

PSALM 51

THE SINNER AND FORGIVENESS

Steve Williams

PSALM 51 is the story of a sinner who repents and finds forgiveness with God. Martin Luther proclaimed: “There is no other Psalm which is oftener sung or prayed in the church.” In his massive seven-volume work on the book of Psalms, Charles H. Spurgeon told of his awe in approaching Psalm 51. He compared it to the holy ground upon which Moses stood at the burning bush. He also compared it to the sacred ground at Bethel where Jacob saw the vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. He concluded, “Such a Psalm may be wept over, absorbed into the soul, and exhaled again in devotion; but commented on—ah! Where is he who having attempted it can do other than blush at his defeat?”¹

Psalm 51 is universally declared as the most eloquent of the penitential psalms. It is the gospel in a nutshell. In the 1500s, one writer referred to it as “the brightest gem in the whole book, and [it] contains instruction so large, and doctrine so precious, that the tongue of angels could not do justice to the full development.”² We should read and study it reverently, with an open mind, and with a “broken and contrite heart” (v. 17).

Psalm 51 was written by David in connection with his repentance over his sin with Bathsheba after being confronted by Nathan the prophet. As one reads it, many parallels with the spiritual journey of David are obvious. He lusted after

Bathsheba, committed sexual immorality with her, and then had her husband killed in order to cover up his sin and take Bathsheba for his wife. Nathan confronted David with his sin several months later. He confessed his guilt, repented, and was forgiven by God.

The steps which David traveled from sin to salvation are steps which are common in the spiritual journey of others. They are:

1. The burden and conviction of sin (v. 3).
2. Penitence and repentance (vv. 16, 17).
3. Confession of sin (vv. 4, 5).
4. An appeal for mercy and forgiveness (vv. 1, 2, 7-12, 14a).
5. The joy of salvation and forgiveness (vv. 8a, 13, 14b, 15).

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me (v. 3).

David had lived with his sin for almost a year. He thought no one knew about it. But when Nathan the prophet confronted him with his sin, David realized how ugly, detestable, and repulsive his deeds were. Maybe David’s conscience had bothered him more than we realize. The memory of past misdeeds can haunt a person and make life miserable. As David himself wrote: “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever-heat of summer” (32:3, 4).

The guilt and burden of sin for David were so unbearable that he compared the feeling to that of

¹C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1978), vol. 2, v.

²Victorinus Strigelius (1524-69), quoted in Spurgeon, *Treasury*, vol. 2, 457.

his bones being broken (v. 8). Guilt can hurt and be as painful as actual physical injuries. Most preachers and counselors have talked with people who sit and cry over tragic mistakes they have made. They are yearning for relief. Sin hurts!

Dr. Francis Braceland, former president of the American Psychiatric Association and editor of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, was speaking at the National Methodist Convocation on Medicine and Theology. He said the number of young people in mental hospitals is increasing. One reason for this is the lower standard of sexual morality in our society. He said, "A more lenient attitude on campus about pre-marital sex experience has imposed stresses on some college women severe enough to cause emotional breakdown."³ The healing process of salvation begins with the burden of sin.

PENITANCE FOR SIN

For thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise (vv. 16, 17).

The only proper way to deal with the guilt of sin is to humble ourselves and become truly penitent. If we want to approach God and find forgiveness, we must do so with a contrite heart. A ritualistic obedience will not properly deal with the guilt of sin. David knew that sacrifices and burnt offerings would not atone for his sins of murder and adultery. He needed to repent. He needed to give God the sacrifice of a broken spirit.

By way of contrast, in Chicago a hoodlum murdered a policeman. He was apprehended and put in jail. The next Friday, he was served meat for his meal. He indignantly told the guards: "Take that away. Do you think I would eat meat on Friday?" He had no compunction about killing a policeman, but he slavishly observed a religious tradition.⁴ What the man needed to do was repent, not spurn meat on Friday. "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (34:18).

³Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations* (Rockville, Md.: Assurance Publishers, 1979), 793. Also see the chapter on "Premarital Sex" in Steve Williams, *Studies in Christian Ethics* (Abilene: Quality Publications, 1990).

⁴Walter B. Knight, *Knight's Illustrations for Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 65.

CONFESSION OF SIN

Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when Thou dost judge.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me (vv. 4, 5).

David makes no excuses for his sins. He confesses them. He does not make a vague confession, saying, "If I have done anything wrong. . . ." He does not call his sin a slip, a mistake in judgment, or a questionable action. His statement is not a half-excusing whine from a heart of stone. David takes complete responsibility for what he did. Because his confession is so forthright, it was pleasing to God. "Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned." He had sinned against Uriah the Hittite, against Bathsheba, and against society. To say that he had sinned against God and God only was an overstatement that goes to the heart of the matter. David was saying that he had offended the will of God. He had not merely offended cultural niceties of society. He had broken God's law and sinned against God Himself.

David also wrote: ". . . in sin my mother conceived me" (v. 5). Many explanations have been given of this verse including the doctrine of original sin. Realize that there is no systematic theory of original sin in the Old Testament. Only a few verses, mostly poetry, even hint at anything remotely related to it, and there is an alternative explanation for each of them (58:3; Job 14:4; 15:14). How, then, do we explain verse 5?

It is unlikely that David is implying anything wrong concerning his mother or father (86:16). His statement could be a bold, poetic overstatement. Most likely David is saying that he was brought into a sinful world, an environment of universal sin, into a race of people that all sin, and that he soon took up the practice. David is making an emotional statement about how sinful he has been. "It is inadmissible to base some doctrine of the nature of man on this touching bit of poetry."⁵

If verse 5 teaches original sin or hereditary total depravity, then it does not fit the context of the whole passage. In Psalm 51 David is confessing his guilt. He is at fault. His sin was no freak event. His error was not just a moment of weak-

⁵Anthony L. Ash and Clyde M. Miller, *Psalms* (Austin, Tex.: Sweet Publishing Co., 1980), 181.

ness or a slip. There were no extenuating circumstances to which he could appeal. It was premeditated and desired by him. He did not merely make a mistake. His whole being was involved in the lust and the murder, and his whole being needed cleansing.

To insert the doctrine of original sin here would make David guilty of dodging responsibility. If he had been totally depraved from the time he was born and if he had been predestined to sin, part of the blame would be taken away from David. But David uses “I,” “me,” and “my” thirty-five times in Psalm 51 (NASB; RSV). His confession is personal and specific. His sin was his own fault, not an inherited tendency toward evil.⁶

AN APPEAL FOR FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which Thou hast broken rejoice. Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Thy presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit. . . .

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation (vv. 1, 2, 7-12, 14a).

After confessing his sin, David appeals to God to have mercy on him and forgive him of his wrongdoing. He piles one metaphor on top of another in a passionate appeal to God. He asks God to be gracious, blot out his sin, wash him thoroughly, and purge him with hyssop, maybe as a leper must be purged. He asks God to wash him as white as snow and to mend “the bones which Thou hast broken.” He again asks God to blot out his iniquities. David’s condition is so in need of mercy that he needs a fresh start, that is, he needs a clean heart created in him. He begs God not to take away His Holy Spirit as He did with King Saul (1 Samuel 13:14; 15:23; 16:14; 18:12; 28:15). He asks God to restore him and to deliver him.

⁶On other confessions of sin in the psalms, general and individual, see 32:5; 38:18; 130:2, 3; 143:2.

FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Make me to hear joy and gladness, . . . Then I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee.

Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Thy righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Thy praise (vv. 8a, 13-15).

Since David was sincere in his penitence and since he confessed his sin to God and begged for forgiveness, God forgave him. David felt the joy of salvation and shared the goodness of God with others. As he wrote elsewhere: “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!” (32:1, 2).

CONCLUSION

The process of forgiveness for a child of God who sins can be seen in Psalm 51. We must be convicted of our sin, be penitent, confess our sin to God, and appeal to God for forgiveness. God will then renew our joy of salvation.

Sin

“Since the devil first induced Eve to taste the forbidden fruit, thus instigating the first step in the apostasy of the whole human race, he has continued to use the short-step method to drive a wedge between man and his God. We must know something of this method if we are to ‘stand against the wiles of the devil’ (Ephesians 6:10).

“The short-step method is one of the most deceptive and devastating devices employed by Satan. He puts forth every effort to cause us to take that first short step. After the first step has been taken, the second one does not look so bad. From the vantage point of step number two, the third step isn’t nearly so repugnant in appearance. And so it goes—one short step after another in unrelenting succession until a tragically long journey results. A man does not make a sudden long plunge into the dark night of total apostasy. If an individual or group reaches the point that ‘it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance,’ this deplorable condition is the result of Satan’s short-step method.”

Avon Malone,

“The Devil Goes a Long Way. . . .
But He Takes Short Steps”