

# Psalms of Confession

Psalm 51

June 9, 2019

My sermon this week is a little different than a normal Sunday. That's because I wrote it in 2 parts.<sup>1</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> part will focus on confessing our sins and will lead us right into our time of celebrating the Lord's Supper. The 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the message will then follow our time of communion and focus on praising God for His forgiveness. It ends with a rather long by powerful Scripture reading.

Consider this Call to Worship from Psalm 39:23-24, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." I urge you to allow God to search your heart as you read through this transcript. It would be very helpful if you paused right now and read Psalm 51. Our message today begins with

**Part 1: Honest Confession of Our Sins.** One of the amazing spiritual benefits, of pondering and reading through the psalms, is that they give us words to articulate and express what we often don't have the heart to pray or say out loud ourselves.<sup>2</sup> In other words, sometimes our regret, our shame, or our personal embarrassment over our own sinfulness, makes it difficult for us to even talk to God.<sup>3</sup> The psalms help us put into words, our own confession of sin.<sup>4</sup> And so, let's begin today by soberly contemplating our sin and by confessing our need for God's forgiveness. Ask the Lord to search your heart today and to help you be honest regarding any sin in your life. May the searchlight of your Holy Spirit convict us. May we remember that "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and [God's] truth is not in us. [but] If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9) Psalm 51 is well-known to many of us because it was written in response to one of the best-known stories in the entire Old Testament. In fact, the title states it plainly: "A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba." Talk about having your dirty laundry hung out for everyone to see! But, much more important than seeing David's dirty laundry, is seeing David's honest confession and godly response to his sin. He doesn't deny his sin, or try to run from it or rationalize it. David sets a poor example for sexual purity but he sets an excellent example of brokenness over sin.

Psalm 51 begins, "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<sup>5</sup>, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge."<sup>6</sup> The depth of David's sin and depravity, DOESN'T keep him from asking God for forgiveness. Given the dirt and the filth of his unrighteous behavior, what right did he really have, to ask God for anything?<sup>7</sup>

And yet, in vv. 1-2, when he comes before God in honest confession, **David boldly asks God for 4 things**<sup>8</sup>: 1<sup>st</sup> of all, David asks God for **Mercy**. David knows that he deserves God's just punishment but he pleads for mercy anyhow. He begins Psalm 51 with a humble plea, "Have mercy on me." This shows us that David's knows that he has no right to beg for God's favor. And yet, "For all his unworthiness, David knows that he still belongs" with God.<sup>9</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> thing David asks God for is **Unfailing Love**.<sup>10</sup> When God chooses to be in relationship with us, it isn't

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<sup>1</sup> This past Tuesday, I had something kind of strange happen: I don't normally wake up at 4 a.m., but I did this week and my mind was buzzing with anticipation for today's worship service. I couldn't fall back asleep so I went out and sat on our front porch. It was 60 degrees and the sun was already starting to lighten the sky. I sat there for about ½ an hour and listened to the birds while I thought through an idea for this service. That was the first step toward today's message and today's service being a little different than a normal Sunday.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-71*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Consider Romans 8:26.

<sup>4</sup> See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, pp. 206-207.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Patterson notes that Uriah and Bathsheba might have argued with David on this point. And yet, "Uriah would never have been murdered if David had attended to his relationship with God." *God's Prayer Book*, Tyndale, Carol Stream, IL, 2008, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> David's sin is laid out powerfully before him by the prophet Nathan. David was the king of all Israel. He could have simply threatened Nathan to keep quiet. He could have easily had him killed. After all, that's what he did with Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. David choose a rather uncommon response: complete honesty about his sin.

<sup>7</sup> Consider Hebrews 4:14-16.

<sup>8</sup> See Ben Patterson, *God's Prayer Book*, Tyndale, Carol Stream, IL, 2008, p. 136.

<sup>9</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> Consider Psalm 6:4-5.

because of our goodness. Therefore, we shouldn't expect that any amount of our "badness" (bad behavior or bad attitudes) will END our relationship with him. Rather, what we can expect from God is faithfulness. Even when we break our promises to God, he keeps his promise to us: his unfailing love. Later on, in verse 11, David begs God, "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me."<sup>11</sup> This points clearly at one of the root issues of sin, SIN RUINS RELATIONSHIPS! It creates relational distance in places where there shouldn't be any distance!

The 3<sup>rd</sup> thing David asks God for is **Compassion**. David is concerned about something far greater than mere judicial acquittal. Beyond just having his legal slate wiped clean, David desires a relational reconnect. Put another way, he desires a return to intimacy. Any good parent will make sure to give their child a hug after their tearful confession. David longs to reconnect with his Abba Father. Perhaps some of us need to reconnect with God this morning, even asking him for the equivalent of a spiritual hug. The 4<sup>th</sup> thing David asks God for is a **Thorough Cleansing**. David asks God to wash away ALL of his sin.<sup>12</sup> Later on, in v. 7, David asks God to "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow."<sup>13</sup> Hyssop is a plant that has the combined properties of both an antiseptic and an astringent.<sup>14</sup> But David wasn't referring to these properties.<sup>15</sup> The real property of hyssop that matters here, is that the "surface of its leaves... held liquids well and made it suitable as a sprinkling device for use in purification rituals."<sup>16</sup> In other words, it was like a sponge for the sacrificial blood. Therefore, the cleansing with hyssop that David longed for, was not from the hyssop plant itself, but rather from the blood that was soaked up by its leaves, and then sprinkled on whatever needed cleansing. David understood what you and I can read in Hebrews 9:22, "...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." He was pleading with God for a deeper cleansing than what mere soap or herbs could provide. David was pleading for the cleansing of his very soul. He knows that his soul is dirty and he invites God to do a deep-clean in his life.<sup>17</sup>

David summarizes the essence of confession this way in verse 16-17, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." In other words, kneeling down before God in confession, David says: "I'll do whatever it takes to be close to you again God. But I know that nothing else really matters to you, except this one particular sacrifice that you desire most: a broken and contrite heart."<sup>18</sup> **Please prayerfully read this Prayer of Confession:**

"Dear Heavenly Father, I confess my sins before you today. I know that You are a Holy and Righteous God and that Your desire for me, is that I be a holy and righteous person. God of Truth, like a sheep I have gone astray, I have wandered from your ways. I have followed the desires of my own selfish heart and I've offended your good and holy commandments. I've done some things which I should not have done. And, I've left some things undone that You have called me to do. Lord God, please have mercy on me, deliver me from the heavy burdens that my sins have brought upon me. I have drifted away from You, please draw me near once again. Rescue me, as I confess my faults and admit my great need for Your grace. Restore me to a right relationship with You, as I humble myself with a repentant heart. Please heal me from my sin-sickness, according to your great promises, given through my Lord Jesus Christ. And now God, for Your Name's sake, I ask that you would grant me a life, that from this point forward, grows to be more and more godly. May I mature in

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<sup>11</sup> Derik Kidner points out that "The likely background to this fear of being a castaway was the example of Saul, from whom the Spirit of the Lord had departed (1 Samuel 16:14)." *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> It feels so good to be clean. If you've ever come home from a long camping trip or fishing trip where you didn't have running water, you just want to take a nice long shower! Or, if you've been out gardening in the dirt or just doing something messy at your job, like blowing insulation into an attic, then you know how it feels to be dirty and grimy and just feel itchy all over!

<sup>13</sup> "a flash of realization that with God there are no half-measures" but rather "whiter than snow." Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 209.

<sup>14</sup> Learn more at <https://www.organicfacts.net/health-benefits/essential-oils/health-benefits-of-hyssop-essential-oil.html> So we might think of modern-day anti-bacterial soap or a deep-cleansing facial scrub or make-up remover. The kind of stuff that makes your face so clean that it feels tingly.

<sup>15</sup> "Hyssop was used in the washing of lepers." Ben Patterson, *God's Prayer Book*, Tyndale, Carol Stream, IL, 2008, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> When David prays "cleanse me" in v. 7, he is literally asking God to, "un-sin" him. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 913.

<sup>18</sup> Think about the 2 words that David uses in v. 16, "delight" and "pleasure." David helps us to realize that what delights the heart of God and what brings him pleasure, is when his children come before him with a broken and contrite heart.

my faith and grow in righteousness, becoming more fully committed to You. I pray this to the glory of your holy Name and I ask this in Jesus' mighty Name. Amen."

**Part 2: Praise for God's Forgiveness** One of the most interesting things about Psalms of Confession, is how often they include words of praise.<sup>19</sup> In other words, genuine expressions of confession before God, very often conclude with Praise for God's Forgiveness.<sup>20</sup> Consider David's anticipation in Psalm 51:8, "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice." In verse 12, David asks God to "Restore to me the joy of your salvation...." And then in verses 14-15 he says, "...my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise." David begins Psalm 51 with humble and heartfelt confession of sin, and then moves on to joy-filled praise! Even as David helped us find words for confessing our sins, now he also helps us find words to rekindle our hope and express our thankful praise for God's amazing grace.<sup>21</sup> How about you and me though; how often do we leave our times of confession and repentance with words of praise on our lips? Once we have honestly come before God with a broken and contrite heart, God doesn't want us to then continue wallowing in our guilt and shame. Rather, he wants us to receive his loving restoration to a close relationship with him. What other response could be more appropriate than heartfelt gratitude? The proper response is words of praise: I've been forgiven! I've been released from my burden of guilt and shame! Praise God! Glory! Hallelujah! (This isn't very Scandinavian, but it is very biblical!)

Consider some of these words of Praise from Psalm 32: "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. ...You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. ...Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!" The depth of David's failure could have led him to deep despair and hopelessness.<sup>22</sup> After all, that's where our personal failure often leads us: to despair and hopelessness. But why not rather, have it lead us, into the loving arms of our Heavenly Father? David's failure led him to pray for holiness; for God's patient and powerful new creation in his life.<sup>23</sup> No matter how backslidden our faith, David models for us, how to find not only repentance, but also a heart filled with praise. Praise for the return to closeness with God. Any sinner who has determined that he or she is beyond recall, needs to gain a better understanding of the heart of God. God has given us Psalm 51, not just to show us the way of repentance, but to show us the way home.<sup>24</sup>

Last Sunday we talked about Psalms of Deliverance. David takes us beyond deliverance from sin and guilt. He takes us to a place, where we just want to raise our voices and praise God; to praise him for his generous grace, of making us poor sinners rich with his righteousness.<sup>25</sup> Psalm 51:15 says, "Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise." This prayer, "open my lips," isn't just a way to get ready to sing praises, it is the cry of someone whose guilty conscience had been shaming him into silence. But now, this follower of God has been set free to once again worship him openly, in grateful praise.<sup>26</sup> Let's respond in this same way! Let's sing to our God with songs of joyful praise and celebration for God's amazing forgiveness!

Psalm 103 wraps up this lesson with an incredible declaration of Praise for God's Forgiveness "Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good

<sup>19</sup> "In almost all lament psalms, praise is a component." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 973.

<sup>20</sup> Consider Acts 3:19.

<sup>21</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 207.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, pp. 209-210.

<sup>24</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 210.

<sup>25</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 211.

<sup>26</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 211.

things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children—with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts. The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all. Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. Praise the LORD, all his works everywhere in his dominion. **Praise the LORD, my soul."**

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