

God's people celebrate the gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 51. Now, we've been singing songs that celebrate the gospel, celebrate the good news of God's work in the lives of His people. And we'll read Psalm 51 and think about it here too.

The title of this says, For the director of music, a psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. 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 have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. So you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb. You taught me wisdom in that secret place. Cleanse me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways so that sinners will turn back to you. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.

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.

[2 : 1 2] May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole. Then bulls will be offered on your altar. Amen. So, we're thinking about the mission of God's people to celebrate the gospel.

As we begin, what was the last thing that you found yourself getting excited about? Perhaps it was around the dinner table, sharing with family. Perhaps it was spending time with a friend or a colleague.

Something that you had to share that you couldn't wait to communicate to someone else. You want the world to know this thing that so captured your imagination. As followers of Jesus, perhaps it's challenging to reflect. When was the last time that was God's Word? When was it some deep truth from Scripture? When was it the gospel of grace that captured our hearts so much that we wanted to share it with one another or indeed with someone who doesn't know Jesus? Psalm 51, the title tells us, is by David. David, who is the king, therefore he is the chief worshiper. He leads the people of God in the worship of God. But now, as our title reminds us, he has become the chief of sinners, as it were.

So, as we think about that, what's the story that makes his heart sing? What is it that he is happy and delighted and so overjoyed to share with his people? And we discover it's that God forgives sinners by his mercy and grace. And so, David, though he is the king, publicly, openly confesses his sin.

Psalm 51 is part of the public worship of the people of God. I find that a remarkable fact that David would allow that, led by God's Spirit. But he can openly confess the sin, knowing that it's going to highlight the covenant love and forgiveness of God that he's come to know by God's mercy and grace.

[4 : 32] Learning to celebrate the gospel is so important for us as Christians and as a church because we look around our city, we look around the world, and we see many challenges, many difficulties, perhaps. But the great need that the world has from God's people is that we would be personally delighted by the gospel so that we would then be led and compelled to declare the gospel.

The great challenge for the church, of course, is that sometimes, individually, collectively, we're afraid of that calling. We've kind of got used to living on the margins. Perhaps we lack confidence in our ability. Perhaps we even lack confidence in our message. We find ourselves thinking, well, where would we even start? Something I've been thinking about a lot this week in our own local context, recognizing, you know, for us as a church, our responsibility, indeed our need to be going out with the gospel, to have that confidence to invite people in to hear the gospel, it requires that we need to know what we believe, and to be able to share clearly, simply, powerfully with others what we believe.

So, this evening, in helping us towards that, we're going to use Psalm 51, perhaps in a different way than we've heard before, to help us to think together, what is it that we believe about God?

And what is it that we believe about sin? What is it that we believe about salvation? And how do we want people to respond? So, hopefully, this will encourage us all towards thinking about the gospel, so that we might then be able to share the gospel.

And as we go, as a by-the-by, one of the really interesting things about David and about so much of the Bible is imagery, imagination, trying to get to the heart in different languages, different images. So, perhaps, as we think about some of these images that David uses, we'll find them helpful in talking with others. But first of all, what is it that we believe about God? There are some crucial truths here. Of course, it doesn't contain all that we believe about God, but certainly, it centers on the reality of a God of covenant love, doesn't it? Verse 1, Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. That's covenant language. David holds two truths together. One, that he does not deserve the favor of God. He does not in and of himself deserve forgiveness. Mercy, in that sense, is optional with God. But he also holds the truth that forgiveness is found within the covenant of grace. Now, David is a believer, and he understands that the whole of the Christian life, from beginning to end, stands on the basis of God's grace, God's unfailing love, God's mercy is what begins us on the journey of faith. It's what sustains us in the journey of faith.

[7 : 59] And we see it, in a sense, captured in the parable of the prodigal son, the returning son who has brought shame on his father, who's turned his back on his father, made such a mess of his life, he comes back and he says, Father, I am not worthy. And he discovers a father who loves to welcome and to rejoice over him. David, when we read Scripture, we discover that David has committed two sins that could be regarded as no-hope sins. He has committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then he has arranged for her husband Uriah to be murdered. These are sins not covered by the sacrifices, because these are deliberate sins, deliberate breaking of God's law. But yet David still has hope for mercy and forgiveness.

There is in the story of David a reminder that because God's mercy is much greater than our sin, there's hope for any and for all who turn in repentance and faith, that we will be saved, and that restoration can happen because of the mercy of God. This psalm also reminds us that we talk about a God who is the ultimate moral authority in the universe.

Now, verse 4 says, Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so you're right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Of course, the question comes, how can David say against you, you only? Because we know he's sinned against Bathsheba and against Uriah. But David understands all sin is an offense to the holy God, a God who sets all the laws, all sin is either directly against God or against an image bearer of God, which is to sin against God also. And so, we're discovering in this psalm, and David acknowledges that the king's law has been broken, that the king's rule has been rejected, the king's word has been ignored, and this king, he's the judge of all. And his verdicts are right. And one of the needs that we have as we look to communicate who God is, is that people would feel that sense of weight. As the Bible says, it's a terrible thing to fall into the hands of a holy God. That's really challenging to people today.

Perhaps it's challenging to our own mindset when we hear so often that nobody has the right to claim there's an absolute moral authority. You know, we see it in debate and in argument, and no one can tell me what to do with my life or with my body. The truth is, God can and God does. And there will come a time when everybody finds ourselves in God's lock or under God's right and just judgment.

So, we talk about God of covenant love. We talk about God as ultimate moral authority, and we recognize and we find hope in the fact that God alone forgives sin. David's focus in the first half of this psalm is that sin is what makes a person both guilty and unclean before God. And he understands completely that only God can deal with that. And God does so on the basis of grace.

[11 : 44] When he comes to guilt, he uses the image in verse 1, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. The idea of a record of debt being canceled.

Right? Perhaps nationally, many people are going to feel that stress of mounting debts. Well, here, the debt is not financial. The debt is a failure to give God what he deserves.

A failure to give God the love he deserves, the worship he deserves, the obedience and honor that is due to him, that is this record of debt, our guilt.

And it's only God that can blot that out. And David also recognizes that sin makes him unclean before God. Verse 2, wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Sin is that ugly stain that we cannot remove, that we cannot hide. And the result is that we are unfit for God's presence. We are unfit in and of ourselves to share life with him. But David turns to another set of things that he knows are true about God, these realities that give him confidence even in the face of these great sins.

He understands that when we confess our sin, when we turn to God, verse 7, God cleanses. Cleanse me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. This hyssop was used in cleansing rituals. It was used at the Passover. It was used to cleanse someone who'd been suffering from leprosy. Brings pictures, images of sacrifice and blood. And the effect of that is to make a person whiter than snow. God forgives sin. God cleanses sin. Verse 8, God also restores joy.

[13 : 57] Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones you have crushed the joy. Think of those moments when we have done wrong, perhaps in childhood or as adults. And there's that point where we know that we need to confess as a way to be putting things right. But there's that fear sometimes. How will this person receive me? Will I be forgiven? Well, with God, David knows the answer is yes. There is forgiveness. There is restoration. And for David, that brings joy.

And he also knows that when we confess and turn back to God, God diverts his attention. Verse 9, wonderful picture. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

It's as if there's a parent and you get to the school gates and you see your child and they're covered in dirt and they've got stains all over their clothes and you know that other parents are pointing the finger at this kid that's a disgrace. But you don't see that because you love your child.

What does God see in his children? He sees the love that he has for us. He turns away from focusing on our sin because that's been cleansed and he sees the love he has for his children.

What is it that we celebrate? What is it that excites us about God? Is that in Jesus' sacrifice, in Jesus' blood, there is forgiveness, there's cleansing, there's reconciliation.

[15 : 52] In Jesus, there is joy, the joy of peace with God. In Jesus, God sees us as righteous because he has paid our debt. The stain is paid. It's gone. And so, there is good news. And so, we have wonderful truths that David helps us to see about our God. But we also understand from David that there are things that we believe and teach about sin. So, our message is really good news. The gospel is the best news anyone will ever hear. It is freedom. It is life. But it only ever hits a person's ears.

It is that way if we hear the bad news and deal with the bad news of sin. Perhaps we can imagine a group of friends discussing a new wonder drug that's come on the market.

And in that group of friends, there are some people who are healthy and they look at it kind of without much excitement. Well, that's nice for those people. That's not something I really need. But if you're suffering from the disease or the illness that the drug is particularly going to target, then you're thinking, wow, that's amazing. How do I get it? You're on the phone to your GP.

In Jesus' day, he said to people, I will set you free. And they said, well, we're not slaves. I'll give you life and life to the full. And there are people who say, well, religion, following Jesus, that just sucks away life. It sucks away joy. We have good news, but not everybody hears it. So one thing that we need to recognize and always remind ourselves as we look to share our faith, as we look to celebrate the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus, is that we need God to open people's eyes and minds and hearts. It's only God that changes people's lives. But we do need honesty about the bad news so that the good news can sing as God's Spirit does His work through His Word.

David's story, we find it in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, of his failure as king of being tempted to sin, of his adultery with Bathsheba, and then trying to cover it up, as we've said. And then God sends Nathan the prophet, and God's Word cuts deep into David's heart. And now, rather than cover up, there's public confession. Knowing the gospel, he is free to own his sin, to confess his sin.

[18 : 24] It's a wonderful thing about the gospel of grace. It gives us freedom to be honest, because we know we're not trying to prove ourselves to God. So, let's think about the four truths that we believe about sin that we find in our text.

Now, first of all, David talks about the stain of sin. Back there again in verses 1 and 2, when he talks about blotting out my transgressions and washing away iniquity.

Supposing the next time you find yourself walking past your local newsagent, maybe you're wanting to go and get a pint of milk or get some eggs. And you saw, as newsagents often do, they've got all the newspapers displayed outside. Suppose every headline, every picture, every cover story featured the worst things that we had ever done in our lives. Imagine how we would feel in that moment.

Or perhaps, imagine being at a wedding and seeing a bride walk down the aisle should be her moment of glory and great joy, but the dress is covered in food stains and ink stains and it's a mess. And imagine how different that day is going to feel.

Well, what David points us toward in Psalm 51 is that as people, we are that wedding dress. And we have been made in God's image and we should shine with glory, but we are spoiled by sin and that stain runs deep.

[20 : 02] Going further, let's think about the direction of sin. Again, verse 4, against you, you only have I sinned and done what's evil in your sight.

We're coming towards the 5th of November. We're coming towards Bonfire Night. And perhaps boys and girls. I said boys today, actually, it's boys. We can think of Guy Fawkes. As we think about Guy Fawkes every year, Guy Fawkes, the image of him often gets put on a bonfire.

Well, who was Guy Fawkes? Well, he was one of many people who came up with a plot to try and get rid of King James. And the plot was foiled. No blowing up with the Houses of Parliament.

And instead, Guy Fawkes was arrested and he was killed for treason at the Tower of London. And we remember him as this infamous baddie from history.

Well, David here is reminding us that sin is treason against God, our King. Sin is treason, rebellion against our Creator.

[21 : 22] The one who gives us everything good that we enjoy. The one who's given us Jesus. So sin is directed against God. He also talks about the nature of sin.

In verse 5, Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. A different view of sin than perhaps many people think of.

He's saying, I'm not a sinner because of what I do. He's saying, I commit sin because I'm a sinner. Understanding that we inherit a sinful nature.

Robert Murray McShane, a minister in Dundee from a previous generation, I said, the seed of every sin known to man is in my heart.

And so David, as he explores the depth of sin, is showing that what we need is heart change. It goes so much further than the idea that people have perhaps of turning over a new leaf.

[22 : 31] Let's try a little bit harder, and we're sure that we can keep God's laws. The answer to sin is here. And it's not in resolve or discipline or turning over a new leaf.

It's here in verse 10. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. It's a miracle of grace.

That word create is the same word used in Genesis 1. It's the word that's only ever used of God in the Bible. We make stuff. God has the power to create.

And David understands the sin problem is so deep. It cuts right to the depths of the human heart that what we need is new creation power to forgive, to restore, to change.

And so David didn't minimize the sin problem. He didn't make excuses for his sin problem. He didn't say, well, I'm the king. I'm above the law.

[23 : 33] But rather, we find honest and open confession. Understanding God's mercy and grace and giving that new heart, making him a new creation in Christ.

David could sing of amazing grace. So many ways he did. How much more can we? We've seen the cost that God pays to forgive us in the sending of his own son, Jesus.

And so we need to be honest about sin so that we can help people see the goodness of God and the goodness of salvation. So what do we believe about salvation?

What can we learn from Psalm 51 about our salvation? Like many, perhaps one of the abiding images from Euro 2020, if you followed it, was thinking about Christian Eriksen, the Danish football player who had the cardiac arrest on the pitch and he was resuscitated with the help of some of his team and doctors and whatnot.

And when he came around a few days later in the hospital, what he wanted to do was to pay tribute to his team captain, to pay tribute to the medics on the pitch, and to pay tribute to the doctors in the hospital who saved his life.

[24 : 52] He understood, without having to be told, I'm sure, that being saved is something to enjoy and it leads to praise, to praise one's Savior.

Now we see this in David's song, especially in verse 13 to 19, as he has reflected on who God is and what God has done for him.

Look at verse 13, Then I will teach transgressors your ways so that sinners will turn back to you. Deliver me from guilt, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

So as he celebrates God's mercy and forgiving him, he wants everyone to hear so that others too might respond and turn and receive mercy. In verse 16 and 17, he wants everyone to know, listen, being right with God is not about being religious.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking you, in their case, you need to go to the tabernacle and offer one more animal on the altar. It's about having a deep heart change.

[26 : 05] Verse 16, You do not delight in sacrifice that I would bring it. You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

It's God's grace. This deep heart change that comes from God's grace. So when we talk about salvation, we do it so that God is the hero of the story, that God is glorified, but we can also show that God provides what every heart instinctively is longing for.

And perhaps, as we listen in to conversations among family, friends, colleagues, perhaps we can recognize some of the longings expressed, some of the conversations that people have, and we'll be able to apply different aspects of the good news of the work of Jesus to really hit home with people.

Some areas to focus on from Psalm 51. The major one is forgiveness, isn't it? Think about how many people are living with a burden of guilt.

Something they did in their past. A pattern of lifestyle in the present. Why there is so much anxiety in our day and age. What's the good news that we have in the gospel?

[27 : 39] What's the good news that David declares with Jesus? We can have a clean slate before God. We can have a pure heart. We can be made white as snow.

We know, too, people are looking for love. Always. The government has talked about a loneliness epidemic. We don't have to look too far, I'm sure, to recognize breakdowns of relationships.

And there is a lack of security that comes from that, but with Jesus, there is a love, there is fellowship you will never lose. Verse 11, Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

David is looking at what happened to Saul when Saul had the Holy Spirit removed. And David wants nothing more than to enjoy fellowship, friendship, relationship with his God and with his Savior.

That's what we call people to, to invite people into that relationship of love with their Creator and Redeemer. And there's joy, too, isn't there?

[28 : 55] It's the answer. Jesus is the answer to the despair, the sense of life being meaningless, the loss of hope and the growing fear. For the folks that have it all but still feel empty, to understand that that longing for deep joy is found only in Jesus, in the gospel.

Again, to go to verse 12, Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. The joy of knowing the curse is lifted.

The joy of knowing the life we were made for life in fellowship with our God. It's what creates that changed heart that gladly obeys. So we think about the wonderful song that is Psalm 51.

We need to believe for ourselves that the gospel is the message that a hurting and broken world really needs to hear. Like David, we'd be experiencing daily the joy of our salvation.

That we'd be eager to give glory to our rescuer, the one who has shown mercy to us. That we'd be encouraging one another towards rejoicing in our God and Savior and so that others may know, that they may see, and they may believe too.

[30 : 20] So let's pray about that as we close. Father God, thank you for this psalm. Thank you for the wonderful truths that David could point us towards about you, about the dark nature of sin, but the fact that you, by the Lord Jesus, cover sin, that you give forgiveness, that you show mercy and grace.

And thank you that in finding salvation, we find true joy, we find eternal love, that we find full and free forgiveness through the blood of the Lord Jesus.

Lord, we pray that the gospel would be precious to us, and that the gospel would be what delights our hearts as individuals and as churches, so that with the help of the Spirit, we might declare the wonder of the gospel to others, and that you might work through us as weak and as feeble as we often feel, so that many more people in our city, in our circles, would be celebrating the gospel too.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Let's close our time singing together from Psalm 130, and let's stand to sing together.

Amen.