

## Summer of Psalms: God Forgives the Broken

Psalm 51

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Dan Hoffman

[Pray]

If you have been with us for the summer you know that we are spending some time in the Psalms. So if you have your Bible or see one in the pew in front of you please open it up now to Psalm 51.

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It turns out you can boil the entire book of Psalms down to a single theme. And that theme is “what it looks like to have a right relationship with God.” And King David, who is the author of most of the Psalms, gives us the picture of what this looks like.

Now with this in place, what we find within these pages is remarkable. You see for a book that is titled “praise” – which is what Psalm means in Hebrew – David spends a remarkable amount of time lamenting his situation, cursing his enemies, and confessing his fear, doubt, loneliness and confusion. And David is incredibly honest and graphic as he does this. When he is angry with God he doesn’t sugar coat his words, he lets God know. And this is the point.

David realized that a right-relationship with God – being righteous in God’s eyes – has nothing to do with putting our best foot forward. It is nothing like meeting the queen – you don’t have to wear your best clothes and be on your best behaviour. Instead having a right relationship with God means realizing God wants us to pursue Him like we pursue a best friend.

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So have you ever had a friend that always made it feel like a chore to hang out with you? They gave you the impression they were not really interested in walking with you through the mess of life. Have you had a friend like that?... What did you do? You got a new friend right? We all want to be with people who want to be with us; and God is the same.

And this, I believe, is the reason that, in spite of his sinfulness, David is “the man after God’s own heart.” This doesn’t mean David never fell short of what God wanted – a lot of the time he did – but he kept coming back. He pursued God’s heart – he was after it. He wanted to get God at any cost. And when sin got in the way he did everything he could to get rid of it.

And this is what a right relationship with God is about. Proverbs says:

Although a righteous person may fall seven times, he gets up again (Proverbs 24:16 NET)

And seven means “completion” in Hebrew so this means “Although a righteous person falls a million times – which I’m probably getting close to – he gets up again.”

You see what God wants from us is to keep running back to him when we sin. He wants us to come, and keep coming, as sinners desperately in need of a Saviour because God wants to be your Saviour – we never outgrow this.

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Now today we are in Psalm 51 which is one of the most significant Psalms in the book because of the context David was in as we wrote it. And we know exactly what this was because of the note provided for us as an intro.

So if you look just under the words “Psalm 51” in your Bible you will see the words “For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”<sup>1</sup>

So here is what happened:

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her... Then she went back home. The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, “I am pregnant.” (2 Samuel 11:2-9)

From here David tries to cover up what he did by bringing her husband, Uriah, home from battle so he would sleep with his wife and suspect that the baby was his. But when he gets home Uriah is too noble to enjoy the comfort of his home while his fellow soldiers are at war and so sleeps at the king’s gate. When David realizes his plan isn’t going to work he murders Uriah and marries Bathsheba. Terrible right?

The story ends with some classically under emphasizing words “But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.”<sup>2</sup> No kidding!

Now the crazy thing here is that David doesn’t recognize he has done anything wrong. He just carries on with life. Or is this really that crazy?

By show of hands have you ever found yourself sinning and just kept on doing it hoping you wouldn’t get caught?

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<sup>1</sup> These words are actually verses 1 and 2 in the Hebrew Bible making Psalm 51 have 21 verses instead of the 19 we have in English. The English translators moved these words to the introduction because that is really what they are.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 11:26

This is where David was, but God didn't give up on him. He sent the prophet Nathan to speak to David. And Nathan told him a story. He said "there is a rich man in your kingdom who has lots of sheep. But he stole and ate the pet lamb of his poor neighbour. Now what should we do with this guy?"

And as David visualizes the scenario he goes ballistic and determines he is going to kill that rich man. And then Nathan turns around and in a brilliant display of courage and conviction tells David: "You are the man!"<sup>3</sup> Ouch!!

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But here is where David begins proving that in spite of his sin he is a man in right-relationship with God. In this moment he doesn't just realize his sin has been exposed, he realizes his sin. And he writes this Psalm in repentance which quickly became a template for how a righteous person, a person who is in a right relationship with God, deals with their guilt when it comes to their attention.

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Now as we look at these verses I want to encourage you don't let this be an academic exercise. Don't let this be about David's sin; instead examine your own heart. The words of this Psalm have been written for you. Their point is that you and I would see our sin and respond like David that we might enjoy a right-relationship with God. Do you want that? Look with me at verse 1.

[Read Psalm 51:1]

The first thing David does when faced with his sin is to throw Himself at God's mercy. This is the opposite to trying to justify his actions or make excuses.

How do you act when confronted by your sin? Are you prone to say: I didn't have a way out. I was trapped. I wouldn't have done this if You, God, would have made things different in my life. This is just my personality.

When we make excuses what we are doing is partnering with Adam and Eve instead of David. Adam blames God for putting Eve in the garden, and Eve says the Devil made me do it. But David knows he is guilty and asks for mercy... So what do you do when your sin finds you out?

The first thing David does is ask for mercy instead of making excuses. Then second David asks for forgiveness. Look at verse 2.

[Read Psalm 51:2]

Now mercy and forgiveness aren't the same thing. Mercy is asking God to deal with us based on His attributes – His unfailing love, and forgiveness is having the guilt of our sin erased.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 12:7

But what neither of these things do is request no consequences for our actions. In the Psalm it isn't super easy to see this, but 2 Samuel makes it clear. God tells David exactly what his consequences will be and David repents and accepts them. We don't have time to get into that in detail today.<sup>4</sup>

But test yourself in this again. When your sin finds you out do you wish you hadn't been caught and didn't have to suffer the punishment, or do you ask forgiveness and accept what follows?

If this is as convicting for you as it is for me know that this is the human default. When my 4 year old is caught in some act of diabolical evil – which happens every day – her cute little tendency is to slough it off like nothing is wrong until there are consequences. And then she explodes into sobs of agony. The fact is “naturally” people hate consequences more than they hate sin. But David has learned to be different.

David sees that his sin has separated him from God and he longs to be washed clean at any cost. He could have said “if water won't work for this washing then use fire, but just don't leave me separated from You by the guilt of my actions, that's what I care most about.

Or picture with me Peter at the Lord's Supper. As Jesus bends down, wraps a towel around His waste and begins washing feet. Peter's first response is “Don't do this Lord.” But then when Jesus says:

“Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me.”

“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!” (John 13:8-9)

When Peter realizes that to have any part with Jesus requires being washed by Him Peter says “give me a bath!” And David gives us the same picture. There is nothing he is not willing to do in order to have his iniquity blotted out. He doesn't care about the consequences, he just wants to be forgiven. And God forgives. Here is how it happened:

Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Nathan replied, “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. (2 Samuel 12:13)

Now this is a remarkable verse. David has just lusted and then acted on that lust by raping a helpless woman – he was the king there was nothing she could do – and then murdered her husband in cold blood, and yet with a single sentence of repentance he gains God's forgiveness. Does this sound as crazy to you as it does to me? I mean David hasn't done nearly enough penance right? How could a righteous judge extend forgiveness so easily?

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<sup>4</sup> See 2 Samuel 12:11-23 to see David appeal for mercy but accept the consequences God gives.

Here is where we have to turn to Romans to get an answer because the Old Testament can't give us one. Paul writes:

For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past (Romans 3:25 NLT)

So before Christ came God had left sin unpunished – God forgave David without punishing his sin – but He could do this because He knew that Christ would come and be David's atoning sacrifice. Christ's sacrifice would pay for all sin past and present. So when Jesus took all sin upon Himself, dying as punishment, God demonstrated His righteousness. God takes sin seriously.

So God doesn't just sweep David's sin under the rug, He is takes it upon Himself and deals with it personally. And that is how God can be both just and forgiving at the same time.

Now David didn't understand this in the same way we do today, but he knew that somehow God could grant forgiveness so he asks for it with all his strength – “wash away my iniquity.”

And we need to ask for this too. Just because Jesus' blood has paid the debt our sin acquired doesn't mean we shouldn't ask and keep asking. The Apostle John wrote to Christians saying:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word is not in us. (1 John 1:9-10)

John says we have to admit our sin if we expect to be forgiven because Jesus only saves sinners – He has no time for those who feel they don't need Him. But when a sinner comes to Him recognizing the seriousness of their sin Jesus' forgiveness is immediate and knows no bounds. Spurgeon wrote “When we deal seriously with our sin God deals gently with us.”<sup>5</sup>

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So in the next verses David digs deep into his sin unpacking it, understanding it, getting to know it – he takes it seriously. Look at verse 3.

[Read Psalm 51:3]

First David says that his sin isn't something he is trying just to put behind him and forget about. Instead he plays it out like a broken record in his mind.

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<sup>5</sup> C.H. Spurgeon “The Treasury of David” Volume 1 (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott), 1963. pg 402

Now he isn't meditating on the fact that he has been caught, he is meditating on the wickedness of his action. He knows that he has sinned and he sees what this sin looks like to a holy God. And David goes on: verse 4.

[Read Psalm 51:4]

With these words David recognizes that as terrible as what he did to Bathsheba and Uriah was it wasn't the real horror of sin. The real horror of sin is that we separate ourselves from our Creator. We take the right relationship God created us to live in and trample it.

And we see this right from the beginning. The sin Adam and Eve committed wasn't eating fruit, it was saying "God, we don't want you to be our God, we want to rule our own lives and do things our own way." And all sin says this.

This is why Nathan told David:

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul...' ***Why did you despise the word of the LORD*** by doing what is evil ***in His eyes?***... Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because ***you despised Me***. (2 Samuel 12:7-10)

David's raping adultery and murder, and all our sins, are actually just the physical acting out of our primary wickedness – despising God. So we never sin against our neighbour without first sinning against our God.

And David gets this and so vindicates God's action to judge. He recognizes his guilt and deems whatever consequences coming to be appropriate even if that means hell – "You are justified when You judge."

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Friends, do you believe that your rebellion against God has been so wicked, and continues to be so wicked – you're still sinning in spite of receiving grace – that it justifies, in fact it demands, eternal death as punishment? Any lesser treatment would make God unjust.

You see it is only when we understand this that we realize what Christ has done for us. When we consider our sin inconsequential we mock God and the cross. And David refuses to do this. He sees his actions as rebellion against God and understands that God must have to go to incredible lengths to forgive him – though he has no idea what those lengths are.

And friends a right relationship with God demands this. It recognizes God is the Creator we are the creation. He is holy we are sinful. He is just and we deserve judgment. A right relationship with God demands we come to His as desperate sinners, and keep coming to Him as sinners always in need of a Saviour.

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Now that's big, but in verse 5 David takes it to another level.

[Read Psalm 51:5]

Now David's words here might seem like a shot at his mom as though he had been conceived out of wedlock or something like that, but we know that isn't the case. Instead what David is doing here is realizing that he hasn't just done some bad things, he is a sinner by very nature.

Sin is his fundamental fiber. If he were in a room all by himself he would still find a way to sin because everything in his body is prone to this. Can you relate?

Now don't think this is an excuse. David isn't saying "you made me broken God." This is the culmination of his confession. He is saying like Adam and Eve my nature is to throw off Your law and rule my own life. Without You changing me, sin is my default.

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Alright let's bring this home to a very delicate but very big issue in our culture. Today the homosexual community feels it is unjust to have their lifestyle deemed sinful. Now I've crafted what I am going to say here very carefully.

I know several gay men who make the statement "we were born gay and therefore this is what is natural to us. And what is natural can not be sin. Sin for us would be to lie to ourselves and not live the way we were made."

Have you heard this argument? It's one that has convinced many people. How do we respond?

I've heard some Christians respond by saying "no one is born gay, somehow these people choose this for themselves", but really that is a ridiculous statement, it is biblically wrong and ultimately irrelevant and here is why:

The Bible says "being true to the way we were born isn't the solution, it's the problem."

In verse 5 David says he was born sinful. Sin is our "natural" nature. Now it manifests differently in each of us – some of you get angry easily; I can get angry, but it takes a bit; but I'm prone to lust while many of you aren't.

Here what is clear – all of us have a sin problem that stretches back to birth. Our nature is to be radically rebellious against God. This is why you never have to teach a child to sin – it comes naturally.

Now this has two implications. First this means there is no difference between me and someone who is tempted homosexually – so the Christian community needs to stop making this a bigger issue than say the gossip that is so rampant in every church – it’s just as bad! And second it means if we are going to live a righteous life in right-relationship with God then all of us need to be forgiven, all of us need to confess our natural tendency to rebel, and all of us need to put to death the tendencies of our birth. What is natural to all of us must be killed.

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So David understands his sinfulness. He realizes that not just that his actions prove he has despised God, but that he is broken to the core. He is guilty and God would be just to condemn him.

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Now there is a lot more here that we could dig into here, but I want to turn now to David’s plea for re-creation in verses 10 through 12. These are familiar verses; they are the words of the song we sang earlier, and there is incredible power in what David sings:

[Read Psalm 51:10-12]

Here David prays that God would affirm his election. He asks God “please don’t cast me away. Please don’t take the presence of your Holy Spirit away.”

Now I have heard Christians argue that we shouldn’t talk this way because we believe we can’t lose our salvation – which is true but misses the point of what David is saying here. The fact is a saved person is continually asking God not to take the Holy Spirit from them like they deserve. In contrast those who are not saved don’t care about the Holy Spirit at all.

So in Hebrews we read:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened... who have shared in the Holy Spirit... and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again... Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. (Hebrews 6:4-9)

Now these are scary words but they aren’t talking about Christians who still sin – that’s all of us – this talks of those who stop believing after tasting everything God has to offer, they don’t care about Holy Spirit at all anymore. But the author of Hebrews says “dear friends, Christian brothers and sisters, we are convinced of better things for you; we are convinced of your salvation.”

And Hebrews can say this because assurance of salvation has nothing to do with our past – it does not come when we prayer at six – assurance of salvation comes from where we are with God right now.

Friends, the Bible offers no assurance of salvation for people who used to believe in God but have no love for Him now – the Bible doesn't say those people are saved.<sup>6</sup>

But there is assurance of salvation for people who hunger for God's mercy right now. There is assurance for those who cry out, like David did, in remorse for their sin and long for a clean heart, they hunger for the Holy Spirit. So friends, I say this sensitively but earnestly, don't worry about your family members, worry about yourself. Make sure you are hungry for more and more of Jesus because this is where assurance of salvation lies. Know that if you long for the Holy Spirit to keep filling you then you are saved. So pray David's words here often.

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Alright, jump forward to verse 16, where David tells us what God wants from us, and this is where we will end today.

[Read Psalm 51:16-17]

This is what it means to be in a right relationship with God. God doesn't want perfection from you; He doesn't want big gifts. What God wants from us is need. He wants to be our God, our foundation. He wants to be the One we go to when we have no other hope because God loves to save broken, desperate sinners. Jesus said it like this:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
(Matthew 5:3)

So brothers and sisters, if you want to have a right relationship with God; if you want to please Him like David did, then whatever imperfections and short fallings you suffer from don't miss this – bring them to God admitting your fault.

Don't harden your heart. Don't hide your sin. Instead confess, bring it whole heartedly to God understanding that it isn't just your sinful actions that are the problem, it's your very nature. Recognize that what you need from God is not a Band-Aid but to be re-created in His image.

Friends, God has no love for perfect people who don't need Him but He loves to save broken sinners. And His promise is that when we come to Him like David did He will restore to us the joy of our salvation – He will give us Himself.

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<sup>6</sup> See Mark 4:3-20 for example