

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for October 11: When the music stops

September 30, 2009

Psalm 51 is the most well-known and greatest of the so-called “penitential” psalms (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). The term “penitential” refers to concept of offering penance for sin. Coming in our lesson series after the “comforting” Psalm 23, whose message we desire to hear repeatedly, Psalm 51 presents a message we need to hear repeatedly.

Psalm 51 famously is attached to the dark episode of adultery and murder in the life of King David. So shameful and repulsive were these premeditated offenses, that they obscure David’s landmark service as Israel’s greatest king. Yet this psalm is not about David’s high-handed sin. It demonstrates the repentant strides he took to be restored to his Heavenly Father. Greater still, the psalm champions the Lord’s grand plan of salvation by grace.

The Apostle Paul writes, “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). These marvelous words present a compelling spiritual truth in prose. Yet Psalm 51 delivers the same message of God’s salvation by grace in poetry. The psalm is supercharged with emotional action drawing the reader into David’s plea for restoration and then his confidence in experiencing it from the hand of a forgiving, gracious God. Psalm 51 may be a penitential psalm, but it is truly a hero psalm as well—glorifying our magnificent Heavenly Hero, the Lord himself.

The perspective of Psalm 51 is worth noting. David speaks directly to the

Lord, hence the second-person references. He never speaks in third person about God to the audience of the psalm. So the expected breaking forth in triumphal praise is not seen, as for example, it is seen in Psalm 54:7, "For he has delivered me from all my troubles, and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes." In Psalm 54, David concludes with a praise using the third person after speaking to God in the second person.

The point therefore is important. In Psalm 51, rousing worship would not be appropriate in light of the great personal offense to God. So in verse 15, David asked for the Lord to teach him how to praise in such a moment.

Nevertheless David continued his approach to the Lord, building in confidence until he knew the outcome before his penitent petitions had ended. Instead of responding with resonating worship, David responded with a commitment to careful service. Service, as Paul tells us in Romans 12:1, is an act of worship, and in David's case is the type of praise that fits God's response of forgiveness.

The steps, or stations, of penance can readily be seen in Psalm 51. They are: the confession of sin, the expression of sorrow regarding the offense, the recitation of the lesson learned, the statement of the desire to amend one's lifestyle and the request for forgiveness. For those trying to connect Psalm 51 with repentance, these are the steps of turning away from sin and turning to God. Therefore Psalm 51 can help chart progress through repentance.

The outcome of such careful attention to one's spiritual shortfall is the expression of forgiveness by the Lord. It is not that careful observation of the steps of repentance earn salvation, but that the Lord's attention is attracted by such behavior. The Lord then responds with forgiveness. Psalm 51 never directly mentions forgiveness, but David's confidence in the Lord's forgiveness is seen in the words of verse 17 that state David's realization that inner contriteness moves God, not mindlessly stepping

through some external penitent activities.

Psalm 51 conveys much for the believer to learn about God, sin, the believer's involvement in sin and the steps to restoration with God. The psalm makes many revelatory statements that those who value God's gracious activity greatly cherish. Verse 17 is the climactic and thematic core of the psalm. Nevertheless it is not covered in the present lesson. Sunday school leaders would therefore be wise to be familiar with verse 17 and its influence on the progression of the psalm.

Forgive me (Psalm 51:1-5)

Psalm 51 opens with a plea for mercy. Greetings and praises are set aside to get at the heart of the pressing issue. Mercy can be described as receiving that which is not deserved. Anything short of full punishment for offenses is mercy, though in biblical terms, mercy is full pardon. Mercy does not ignore the seriousness of the crime, but sets aside its offense for the purpose of reconciliation and life change.

A parallel example of David's emotional plea for mercy can be found in Luke 18:13-14: "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The request for mercy has an interesting insight. Though David's offense is hideous and completely at odds with the character of God's committed ones, David knows he still belongs to the Lord. David appeals to the Lord's "unfailing love." This love is the Hebrew word "*chesed*," a covenant word, used to gently appeal to God's covenant obligation to love his people, unfailingly, even in the dark spiritual disaster that David has engineered. Our hymnal leads us to sing of "grace greater than our sin." This was

David's appeal in this high moment.

Verses 1-2 use three words to describe sin. "Transgression" violates a known statute. "Iniquity" describes the sinister nature of the act. "Sin" refers simply to missing the mark, but serves as the Bible's umbrella term and includes by general reference all other senses its synonyms can mean. The confession of sin saturates the first five verses.

It should be evident that David did not mindlessly repeat his failure. He showed he understood the gravity of his deeds. He characterized his wrongs in such a way that God did not have to intervene and set the record straight. This does not mean David judged himself, but that he had submitted himself to the penetrating insight of God's Spirit and confessed what had become hauntingly clear to him.

The three words for sin are also accompanied by the request for a remedy, which in turn is also described by three words: blotting, washing and cleansing. The key is the request for cleansing. Only those who are clean can stand in God's presence. David was concerned with being restored to God's presence. This is the essence of being forgiven, though the word "forgiveness" is not specifically used. David did not ask for a legal remedy that satisfies the judicial court. His objective was far higher. David wanted to be restored to God's presence. Thus he needed cleansing, something he could not provide for himself. Once again, God's grace was requested.

Some have issue with the wording of verse 4, "against you, you only, have I sinned," asserting David's sin hardly was contained between himself and God. David's sins hardly were private. Many lives besides David's were irrevocably changed both directly and indirectly by his sin. Nevertheless, Hebrew poetry often uses hyperbole, or exaggeration, to make a point. David meant the primary focus of his sin was God himself. David's sin began as an offense toward God and grew outward from there. David's confession thus matched his request for cleansing. The sin began in his

heart, so cleansing must reach his heart.

Verse 5 can be equally difficult, seemingly casting blame toward David's mother. Once again exaggeration is used, though the exaggeration does not seem exaggerated here. David's point was his sin was not a fluke occurrence. It was a matter of character. His character had been warped and corrupted all his life and paralleled the faulty nature of the human stock from which he sprang. David did not pin his sin on his mother as Adam had blamed Eve. He took full credit for this offense and expressed his realization that he always has had a sinful nature.

Cleanse me (Psalm 51:6-9)

If it was unclear before now, David made clear his understanding that he was not speaking merely of appearances. His issue was not being humiliated publicly by his sin. David knew he had sinned grievously and clarified that he understood his sin to have an inner source. This truth can be stated in many prosaic ways, but David's poetry is classic: God desires truth in the inward parts. God is not superficial and neither must be his followers.

Cleansing is dramatically petitioned in the famous verse 7. Hyssop was used for sprinkling a "cleansing agent" (blood or water) and symbolizes the cleansing routines for lepers (Leviticus 14:6-7) and for those who had touched dead bodies (Numbers 19:16-19). Both conditions had rendered people unsuitable for God's presence in the assembly and both passages end with the phrase "he will be clean." Having been rendered unsuitable for God's presence, David sought the pronouncement of cleanness and used hyssop to symbolize the cleansing he needed in his inward places.

Verse 8 introduces the concept of joy, which is repeated in verse 12. David knew joy is the basic response of the believing heart to the presence of the Lord. David was far from that joy. For some people, speaking of joy in the

midst of such deliberate tragedy is incomprehensibly arrogant. Yet David knew God wants his followers to take joy in him. Sin smolders with anger toward God, but God's people take joy in him. Thus it is not a matter of gloating about getting away with murder, but expressing joy that God has marvelously restored him to his presence.

The word "blot" occurs again in verse 9. Verse 10 mentions purity, still developing David's objective to be restored to God's presence and, perhaps, his obsession for spiritual cleansing. Verse 11 refers again to God's presence. Thus David's singular spiritual purpose to regain God's presence dominates the middle verses of the psalm.

Holiness and cleanness of spirit are not often emphasized in Christian circles today. To his credit, David keenly sensed the result of his sin: he was made unclean and therefore unfit for God's presence. Such is a horrifying thought for the real believer. It also is clear that though he was considered "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), David had not thought about spiritual implications when he chose to sin.

This highlights the process of sin: it entices one with promise for too-good-to-be-true gain, it blinds one to reality and consequences, then it leaves one devastated and separated from God. Yet though devastated by his sin, the man after God's own heart returns to seek reparations through a cleansing that requires a new heart (v. 10).

Renew me (Psalm 51:10-13)

In verse 10, David volunteered for a heart transplant, in a manner of speaking. David's declaration anticipated what Jeremiah would later state: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Of course God understands the human heart; he created it. If it seems the heart is beyond cure, again a slight exaggeration—it is because it is beyond human cure, but not beyond God's

cure. Being in the position of needing a change of heart he could not produce, David chose to call on the Lord for help.

Ezekiel prophesied about God's heart cleansing: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

David's poetic imagery appear in Ezekiel's prophecy, which also emphasizes that true cleansing calls for a new heart and an attending spirit, the Holy Spirit. Thus God's Spirit becomes the attendant of the new heart in the believer's life.

The alternative to heart renewal is to be cast away from God's presence (v. 11). This is the horrific consequence David had not realized. Nor had Adam. Nor does anyone who chooses to sin. For the believer, nothing is worse than being outside of God's presence.

The high moment of David's petitions arrives in verse 12. Salvation is mentioned at last, though the thought was present in the successive petitions for cleansing and renewal. Salvation is rescuing a life. David's life had to be rescued from his own miscalculations. The same is true for the lives of all people. That David would resort to petitioning for salvation is not for dramatic effect. David certainly had committed deep and grievous error, but he still was a veteran follower of the Lord. He knew salvation was required for his condition.

Verse 13 presents David's offering to serve the Lord. In Psalm 51, salvation is fully offered by grace and received through faith. Yet the response to the gift of salvation is the offer to serve God by telling others about his great salvation. The service itself becomes praise because God is glorified to

others who also need the Lord's salvation. David had no doubt about the effect of his testimony to other sinners. They would turn back to the Lord, that is repent, because they would be able to see the Lord's spiritual restoration and rehabilitation in David's life and gain hope for similar results in their own lives.

The thought of such service carries the remainder of the psalm, with the central lesson stated in verse 17: the sacrifice God prefers is a contrite spirit, willing to be molded anew by God's Spirit. The horror of separation from God recedes as confidence before the Lord rises. Before our eyes, David seems to be returning to God's presence. David had rightly dealt with his sin, identifying it for what it was without taking matters in his own hands. He presented himself personally to God and by the end of the psalm, he confidently spoke of proclaiming the Lord's great righteousness (v. 14).

From this lesson, let us learn to approach the Lord through the steps of penance that we may experience His grand salvation. And may we ever proclaim God's great salvation to the world around us.