

Songs/Psalms of Our Lives: Psalm 51
Getting it Right, After Getting It Oh So Wrong
John 8: 1-12
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John 8 ¹ *but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.*

² *At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.* ³ *The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group* ⁴ *and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.* ⁵ *In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"* ⁶ *They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.*

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ *When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* ⁸ *Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.*

⁹ *At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.* ¹⁰ *Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

¹¹ *"No one, sir," she said.*

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Psalm 51 (NIV)

For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

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

² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

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

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict

and justified when you judge.

- ⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- ⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.
- ⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
- ¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
- ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
- ¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
- ¹⁵ Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- ¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
- ¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is^[b] a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.
- ¹⁸ May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
- ¹⁹ Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Introduction

Psalm 51 is one of seven so called "penitential psalms". Along with Psalm 32 and others, these psalms convey to us how the grace of God is operative in our lives when we own up to and confess our sin. In this particular instance psalm 51 has an ascription: **For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.**

If you're not familiar with that episode in the life of King David, it is recorded in 2 Samuel 11 & 12. Let it be said that this has the makings of a Hollywood script. That this episode is in the pages of holy scripture is a testimony to the fact that the Word of God tells us the unvarnished truth about who we are and about who God is, and that is good news!

I shall offer a brief recap here:

The story begins innocently enough: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle..." (2 Samuel 11:1). But this time the king is staying home. The former songwriting shepherd, giant slayer, and Commander in Chief is sitting this one out. (That was his first mistake!) David has too much time on his hands and late one afternoon as he takes a roof top stroll he notices a "very beautiful woman" bathing nearby.

Then in rapid succession, David manages to break at least three of the ten commandments with which he was quite familiar:

Commandment No. 10—don't covet your neighbor's wife.

Commandment No. 7—don't commit adultery.

Commandment No. 6—don't commit murder.

David summons Bathsheba—knowing full well that her husband is deployed. David has his way with her. It is only a matter a of time before she sends word: "I'm pregnant." That sets in motion an elaborate plan on David's part to cover up his sins. "The plot thickens and the story sickens."

David now summons her husband Uriah home from battle, in an effort to get him to sleep with Bathsheba and delude him into thinking that he is the father of the child she now carries. But Uriah is a good soldier, loyal to his comrades, and he refuses all the comforts of home. David sends him back,

with instructions to General Joab to place Uriah at the front, and then pull back the troops, ensuring that Uriah will be killed. After a period of mourning, Bathsheba is brought into the King's household, she becomes his wife and their son is born. There is more to the story, but what happens next is relevant to our psalm.

"But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, and the LORD sent Nathan (the prophet) to [confront] David. (2 Samuel 11:27-12:1) Nathan tells David a parable about a rich man who has stolen a poor man's only lamb and slaughtered it for dinner. David becomes enraged.

"What? Who is this guy? Tell me, and we'll royally nail him!"

"You're the guy!" says Nathan. The purpose of the parable was to function as a mirror in which David would see himself. He does, and he is devastated to come face to face with his sinful self. David confessed his sin and God forgave him. (But there were still serious, inescapable consequences for David and ultimately for the nation.)

Such is the occasion for this penitential psalm.

The author of our psalm utilizes three nouns Hebrew words/English translations of "sin": "transgression", "iniquity" and "sin".

Each of three, communicates a different nuance of the word:

"Transgression" has the sense of a child in rebellion against his/her parents.

"Iniquity" literally means: "twisted, bent out of shape".

"Sin" conveys the idea of a marksman missing the mark, not hitting the target.

All three are intended to communicate the comprehensive and far-reaching nature of wrong doing.

Balancing these three words for sin are three words for forgiveness:

"To Wash...whiter than snow" (v.2,7)

"To be cleansed, or healed as from a disease like leprosy (v.2).

"To be blotted out or wiped away" as tears are wiped away (v.3, 9)

As grad students living on a shoe string, Rob and I were still newlyweds having been married all of eight months. Rob had dropped me off at work, while he went on to the laundromat. Later he picked me up, and we headed home to our tiny apartment. Other than his initial greeting when I got in the car, he was silent the entire way.

My mind was racing: What have I done? He must be really mad at me...maybe he wants a divorce? What's going on???

As we drove into the complex where we lived, he broke the silence:

"Something happened at the Laundromat....There was a blue ink pen in the dryer! There are big blue spots of ink on all the underwear, sheets and pillow cases! I'm really sorry!"

Whew! I was immediately relieved. Spots on laundry? I can deal with that! Wow—those spots were beauties! A new secondary design now adorned the previously yellow and white sheets!

Any attempt to remove the ink and bleach out those spots was in vain. Rather, the blue ink turned a lovely rusty brown color! NOT what I had in mind. *Nothing I tried would remove those stains!*

Given the reality of sin, what is the remedy? Where do we find hope?

The appeal to God's "unfailing love" [hesed] is the basis of hope for forgiveness! Without this, there is no hope, and no forgiveness! It all depends on the character of God.

When Nathan confronts David, it is for him a moment of truth.

Perhaps for us, praying the prayer of confession each week in our worship service, is a moment of truth.

Whether we like it or not, the truth of it is that we are sinners.

⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. I John 1:8

That is the crux of it.

The heart of this psalm is that God desires "truth in the inward parts"—God desires transparency in our lives and our relationships. **The meaning of this expression ("truth in the inward parts") is drawn from references to the willful "plugging up" and "hiding away" of something to prevent it being accessed by someone else.**

For instance, on several occasions when there was conflict between the Israelites and its neighbors, leaders would plug up wells or hide water sources in order to divert water for use by the enemy.

God seeks open access to those parts of our lives that we have chosen to keep deeply hidden within our inner world. The kind of "hiding" implied here emphasizes the willful "holding back" of ones' true self from God or others. By hiding, we prevent ourselves from the vulnerability

necessary in order to be truly known. (p 778-779 NIV Application Commentary, Psalms, Vol. 1 by Gerald Wilson)

It would be natural for us, upon disobedience, to hide and attempt to carefully shield ourselves from the gaze of God. We take our cue from Adam and Eve who tried hiding from God after eating from the tree of knowledge! (Genesis 3:8)

If in our moment of truth, we “come clean” and admit our sin, restoration becomes possible. Relationship(s) broken by sin can be mended, healed.

Hear the psalmist’s plea, in verse 10:

***¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.***

In the Bible, the verb “create” occurs only with God as subject. Only God can create a new heart in us. A change within, creates a new attitude and a new motivation to act in a new way.

*¹¹Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.*

*¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

God’s Holy Spirit is the internal change agent!

God is not pleased by sacrifices. God is pleased by hearts that are truly penitent, expressing sincere sorrow and a desire for relationships to be set right.

The spirit –the breath of God—animates our bodies and our spirits. Without God’s spirit/breath there is no life, no new beginning! **A “clean heart” means a new beginning, a capacity for new life, and restored relationship with God and with those who have been affected by our sin.**

Just as I was unable to remove the stains from our laundry, we cannot justify ourselves or remove our own guilt and sin. Only God can do this for us. The only remedy was replacing those ink-stained items with new ones.

Ultimately the only cure for sin is this: *9If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* | John 1:8-9

John records an incident in which the Pharisees dragged a woman caught in adultery before Jesus. (Since it takes two to tango, I've always wondered where the man got off to, but that's another story!) With stones in hand, they demanded a judgment from Jesus. They did **not** get what they were hoping for. Instead, Jesus responded, "Let the one without sin cast the first stone."

Slowly, silently, each of them dropped their stones and left. Why?

Simply put, they knew they were all sinners. (John 8:2-11)

In the wake of numerous public confessions by fallen politicians, sports figures, and business executives, and in light of the recent #MeToo movement, Susan Wise Bauer, offers a helpful distinction in her book, [The Art of the Public Grovel](#).

An apology is an expression of regret: "I am sorry."

A confession is an admission of fault: "I am sorry *because what I did was wrong. I sinned.*"

Apology addresses an audience.

Confession implies ("ownership") an inner change ... that will be manifested in outward action. (*Paul Wilkes, The Art of Confession (Workman Publishing, 2012), pp. 4-5*)

The church I served in Oregon had been broken into, some small electronics were stolen, and in short order the guilty teenagers were apprehended and the items return. Incident over. Right? Wrong. Several months later I was summoned to the church office. "Vince" asked to speak to a pastor. We sat down in the church library. **He was visibly tense, shoulders hunched over, he would not meet my eyes. For what seemed like a long time—probably three or four minutes—he was continually shifting around in his chair, sighing and breathing heavily, before he blurted out:** "I'm one of the kids who ripped off your church."

Once he got *that* out, he began to visibly relax. I listened as he apologized and confessed. He went on to say:

"Getting caught was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I am in a program for first time juvenile offenders. I've learned a

lot. I realized I was running with the wrong crowd. I've made new friends, I have new goals for my life, and I'm making better decisions. My counselor told me I needed to come and talk to you...."

I told him he had a very wise counselor. We had a great conversation about his new choices, and his goals to finish his GED and get vocational training as an auto mechanic, and so on.

As I wrote a brief note he could give his counselor (confirming that we had met), I told him:

"If you were going to break and enter, I'm glad it was here at our church. Do you know why? Because we serve a loving God who is in the business of forgiveness. God forgives you and I do too."

Walking much taller, and with a big grin on his face, I handed him the note and said: **"'Vince', I hope you come again! Next time, just come in the front door!"**

In Greek, the word "confess" (*homologeō*) is a compound word that literally translated means "same-word". To confess is for us to say the same word about our sin that God says; to agree with God that we are sinners.

Unconfessed sin has consequences, that are described in Psalm 32:

³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

To experience "truth in the inward parts" is to confess and experience the relief from the physical impact of holding it all in, the effort to cover up and keep it all hidden.

When we confess our sin, something amazing happens.

Healing begins, and we have full and complete access to the amazing grace of a loving and generous God who promises to forgive us and give us a fresh, clean, stain-free start! Thanks be to God for this undeserved gift!