

Forgive my sin and change my heart * Psalm 51
June 12, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

It's funny how these things work – every so often people will let me know when a message has really spoken to them. They'll email or text or tell me that one or another message really connected with them. By that measure, one of the most moving messages that I've ever given turned out to be one I gave when I wasn't even here!

I had so much positive feedback on the message I gave by video when I had COVID. Remember that? (I guess I need to start tuning in from home).

But do you remember what that message was about? It was on our ongoing struggle with sin and the power of the Spirit to help us in that struggle. That was the sermon that resonated with a lot of people.

And that tells me that you are serious about the Gospel message, serious about sin, serious about doing something about it, and so today I think we have another helpful message on tap. Where Romans 7 taught us about the struggle with sin, this morning's passage teaches us how to pray when we DO sin. And this prayer is truly one of the 'great prayers' of the Bible. It is the quintessential prayer of repentance in the whole of God's Word.

So why don't you join me in Psalm 51 – Psalm 51 – and we'll talk about how to pray when we sin.

Now, as I say, Psalm 51 is really one of the most famous prayers in all of the Bible, because it was written in light of one of the most famous events in all of the Bible. You can see from the title there that David wrote this prayer 'When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba' (Psalm 51:1 NIV).

Yes, David *did* commit adultery with Bathsheba but he did a whole lot more than that (!) and you can read the whole story in 2 Samuel 11. In a nutshell: when King David's army was out in the field, preparing for battle, King David was not with them, but instead was strolling around his palace when he noticed a lovely lady named Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop. David immediately lusted after her and sent for her and laid with her and before long she came back to say 'I'm pregnant.'

Well, to cover up his sin, David decided to recall her husband from the army so that everyone would think that the kid was his, but as it turned out, the husband, Uriah, was a better man than David, and he refused to go in to his wife while his fellow soldiers were at war. David then decided to deal with the sin of adultery with the bigger sin of murder and David assigned Uriah to the most dangerous place in the battle and had his men pull back so that Uriah would inevitably be killed by the enemy. It's a tragic tale of compounding sin here; actually, one of the commentators I read this week pointed out that in this one sequence of events, David has managed to break fully half of the Ten Commandmentsⁱ – that shalt not covet, though shalt not steal, though shalt not murder, commit adultery or bear false witness about it to cover it up. He's done it all and he's drowning in sin.

Well, a chapter later, the LORD sends the prophet Nathan to confront David with his sin and he does it in a very clever way, telling David a story and getting David to pass judgment on it. Once David says 'that man is guilty!', Nathan reveals that the story was actually a metaphor for what David has just done and David had in effect just judged himself.

And it was in that moment of clarity that David realized how far he had fallen. He had hit rock bottom in terms of his sin. And so, David wrote Psalm 51 as a prayer confessing his sin and his need for forgiveness.

So with that in mind, let's look at his prayer in Psalm 51 to see how to pray when we've sinned.

- 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.

What I like about David here is that he holds nothing back. He doesn't beat around the bush here, he doesn't try to justify his behaviour, he doesn't try to shift the blame; he just lays it all out and says 'LORD, have mercy. I have sinned. I have transgressed Your laws. I have committed iniquity.' You know how they say that the Inuit people have like fifty ways to say snow? David is using all the words that there are for sin in order to say 'Lord I have stepped in it big time and done what is evil in your eyes.' And so he asks for mercy.

And notice – what makes him think that God might forgive him? His own past behaviour? His own righteousness? No – it is only the character of God that gives him hope for forgiveness. He knows that he in himself deserves only judgment and so he appeals to the Judge for mercy. He starts with that humble plea – 'Lord have mercy' - and then he continues – 'Have mercy on me... according to your steadfast love. According to your great compassion – blot out my transgressions.'

You know what he's doing? He's appealing to God's character. 'Don't treat me according to my actions, but according to your goodness.' David is not counting on his own track record for forgiveness but on God's and these verses make that clear.

It's like that old hymn – 'Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me.' David knows that his only hope for forgiveness lies in the goodness and compassion of God and so he humbly prays that God would treat him according to God's own character.

I think that that's an important lesson for us as we pray for forgiveness – that we strip away all pretense, all pride, the sense that we somehow deserve to be forgiven, and simply go humbly into the presence of God and say 'I have sinned but You are merciful. Lord have mercy on me.'

Now from here, David continues – verse 4 – 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

Now, I think you could make a pretty good argument that David has NOT only sinned against God; he has definitely sinned against Bathsheba and against Uriah, and if he ever said verse four in front of Bathsheba I hope she gave him a good slap.

But the point here is that all sin is ultimately against God. Yes, sin may have caused you to do wrong to another person, but that wrong is only a symptom of a greater problem, a heart problem. Sin against others is rebellion against God and I think David points that out in the next few verses -

- 5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

6 Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

When it comes to sin, the issue is not simply 'breaking the rules;' the issue is sin nature; that fallen part of us, that old Adam that puts our desires before God's. The problem is not simply 'sins' that we commit against other people, but 'sin,' namely our reluctance to honour and obey God as we should.

And so, having admitted his sin problem, David proposes a solution. Verse 7 –

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.

This I think is one of the most important parts of a prayer for forgiveness. You start with the address – you say 'God, I need forgiveness.' Then you admit your sin 'I am guilty and I know it.' Then you say 'God, this is what I want you to do about it.' That shows that you're not just feeling guilty and wanting absolution; this is all about turning from sin and turning TO God for His healing and renewal. And this is what David wants God to do about it -

'Cleanse me with hyssop; wash me and make me whiter than snow. Hide your face from my sin and cast out my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Grant me a willing spirit to sustain me'

That, I think, is the key idea in David's prayer here. When we sin, yes, we need forgiveness; when we wander, yes we need restoration, but what we truly need, what will help us in the days ahead, is a new heart and a steadfast spirit that is fixed on the things that God Himself would want us to do.

The language here is very 'Genesis 1:1' – whenever the word 'create' appears in the OT, it's God doing the Creation. And so David is praying ultimately, 'yes Lord, forgive my sin, but even more importantly CREATE IN ME a new heart. Don't just put a band-aid on the disobedient parts of my heart; instead, take out this rebellious heart of stone and give me heart of flesh that is sensitive to You and eager to honour you.' That's ultimately what we need here; we need the Lord to change us from the inside out. And that's what David shows us to pray.

And incidentally, this is what Jesus does when we turn from sin and turn to Him. We are born again, we are renewed, we are given a clean heart and a willing spirit to seek after God. He washes us and makes us whiter than snow and He gives us His Spirit to help us to stay that way.

(Now just a quick note on that. I have to admit that I get a little nervous about the 'take not your Holy Spirit from me.' You know Keith Green's 'Create in me a clean heart?' I get nervous about that because when David says 'take not your Holy Spirit from me,' he's not talking about the Holy Spirit as we know Him post-Pentecost. He's talking about the Spirit from an OT perspective.

In a nutshell, in the OT, God gave His Spirit to certain people to empower them for a specific task. He gives them the Spirit, the Spirit enables them to rescue Israel or be king or whatever. But here's the thing; in David's lifetime, he's seen God give Saul the empowering spirit to be king and then take it away

from Saul and give it to him. So when he says ‘take not your holy spirit from me, he’s saying ‘don’t let my sin disqualify me from serving you the way your spirit helps me to.’ This is not a salvation issue for David, but an empowerment issue.

And so I don’t want you to think that God arbitrarily takes the Holy Spirit from us because of sin because He doesn’t; the Spirit as WE know Him is the guarantee of our eternal inheritance and the one who makes us more and more holy and so God WON’T take Him away – and admittedly that’s why we’re not singing that song. I just don’t want to risk the misunderstanding. The Holy Spirit is always with us and God won’t take Him away; He’s the one who helps us to live for God! Just an aside).

Now from here, David lays out what he expects will happen when God forgives Him, wipes away his sin and gives Him a new heart.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.

14 Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

15 O Lord, open my lips, 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 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

In effect, David says ‘When You forgive my sin, I look forward to praising you for what you have done! And not just with token offerings and half-hearted sacrifices, but I will praise you with a humble heart that is reliant on you.’

Eugene Peterson wrote on this saying ‘If sin brings us to our knees where God can forgive us, mercy puts us on our feet again so that we can praise God and witness to His ways. Guilt brings us low, but forgiveness lifts us high.’ⁱⁱ

Now that’s a powerful prayer of confession, a prayer that honestly lays out before the Lord the depth of our sin, calls on Him for mercy, asks for forgiveness and then looks forward to praising the Lord as a renewed and restored sinner. That’s a great prayer that we all need to pray at various times in our lives.

But to narrow it down to make it easier to remember, I think that we can condense it even further.

This is the prayer at the heart this prayer – ‘Forgive my sin and renew my heart.’ That’s the concentrated essence of Psalm 51 – ‘Forgive my sin and renew my heart.’

The goal for us as Spirit-led believers is ultimately to not sin, but, following 1 John 2, if we do sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus the Righteous One. HE is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and so God is faithful and just to forgive our sins, on the basis of Jesus the righteous, when we confess our sin.

So look, if you sin, if you act on the sinful nature inside of you, even as a believer, ask God for forgiveness. Just like David said ‘Lord have mercy, according to your unfailing love,’ we pray ‘Lord have mercy, according to the righteousness of Jesus.’ We are forgiven on the basis of Jesus’ death on the Cross, and so when we confess our sin, we put Jesus’ sacrifice front and centre. God is pleased to look on Him and pardon me.

So look, when you sin, don't try to hide it, don't try to cover it up. You probably know that feeling that David did – my sin is ever before me. The guilt of it, the shame of it. Sin has this corrosive effect in that it not only hurts other people but us as well as we try to hide it or hide from it.

But when we bring it out into the light and confess it to the Lord, then He lifts that burden and forgives our sin. You might say 'Yeah, but do you know what I've done in my life? How far I've wandered from God's way?' Well, let's see – have you slept with another person and killed their partner and put a whole nation at risk in an attempt to cover it up? God forgave David; He can forgive you. David dealt with the consequences – that's for sure – but in eternal terms, in terms of morality and goodness, God wiped out His sin and blotted out His iniquity.

Now, on the flip side of that, if you're like Donald Trump who says 'I don't make mistakes; why do I have to ask for forgiveness?' then I would say, remember, this is not just about 'breaking laws,' it's about a heart that ignores God. And if you want to talk about breaking laws, I would point you to a passage like Romans 1:29 where envy, gossip and deceit sit side by side with murder, greed and depravity on a list of sin.ⁱⁱⁱ This passage is for all of us.

Jesus died to be both the atoning sacrifice that wipes out our sin and to be our Advocate before the Lord, pleading for forgiveness; when you sin, go to Him to confess your sin.

Pray – 'forgive my sin' and 'renew my heart.'

That I think is very important. How often do we sin and we ask for forgiveness and then we say 'Lord, help me not to do it again?' Or we just leave God out of it and say 'I resolve to never do that again and I will make myself do it.' And then we do it again.

I think it's really interesting that at no point in this prayer does David say 'help me not to do it again.' He never says 'God, I'm going to make myself better.' What does he say? Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me. That hit me like a tonne of bricks this week. David doesn't pray for strength to be sinless; he prays for a new heart to be more reliant upon God.

I think very reasonably we think a lot about ourselves resisting temptation, but David teaches us something very important about turning our eyes away from ourselves and depending on God to change us from the inside out. We don't just need 'strength to not do it again' but 'God to give us a new heart' so that we will not desire to do it again and so we pray that God would do just that.

Forgive my sin and renew my heart.

Forgive my sin

Renew my heart – make desires that were once enticing bitter in our mouths. Renew our priorities so that we stop ignoring you on our schedules and make you the centre...

ⁱ J. Clinton McCann, Jr. *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Psalms*, 885.

ⁱⁱ Eugene Peterson, *Praying with the Psalms*, April 18 entry.

ⁱⁱⁱ 29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless (Romans 1:29-30).