

The Path from Transgression to Joy

Psalm 51

Psalm 51 is a psalm about amazing grace in the context of egregious sin. It is a stunning display of what happens to sinners when they realize the true nature of grace, and the disposition of the heart of God towards those who confess their sin.

There are many problems we face in life: healthy problems, work problems, relationship problems. Disabilities, insecurities, and injuries are the realities we all face, in one way or another. But the greatest “problem” we all face is sin. Our sin.

And we don’t all deal with sin in the same way or at the same pace. Robert Freeman, in his book, *Hide or Seek*, writes:

“When people sit in our pews they are in various states of dealing with their sin.

- Some are denying that they have a problem. They know they “aren’t perfect” but are pretty comfortable leaving themselves alone.
- Some know that they are sinning against God's law but are in secret rebellion, and live lives of hypocrisy and deception.
- Some are finding various degrees of success to make the changes God requires.

But few are enjoying the full, abounding peace and joy available in the grace of Christ.

Church historian Richard Lovelace writes that many Christians “below the surface of their lives, are guilt-ridden and insecure...[and] draw the assurance of their acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience.”

Psalm 51 is a glorious invitation for sinners like you and me to experience the ocean of mercy and grace in Christ that is the true source of deep comfort and abounding joy.

I. An Egregious Sin

The title of the Psalm is meant to instruct us:

“A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN NATHAN THE PROPHET WENT TO HIM, AFTER HE HAD GONE IN TO BATHSHEBA.”

Psalm 51 is the prayer David wrote after he had been brought to conviction concerning his great sin with Bathsheba and her husband. You can read all about it in 2 Samuel 11-12. The

outline of the story is as old as mankind: David lusted after another man's wife, he slept with her, she became pregnant, and so he had her husband killed and married the woman in an attempt to cover his crime.

David did all this as the King of Israel and the recipient of astonishing blessings and privileges from God. It would have been hard to find another man in all the world who was more blessed by God, spiritually and materially, than David. And yet, David – the man after God's own heart – did all these awful, wicked things.

God could have justly left David in his unrepentant state, and had David never been brought to true repentance, he would have perished eternally. But God graciously sent Nathan the prophet to bring David to his spiritual senses. As Nathan spoke God's Word to David, his rebellious spirit was broken, his spiritual blindness lifted, and he realized what he had done. The horror of his sin and the divine displeasure of God crushed down upon him.

What do you do when you have committed an egregious, awful sin and you can't undo it, you can't make it right, and you know that God is severely displeased? Maybe there is a grievous sin in your past and, as Lovelace writes, below the surface of your life you are "guilt-ridden and insecure." Maybe you are caught in a pattern of sin and feel like the Lord is disappointed or angry with you. We all experience the reality of conviction of sin. And when we are face to face with the ugly truth of our sin, our instinct is to hide. Some of you may be hiding even tonight. But the gospel calls us to run to grace.

II. A Bold Request

Once David has been convicted of his egregious sin, he moves to an open prayer of confession and an expectant cry for pardon:

Ps. 51:1-2

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

This movement from conviction of sin to God is critical. God comes to David through Nathan the Prophet and says, "You are the man. You are the wicked man, the adulterer, the thief.

You are the man who deserves to die!" And David, in response, turns directly to that God who has revealed his sin, and asks for mercy.

C. John Miller, in his excellent book *Repentance*, points out that many professing Christians treat conviction of sin as though it were repentance and faith when in fact it is neither. The Reformed church culture embraces the doctrine of sin. The goal of some preachers seems to be to make their congregations continually feel convicted about their sin. But conviction, by itself, is not repentance, it is not saving faith, and it has no saving power. No one will be justified by conviction.

"Conviction, by itself, is not repentance. Conviction of sin apart from turning to Christ has no value whatsoever."

Conviction is necessary – but is only helpful if you flee from conviction to Christ!

I love how thoroughly and completely David cast himself, with expectancy, upon the love and mercy of God. Notice what he is asking God to do.

"*Blot out my transgression*" – *transgression* is the word used for a willful, disregard of God's clear commands. David knew exactly what he was doing in his sin – and he did it anyway. And now he is asking God to "blot it out" – to erase this heinous act from the book. He repeats the prayer in verse 9: "*Hide your face from my sin and blot out all my iniquities.*"

David fully understands that his sin has brought real guilt upon him – a genuine debt to the law of God, an actual violation of God's character and rule that has placed him under the sentence of death. And so he asks God to cancel the debt. To remove the record of his actual guilt from the book of Divine Justice.

"*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity.*" Sin not only involves guilt before the law, but it also involves a moral stain that bars us from the presence of God. David asks God to make him clean, ceremonially clean. In other words, he asks for God to make him righteous, innocent, and able to come into the presence of the thrice holy God.

David is asking, after this incredible, egregious offense, for God to take away the guilt of it – to wash away the moral stain of it, and to restore him to full fellowship and communion with God. It's a big ask!

On what basis can David ask such a thing?

David is not making little of his sin:

Ps. 51:3-4

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

Have you ever tried to explain or justify your sin? "I wasn't in my right mind, I didn't know what I was doing, I was in a weak moment, etc.". David doesn't do any of that.

- He acknowledges that his sin was a sin of the worst sort – an abominable transgression of God's law, a violation of God's holy character. Contrary to everything he knew and believed. Contrary to all the promises he had made in his life to follow God's commands. Contrary to all the grace and goodness of God to him.
- He freely acknowledges that his sin was directly and personally against God. We often act as though God were merely a bystander, a witness to our sin. The truth is that God is the subject, the recipient, the "victim" of our sin. It's against Him. Our transgressions are a finger in his face. That's what David confesses.
- He freely confesses that God would be perfectly just to condemn him (vs. 4).
- He confesses that he has not only committed wicked acts – but those wicked acts spring from a wicked heart and nature:

Ps. 51:5

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

In other words, he didn't only do something wrong – but he IS wrong.

Rom. 7:18 *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.*

There is no attempt to diminish or in any way lessen the awful reality of the sin. Instead of seeking to hide the truth, David exposes the truth. This is so important. God calls us to simply confess the full truth of our sin.

Jer. 3:12-13

*Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say,
"Return, faithless Israel, declares the LORD.
I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the LORD;
I will not be angry forever.
Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the LORD your God*

*and scattered your favors among foreigners under every green tree,
and that you have not obeyed my voice, declares the LORD.'*"

Just tell the truth – the real truth and the whole truth about your sin and about yourself. And then throw yourself on the steadfast love and mercy of God.

"Have mercy on me" – show kindness and compassion to me – "according to your steadfast love." Blot out my transgression – according to your abundant mercy. There is such a thing as the steadfast love and abundant mercy of God. These are not words or ideas. The steadfast love and abundant mercy of God is part of his very character. IF there is a God – then he is this God. And if THIS God exists – then there is steadfast love and abundant mercy for sinners. We simply need to run to it. That's what David does. He runs to the reality of God's steadfast love and abundant mercy.

This is the key thing I want us to see tonight. It is essential that we see this. True faith and repentance begins with conviction, moves to true confession, and runs to God's mercy and love. Whatever your response to your sin might be, it isn't saving faith and repentance until it ends up in the loving arms of God.

III. An Extravagant Grace

David prays with great expectation! If God washes him, he **will be** truly and actually clean!

Ps. 51:7

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

The hyssop is a branch with smaller branches that was dipped into a bowl of blood from the sacrifice and then sprinkled on the altar to render it ceremonially clean. David is saying, "O God, do that to me. Take the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkle it on my wicked self. Only that blood will make me clean. And Lord, if you wash me that way, I shall be whiter than snow."

David believes the promises of God, that the sacrifice for sin is sufficient to cleanse the sinner. David believes that a sinner cleansed by the power of God is a sinner restored to God. There's nothing remaining in between. That's where the joy comes from.

Ps. 51:8

Let me hear joy and gladness;

let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

C. John Miller wrote his little book *Repentance* out of a concern that so many of the Christians he saw in the churches lacked the joy of their salvation. Like Paul asking the Galatian believers, "What happened to your joy?" Miller's answer is that we have settled for less than what God has invited us to experience in Christ. We've settled for conviction of sin and religious duty, when God offers us full, extravagant joy in the conviction of his guilt-erasing, sin-cleansing mercy and love in Jesus. All we need to do is actually go to Him.

"We do not need to live with a festering conscience. There is a Mediator appointed of God, even the Lord Jesus Christ. Take your sins to God through Jesus." (29)

How? By faith. Take God at His word and believe what he promises.

It does not take faith to realize the fact that you sinned. It does not take faith to be under conviction of that sin. It does not take faith for a person to sense that they deserve the judgment and condemnation of God. Unbelievers can do this. But it takes faith to lay hold of and apprehend the mercy of God for sinners. It takes faith to sin greatly like David and yet be able to believe in mercy. How do you lay hold of the grace of God when you are so profoundly unworthy of it? You must believe it.

On what basis can you make such a bold claim? What gives you the right to ask and expect mercy and love from God?

On the basis of his own character – he is the God of love and mercy.

On the basis of the finished, atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

We simply need to go to Him – to our crucified, risen, Savior.

Matt. 11:28 *Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.*
(NASB)

Freeman: "What enables us to boldly and radically be honest about the state of our hearts? It comes from knowing you've nothing to lose but everything to gain by trusting it all to Christ – trusting your hardened or confused heart, your corrupt desires, and your love for your sin, to him. It also requires trusting in the finished work of Christ for the past, present, and future for you – just where you may find yourself right now. It means trusting his record instead of yours. It means realizing that we all, at any given moment, are in desperate need of the grace that is found in Jesus. It's a grace that isn't manufactured or self-produced, but one that comes from above as a gift from God." (*Hide or Seek*, 78)