

**Making Sense of Selected Psalms**  
**Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2009**  
**“A Prayer for Forgiveness”**  
**Psalm 51:1-19**

### **Introduction**

Many commentators believe that both Psalm 32 and this one, 51, refer to the events surrounding David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba. We looked at Psalm 32 last time, so now we are going to look at Psalm 51 tonight. It is thought that Psalm 51 contains the prayer that David prayed as he sought the Lord for forgiveness for the terrible sins he had committed. It is more likely that Psalm 32 is a later composition that David wrote in order to teach others about the foolishness of trying to cover up their sin, instead of confessing it and having it forgiven.

For example in Psalm 51:13 David says that once God has forgiven him and restored to him the joy of his salvation, that he would then teach transgressors God's ways and encourage sinners to turn back to God. Also in the title of Psalm 32 it says it is a *maskil* of David – that means it is a **teaching** Psalm. So in Psalm 32 David was trying to get others to learn from his mistakes. Whereas in Psalm 51 he is simply pouring out his raw emotions and pleading to God for forgiveness when he realises the seriousness of what he has done.

The sad thing about Psalm 51 is that it wasn't prayed until about a year after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. By this time David had already had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed on the front-line of the battle. After the period of mourning (30 days – according to Deut 34:8) David had already taken Bathsheba home to be his wife, and in due course the baby was born. So Nathan's visit to David was obviously at least 9 months after David and Bathsheba had committed adultery. All that time David was trying hard to cover up his sin, thinking that nobody would know. But God knew, and in 2 Samuel 11:26-27 it says, ***'But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.'*** - God knew, and God was not pleased.

So in the next chapter, God sent Nathan the prophet to David to tell him a parable about two men fighting over a little pet lamb to bring David to his senses and make him realise the seriousness of the sins he had committed. (Read 2 Samuel 12:1-13a).

At first when David heard the story (in v.5-6) he became very indignant and burned with anger against the man Nathan had told him about.

In fact David said that the man in the story deserved to die!

You see it is so much easier for all of us to see the sin in the lives of other people, than it is to see the sin in our own hearts. We always think the best of ourselves and the worst of others – that is part of our sinful nature – we are so twisted!

But whenever Nathan turned on David and said **“You are the man!”** (v.7) - David hardly knew where to look. He was exposed for what he was – a complete fraud, and so after Nathan goes over all that David has done wrong, David says in v.13, **“I have sinned against the Lord.”**

He realised that he hadn't just sinned against Bathsheba, and against her husband Uriah, most of all he had sinned against the Lord – he had broken God's laws – he had sinned against God. It was only then, at that point, that he pours out his heart in the words of Psalm 51 to plead with God for forgiveness! It's at this point that Psalm 51 fits in. Listen to vs.1-4 now:

### **1. David's Prayer of Confession (vs.1-4)**

*“Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion blot out my **transgressions**.  
Wash away all my **iniquity** and cleanse me from my **sin**.  
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.”*

Notice David is using the same words for sin as he used in Psalm 32: He asks God to blot out **‘[his] transgressions’** – the fact that he had broken God's laws – he had trespassed onto private property – the wife of another man. He had broken God's law forbidding adultery, and he had broken God's law which says, *‘You shall not kill’* as well. And in the first place he had broken the very last commandment – *‘You shall not covet your neighbour's wife...’* So David had broken at least three of God's Laws. He had transgressed. He asks God to wash away **‘all [his] iniquity’**- remember that means all his twisting of the truth, all his attempts to cover up – *‘wash away all my iniquity.’* And cleanse me from **‘my sin’** – remember that word means falling short of God's standard of perfection. **‘My sin’** he says *‘is always before me.’* He couldn't get away from it. It was always staring him in the face; it was always weighing down his heart. No matter how hard he tried to cover it up, it was always there! And so he knew that it was, *‘Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.’* (v.4).

Sin is evil, because it's against God. It destroys our relationship with God, it separates us from God. It is a blight on the fact that God made us in his own image. Sin is not natural – it is totally unnatural – it is not the way we were meant to live. It is a result of the Fall; but all of us have sinned and we all *‘fall short of the glory of God’* every day!

So David begins with a prayer of confession. Secondly we go on to...

### **2. David's Admission of Sinfulness. (vs.5-6)**

*‘Surely I was sinful at birth,  
Sinful from the time my mother conceived me.  
Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;  
You teach me wisdom in the inmost place.’*

Notice David doesn't just focus on his actual sins; he also focuses on his original sin. This is one of the clearest expressions of the doctrine of original sin in the whole Bible:

*'Surely I was sinful at birth,  
Sinful from the time my mother conceived me.'*

Now let's clear up some misunderstandings here: The sexual act is not sinful. But at times this statement has been quoted as if sex is always sinful – it's not! God created sex – so it is not sinful. But what we, as fallen human beings, have done with sex can be sinful, however.

As far as we know David's mother conceived him in the normal way with his father Jesse – there was nothing wrong with that, nothing sinful about that whatsoever. However what David had just done with Bathsheba was sinful, because they had taken the sexual act outside of the legitimate boundaries of the marriage relationship and so had broken God's law as far as sex and marriage was concerned. Sex outside of marriage (i.e. adultery) or indeed before marriage (i.e. fornication) is wrong – it is sinful.

But sex within a loving marriage has absolutely nothing wrong with it – it is God's gift to a husband and wife, and it is to be enjoyed within their marriage. So all that David is actually saying in v.5 is that he was **born with a sinful nature**. Right from birth, indeed right from the moment of conception within the womb, he had a sinful nature. He was born with original sin, a natural bent to do what is wrong rather than what is right. That is the doctrine of original sin. And it's because we are born with a sinful nature that we then sin in practice ourselves – nobody needs to teach us to sin, we all do it without being told, it's part of our make-up - passed on to us since the Fall of man!

But David says something else here as well (v.6):

*'Surely you desire truth **in the inner parts**;  
You teach me wisdom **in the inmost place.**'*

Even in the OT David knew that sin was an *inward* thing as well as an *outward* action. This is the very thing that Jesus would later teach us in the NT Sermon on the Mount. The lusting that David knew for Bathsheba, as he looked at her from his window, was just as much a sin, as the act of adultery he committed with her later on. Likewise, the desire to have Uriah out of the way, to wish he was dead, was just as much a sin as the act of putting him on the front line of battle to have him killed. David of all people should have known that sin begins in our heads and in our hearts, not on our hands. He knew deep within himself that it was wrong, and yet he still went ahead and did it.

That's where you and I need to be careful. We know that sin is wrong – deep within us – it's been drummed into us (perhaps from childhood), but that in itself doesn't stop us from doing it – so we need to be very careful!

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:12

***"So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"***

Again we need to remember that David was not an unbeliever.

David is referred to in Scripture as *“a man after God’s own heart.”*

David, even before this, was responsible for some of the most spiritual of all the Psalms – David had a genuine walk with God! That’s what makes his fall into sin all the more frightening. Even the most godly man or woman can fall into serious sin. It doesn’t matter how high we get, we are still just sinners saved by grace. We may be saved, but we’re still sinners by nature! But there *is* a way back:

### 3. David’s Plea for Restoration (vs.7-12)

*“Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
Let the bones you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins  
And blot out all my iniquity.”*

There is so much in these verses for us to think about. For example why did David say cleanse me with **hyssop** and I will be clean, instead of just cleanse me with water?

As I thought about this my mind went back to Passover night in Egypt. In Exodus 12:22 Moses actually told the children of Israel to take *‘a bunch of hyssop’* and use it to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the lintel and door-posts of their homes. Only then would their sin be covered and they would be spared the wrath of God’s judgement as the destroying angel passed by. David knew that it was going to take more than water to wash away his sins. No amount of baptismal water can wash away anybody’s sin – whether infant or adult – It is only the precious blood of Christ – a lamb without blemish or spot – applied to our hearts by faith that can wash our sins away. *“The **blood** of Jesus Christ, God’s Son **cleanses us from all sin.**”* (1 Jn 1:7). *‘Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin.’* (Hebrews 9:22). Only when sin has been atoned for in this way can God then do what David asks here: Only then can he **hide his face** from our sins – or turn his face away from our sins. And only then can he truly not just **cover** our sins, but **blot out all our iniquity!**

In v.8 he says, ‘Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the *bones* you have crushed rejoice.’ That ties in with something David said in Psalm 32:3 -

*“When I kept silent (about his sins – and tried to cover them up himself)  
my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me.”*

Now he prays that the bones God had crushed would rejoice with God’s forgiveness!

**But now, if God had really cleansed him from his past sins, what of the future?**

David goes on to pray fervently in vs.10-12:

***“Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me from your presence  
Or take the Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
And grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.”***

There is more to restoration than simply being cleansed from our past sins. Here David realises that his own *“heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it.”* (the words that Jeremiah later wrote). So what does he need? He needs God to go to work on him on the inside – he knows he can’t do it himself. He needs **God** to create within him a pure heart. It wasn’t a matter of David turning over a new leaf, and redoubling his efforts and trying to be better in the future. He needed a new heart, something that only God could give him. Just as in John ch.3 in the NT we need to be born again of the Holy Spirit of God, if we are ever to see heaven. We can’t do it, only God can. So he needed God to create a pure heart within him, and he needed God to renew a steadfast spirit within him too. He needed God to renew him and restore him to fellowship with Himself and to give him a spirit of faithfulness instead of the unfaithfulness to God he had shown in the past.

God would have had every right to cast David from his presence and to take His Holy Spirit from him, and leave him bereft of God’s presence altogether. But David pleads that God would not do that: ***“Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.”*** But instead, ***“Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.”*** Let’s just take that verse (v.12) for a moment –

Is there someone here this evening who needs to pray that prayer?  
Is there someone here who professes to be a Christian, who claims to be saved, but you know in your heart of hearts that you’ve lost the joy of your salvation? We don’t believe that you can be saved and then lost. We believe that once God saves you, he keeps you. But according to this David had not lost his salvation, but he had lost his joy! Maybe that describes you? Are you just going through the motions of an empty religion – even a Baptist one? Is it a long time since you really felt close to God? Has some bitterness or un-confessed sin been allowed to take up residence in your heart, so much so that you’ve lost the joy of the Lord - you’ve lost the joy of your salvation? Maybe you’ve become unwilling to really live ‘all out’ for God anymore? Maybe the reality is you’ve got far away from God without even knowing it? Well tonight’s the night then to really pray this prayer with all of your heart: (A chorus we used to sing paraphrases it):

***“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from your presence, O Lord, and take not your Holy Spirit from me, Restore unto me the joy of your salvation, and renew a right spirit within me.”***

#### **4. David's Desire for Repentance (vs.13-19)**

As David prayed this prayer he began to see through the blackness and hopelessness of his sin, and he began to see a brighter future. He began to see a time when he could be useful in God's service again - because when God forgives, he restores. As we'll see in Psalm 103 next time, when God forgives us, He takes away our sins, and he casts them into the sea of his forgetfulness. We'll read those wonderful words: *"As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."* (Psalm 103:12).

Now Nathan said to David in 2 Samuel 12 that his whole family would suffer the consequences of David's sins for many years to come. Just like we have to do in this life for our sins. There is a fundamental spiritual law at work – it's stated in Galatians 6:7 *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. **A man reaps whatever he sows.**"* There is a price to pay for sin, but that doesn't mean that we can't ever be useful in God's service again. We may face the natural consequences of our sins, but we **can** be useful to God again nevertheless.

Just look at all the things David began to look forward to in vs.13-19: *"Then I will **teach** transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you."* He looked forward to being able to **teach** others about the seriousness of sin.

(That's exactly what he does in Psalm 32. A Psalm written by David to teach us from his own experience how foolish it is to cover up our sin, whenever God is ready and willing to cover it properly and take it away, if only we will confess our sins and seek His forgiveness.)

He looked forward to being able to point sinners, those who had fallen, or back-slidden back to the Lord. He had been restored – he wanted to see others restored to the Lord. Maybe now he would be more understanding?

(v.14-15) *"Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will **sing** of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and **my mouth will declare your praise.**"*

He looked forward to **singing** God's praise again. He hadn't done that for most of a year! You can't sing your heart out, when you're hiding sin!

(v.16-17) *"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 a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.**"*

It wasn't just a matter of going out and offering a big sacrifice, as many people would do – just perform your religious ritual and everything will be OK.

No, David now knew it went much deeper than that – his heart had to be right too, otherwise no amount of sacrifice would be acceptable. He was looking forward to being more broken, more humble in his worship of God in future. Not proudly thinking he was above falling, but realising because he had fallen,

and because he had been so graciously restored by such a merciful God, that he had so much more to be thankful for.

Didn't Jesus himself say,

***“He who has been forgiven little will love little;  
but he who has been forgiven much, will love much.”***

(v.18-19) *“In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.”*

What was David looking forward to in these verses? Well, I think here he was remembering that he wasn't just any old sinner – he was the King of Israel - God's anointed. He knew that righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is its downfall. What if he had remained in his un-forgiven state and got further and further away from God, where would the nation of Israel have ended up? Here in these verses David is looking beyond his own restoration to the restoration of his people and of true worship in the life of the whole nation.

It was the poet John Donne who said, *“No man is an island, entire of itself.”* That is true of each and every one of us. It doesn't matter who you are – someone is looking up to you for an example to follow. You might not be the King of Israel, like David was, but you might be a church elder, a deacon, a Youth leader, a Sunday School teacher, a school teacher, a father, a mother, or an older brother or sister to someone coming after you. All of us are setting an example for someone! What an awful example David's sin was to his people looking up to him as *‘a man after God's own heart’*?

But then what kind of example are we setting for those who are looking up to us? If we were truly restored to the Lord, truly restored from a back-slidden state, what effect would that have on those looking to us for an example?

## **Conclusion**

Believer, do you need to get right with the Lord, this evening?

In this year of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1859 Revival, maybe we need to pray: ***“Lord send a revival, and let it begin in me.”***

If our restoration to the Lord were the beginning of many others being restored to the Lord too, or indeed brought to the Lord for the very first time in repentance and faith, what a Revival that would be?

But maybe that's what we need! Well then, *‘Lord, let it begin in me!’*

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