grace. This is the raw work that God wants to do in each of us for our joy and for his glory (v. 6):

⁶ *Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.* [God won't settle for making you a nice, put-together Christian on the surface while you're a mess on the inside. No, in Christ he purchased all of you, and he wants all of you to be like Christ. So what's the process of going from one who can pile sin on top of sin with no regret to one who welcomes God's conviction of sin? It's a journey of wisdom. Wisdom often looks like holding different realities in tension instead of clinging only to one or the other. Here's what it looks like in David (v. 7):]

⁷ *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.* [(Reality #1:) My heart is as rotten as a leper's flesh. (Reality #2) But God is willing to cleanse and change me.¹⁶ When you hold those two realities in tension, you know what it produces? Godly sorrow. Godly sorrow means grieving over our sin, but not as those who have no hope.¹⁷ David speaks to this in v. 8:]

⁸ *Let me hear joy and gladness;*

¹⁴ Kidner, 208; Plumer, 557

¹⁵ Kidner, 208; Plumer, 557

¹⁶ Kidner, 209

¹⁷ 1 Thessalonians 4:13

let the bones that you have broken rejoice. [The sorrow of the outcast leper replaced with the sounds of joy and gladness in the presence of God's people. The constant, endless pain of broken bones finally set and relieved. These are poetic descriptions of wisdom in the secret heart, of two different realities being welcomed there. To borrow a phrase from Paul, it's being "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing".¹⁸ It's the death-defying journey toward believing and marveling that God has and will continue to (v. 9)]

⁹ *Hide [his] face from [your] sins,
and blot out all [your] iniquities. Psalm 51:6-9*

But here's why we hesitate to go there: it's painful! And we're afraid that if we go to the depths of despair, we'll never come out. But look at the effect on David in v. 10:

¹⁰ *Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.* [This is not weakened resolve, but strengthened. David doesn't ask God for a little slack, but to "create" and "renew"—only God can do those things! David is asking for a miracle. "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" writes Paul in Romans 7. "Thanks be to God it is through Jesus Christ our Lord!"¹⁹ *That* is broken-hearted boldness.²⁰ He continues,]

¹¹ *Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.* [If God doesn't do this miracle, then this is what awaits him. No doubt what he has in mind is the king before him, Saul, from whom "the Spirit of the Lord departed" because his heart was too proud for godly sorrow.²¹ And yet what's most at stake to David isn't "don't let me lose my kingdom" or even "don't let me lose my salvation," but "don't let me lose you". This is salvation: *God*.]

¹² *Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.* Psalm 51:10-12 [When the process of godly sorrow finally brings you to the end of yourself, you know what you find there? God. And when it's just you and God without all the pretense, you know what else is there? Psalm 16 tells us: "in your presence there is fullness of joy".²² So David prays, "uphold me with a willing spirit"—willing to be broken-hearted that

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 6:10; Piper, "A Broken and Contrite Heart"

¹⁹ Romans 7:24-25

²⁰ Kidner, 209-210; Plumer, 558; Piper, "A Broken and Contrite Heart"

²¹ 1 Samuel 16:14

²² Psalm 16:11

I might be restored to my Savior—and the joy he brings. This is what makes a worshiper. This is godly sorrow.

2) An Example of True Repentance - vv. 13-19

And yet a worshiper's response to sin cannot simply be internal—if it's real, it will flow out. This brings us to the second sacred lesson of Psalm 51: an example of true repentance. If the path of godly sorrow begins restoring David to his Savior, (v. 13):

*¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.*

*¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.*

*¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise. Psalm 51:13-15*

Just as the effects of David's sin fell upon others, so will the effects of his restoration. It's not that he promises to become a street preacher in order to make up for his guilty conscience—how would that help anybody?! No, he has something to say to sinners because *he is one*. He has been forgiven much, therefore he loves much.²³ Loves so much that his story teaches God's grace, his tongue sings God's righteousness, his lips declare God's praise, and later, according to v. 18, his prayers bestow God's favor.

Some people point to the Great Commission in Matthew 28 when they teach about God's mission. I point to Psalm 51. It's not God's command that provides our greatest motivation in his mission (although it is very important). It's that we are sinners who have found a Savior—we actually have something to teach other sinners. We have been changed and we want our lips to match up with our hearts.²⁴

God's willingness to put this renewed desire in us and then to answer us when we pray for it, it's evidenced through the psalm itself. Think about this with me: how many millions of times have sinners returned to God through this psalm? And here we are, hundreds of years after David prayed it, and still God is answering it.²⁵

²³ Luke 7:47

²⁴ The Upstream Podcast, "An Upstream Missions Hermeneutic," <https://www.theupstreamcollective.org/blog/missionshermeneutic>

²⁵ Kidner, 210

You know what I'm learning over and over is my most significant contribution to Antioch as a pastor? Not my missions background. Not my theological education. Not my expositional preaching. To the death of my pride over and over, my most fruitful service to Antioch is being a sinner who keeps repenting. It's my brokenness that qualifies me; it's a lowly heart as the chief of sinners that allows me to lead anything worth following or say anything worth hearing. I guess what I'm saying is I'm learning this (v. 16):

¹⁶ For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Psalm 51:16-17

Here is perhaps the most important truth of the whole psalm, and one of the clearest teachings on true repentance in the whole Bible. First for what it's *not* saying:

It's not saying that sacrifice (or obedience) doesn't matter to God; that we should just wallow in our sin, shaming ourselves and despairing of ever being any different. That's not repentance.

It's also not saying that we can atone for ourselves; that no blood needs to be shed to pay for our sin—we can just feel bad about it for a moment and then keep on sinning. That's not repentance either.²⁶

In order to understand what this is teaching about repentance, we must return to the story behind the psalm. Remember after Nathan the prophet confronted David,

¹³ David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die." ¹⁵ Then Nathan went to his house. 2 Samuel 12:13-15

Let's be honest: what David had done was outrageous: sloth (sitting on his couch when he should have been fighting battles), lust (putting his longing on a woman who was not his wife instead of putting it on God), adultery (although I think a more accurate term is rape considering the way he forced his way upon Bathsheba), deceit (which fills the story from start to finish), murder (of a good, innocent man), apathy (not even

²⁶ Kidner, 211

recognizing anything wrong until he was confronted), and baby-killer (because the child dies thanks to David's sin).

But what God does here in this passage is *even more outrageous*: “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die.” We can make light of this and say, “That’s just the Lord being gracious. He really loves David. After all, David was a great man after God’s own heart.” No, no, no—no righteous judge can do something like this. This is not justice! What is going on here?!

Paul writes this in Romans 3:

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [first of all, we are all in David’s state, we are all the man of Numbers 15—far worse than we know or care to know. But for those who are in Christ, we] *²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.* [Here’s what I want to emphasize in this passage:] *This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.* [same word in 2 Samuel: the Lord passed over David’s sins. What does this mean? It means David’s Old Testament faith was counted to him as a faith looking forward to the sacrifice of Christ for his sins. How can God do something so outrageous as pass over David’s sins? Because he has done something so outrageous as sacrificing his own Son for sinners. Verse 26:] *²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:23-26*

That’s why I describe today’s psalm as “a song for sinners”. David sees this and recognizes how little he deserves, how much he owes. So instead of making worthless sacrifices—even though he is eager and willing if that would help—he clings to the sacrifices of God, knowing only God can atone for his sin.²⁷ Instead of running away to hide, he prays, “Let me hide myself in Thee.” Instead of asking, ‘Can I forgive me? Can I change me?’ he takes this risk: ‘Can God forgive me? Can God change me?’ And that is true repentance.

Conclusion

We began today’s message thinking about how our culture teaches us to post that which is good about us, and to hide that which is bad. And we dared ask ourselves the

²⁷ Kidner, 211

question, can you imagine if the worst things you've ever done were posted for all the world to see? Now by the example of David, we shudder at the thought.

But what makes me shudder even more is the thought that we might walk away from this sacred text seeing its application to David, but not to ourselves. Perhaps your secret sins are not today posted for all the world to see. But they are *known*. The author of Hebrews tells us,

And no creature is hidden from [God's] sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4:13

An account that will be given on a day of judgment, a day in which the Bible tells us books will be opened, books that contain everything you have ever thought or said or done.²⁸ And it will be clear that it never mattered a rip what all the world thought—only God.

And if you have been given eyes to see and ears to hear, then that reality will deconstruct you; and your life will contain moments where you collapse alongside David and say, “I have sinned against the Lord”; where you lay in the dirt beside the prodigal son and say, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son [or daughter].”²⁹ And with contrite courage, and broken-hearted boldness³⁰, you'll cling to this truth for dear life:

¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. Colossians 2:13-14

What does this outrageous God nail to the cross alongside his Son? It's your profile, your status, your story. He posts the very worst about you for all the world to see—with a bloody nail through it that announced *CANCELLED*. This is the best of news for the worst of people.³¹ That's why this is a song for sinners.

And this, a table for sinners. On the night that he was betrayed, taking a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, breaking it and said to his disciples, “This is my body, which is

²⁸ Matthew 5:27-28, 12:36; Revelation 20:12; Ecclesiastes 12:14

²⁹ Luke 15:18

³⁰ Piper, “A Broken and Contrite Heart”

³¹ Piper, “A Broken and Contrite Heart”

broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me.” He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, “This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord’s death until he returns.” **Today we are announcing that Jesus Christ is a Savior for sinners.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you’re a baptized believer, come and remember who you are and whose you are. If you’re a believer but not yet baptized, before coming to the table, we would love to help you first come and declare your faith publicly through baptism. If you’re not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back to talk and pray with you about any need you have. Let’s pray.

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