

# Psalm 51: God's Way of Dealing with Sin

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[ 0 : 00 ] As Matt said, I'm Steve, and it's a great privilege to be able to open up God's Word with you this morning as we walk through the Psalms together.

Welcome, if you're here in person or joining us through our Facebook page. It is great to be together. As we work through the Psalms, may God strengthen us.

May he make us real people. The prayer book is, as J.I. Packer liked to say, is a prayer book for real people in real situations, and especially as we look at Psalm 51, we see how it speaks right to our condition, and it gives us God's remedy.

Shall we pray? Father, we thank you that we can gather in your name to sing your praises, to hear your Word, to break bread together, to encourage one another, and we ask that by your same Spirit and your Word you would help us to trust in you, help us to hear what you would have to teach us this morning.

May our thoughts and our conversation bring glory to you. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Some of you know I spent some time studying Russian and reading some of the good books of Russian fiction.

[ 1 : 35 ] I'm always recommending those. It's a great thrill to read good fiction. That's not the point of my sermon. The point of my sermon is Psalm 51 and what God has to say there.

But I have this illustration from a Russian story that I read some time back. It's about a Russian military officer and prince who, when learning that his fiancée had been the Tsar's mistress, you know who the Tsar is, of course, had been the mistress of the Tsar the year before, he called off his engagement, declared he was ready to kill the man, if it weren't for the fact that he was his beloved Tsar, and decided, in his words, to go into a monastery to get away from the world.

Now, once he's a monk and priest, seven years later, he realizes that worldly temptations have a way of getting there into the monastery too.

So he becomes a hermit monk, not just an ordinary monk, but he goes off into the wilderness. I won't say desert because I don't think Russia has any.

Even out there in the wilderness, the world had a way of coming to him. As it happened, a woman who found him attractive, he was, after all, a handsome prince in his earlier days, came right to his cell.

[ 3 : 08 ] And I'll spare you the details. But she just practically flung herself on this monk and offering herself to him. Now, on that occasion, strict discipline, even going so far as to chop off a finger with an axe, worked.

But when a second opportunity came along, just not too many years later, his disciplines didn't serve him, and he gave in.

Now, that story was told by Leo Tolstoy. He's no special authority for us because, well, he invented his own form of Christianity, which has parts of it which are helpful, but parts of it which aren't.

But I think his basic point here, that the ascetic way of dealing with sin is a dead end. His basic point is right.

Because all he can say to us is, just try really, really hard. And then if that doesn't work, well, just try harder.

[ 4 : 22 ] And apart from the ascetic way, you can probably think with me of other ways of dealing with the fact of sin. There's this, let's call it the libertine way, where we really deny that sin is a problem and we just go on sinning.

It's not a problem. Then there's, a little bit better than the libertine way, there's the permissive way, where we accept that sin is a problem, but we deny its devastating effect on us.

And the fundamental issue with each of these can be looked at from different angles. But I want you to consider with me what it says about the image of God in each case.

In the first case, God is a God who really spends his time weighing our merits, as we have it in the prayer book, where we ask him not to. We pray that he not weigh our merits, but that he pardon our offenses.

That is, he finally accepts us into his kingdom in this ascetic way, if our spiritual struggle turns out to be just a little bit heavier than that container that we have that's full of sin.

[ 5 : 42 ] We're born again into his kingdom, finally, if we deserve it. In the second case, he's a fickle God, because while it seems there's some sort of moral standard, well, it turns out that there isn't.

And in the third case, he's really that forgetful old granddad. I get to be a granddad a lot these days around my grandchildren living next door. And, well, I could play the part of the forgetful old granddad if I want.

Let everything slide. the forgetful old granddad who has boundaries in principles, in principle, I should say, but who in practice just keeps blurring them or letting, letting us blur them.

So, let's consider God's way of dealing with sin as we learn about it in Psalm 51. And not just Psalm 51, but, but the story that's behind it as told in 2 Samuel 11 to 12.

You're welcome to keep an eye on that passage too. I just want to hit, hit the main points of that.

One spring evening, when kings, we read, are supposed to be out fighting, David finds himself there in the security of his palace.

[ 7 : 04 ] He said to his nephew, Joab, I think, you know, I'm going to let you go out and fight the Ammonites. And so, David is there confidently surveying his realm there from, from the high point of the high, the roof of his palace.

Now, had he had on his mind what he wrote in Psalm 19, for instance, he, he would have been considering how great the, how, how the heavens declare God's glory, you know, there from the heights of his palace.

had he had even the next Psalm on his mind, he would have been giving thanks for numerous victories in battle. And we read in Psalm 20, some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

He could have had either of these things or many other things on his mind, but he, he had put those thoughts to the side and had opted instead to focus on Bathsheba.

And from there, I'm almost certain that everybody here knows what happened. So here, here's just the bullet points. King makes the wife of another man sleep with him and she gets pregnant.

[ 8 : 22 ] King eliminates the inconvenience of the husband. She comes to be King's wife. King imagines that he's done a great cover-up job. Well, at least until Nathan pays him a visit and we don't know how soon.

We don't know going from chapter 11 to 12 what kind of time lapse there's been. Maybe it's been a month, maybe it's been a year, maybe more. But anyway, Nathan pays him a visit and Nathan tells David this story to entertain a guest.

A certain rich man could not be bothered to slaughter one of his own many animals that he owned. So he took instead the lamb of a certain poor man and took that lamb and cared for it.

Sorry, the man who had cared for this animal as if it were his own child. At first, of course, David doesn't realize that he's in that parable.

He doesn't even know it's a parable and that he's a character in it. And yet, consider the power of that parable in God's hands as told by Nathan because it brings David to declare the just verdict himself.

[ 9 : 53 ] As the Lord lives, that man who took, who stole that lamb, that man deserves to die. 2 Samuel 12, 5.

And so, once the penny drops, David's sin is made plain. And on one level, it's a theft, isn't it? He's guilty of theft. And that act was bound up with adultery and murder. But in a more profound sense, David's problem was one of idolatry.

We can say this because there's something that far surpasses the evil done to other mortals and it's his sin against God. In 2 Samuel 12, 13, we read this, then David said to Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord.

In a moment of complacency, David hadn't just failed to look in the other direction. He had failed to keep his eyes on God.

[ 11 : 01 ] And as a consequence, God allowed him to experience that direct link that's there between covetousness, sexual sin, and loss of fellowship with God.

Now, if you wonder why these three things in particular have a way of sort of being bound up together, consider Hebrews 13, 4, and 5. This stood out to me as I was considering the passage and you see these themes come together.

Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have because God has said, never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.

All three of those are in there. Loss of intimacy with God, loss of contentment with the things we have, loss of sexual purity.

Start with any of those and you'll come to the others. You can almost count on it. Now I'm not sure that the challenges of our own day make things any better or in fact any worse, I suppose, for us than David's day did for him.

[ 12 : 28 ] The human race has hardly made great moral strides since his time. And while we're daily bombarded with images and promises of all kinds of wonderful experiences that we deserve, in actual fact, we know that it takes very little to distract us.

Some things we've definitely become good at in our day, we reduce sin to mistakes and indiscretions. Notice our language about sin sometimes, how we downsize it.

we tend to focus on the evil that's out there in the world rather than on the hardness of heart and lack of gratitude that's in us and in all our plans and in our imaginations.

And even when we acknowledge sin, we say we're in no worse shape than the next guy. Well, so what's the good news? And that's what we want to hear today.

What's the good news? Well, let's look at the gospel as it's set forth in Psalm 51. We'll look at it under three headings. We'll see what David learns about sin itself. We'll learn about the remedy and we'll learn about the blessings of repenting or of repentance.

[ 13 : 47 ] So what does David learn about sin itself? I think he learns two things, at least. That he hasn't simply broken a rule or committed a crime.

And B, that the effect of sin is devastating. He hasn't simply broken a rule and he learns that sin is devastating. In verse four, David says, against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Nathan's rebuke has shown him that apart from stealing, he's committed murder, and that apart from murdering a man, he's committed an offense against God.

And what's the nature of that offense? It's there in Nathan's question. I don't know if you recall back to that narrative, but Nathan says to him, why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what's evil in his sight?

See what's fundamental there. Why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what's evil in his sight? In other words, Nathan is saying, in doing this evil thing, what you've really done is you've exposed the fact that you found God's word detestable.

[ 14 : 57 ] evil. Now, what a diagnosis, what a thing to say to a man who is so used to delighting in God's word. And what a statement about us, who know so well and how easily that pendulum swings from side to side.

If we've learned that the essence of sin is the rejection of God's word, what we learn from there is how extensive it is, how far it reaches.

And here David really spells out the human predicament that we're in. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, verse five, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Well, the idea of sharing in the fall of Adam is not that we just copy Adam and Eve. We just copy their sin.

Because in that case, we wouldn't really need a savior, would we? We just need a good teacher to imitate, a model to follow. But the problem we see clearly in this psalm is more severe.

[ 16 : 10 ] We inherit Adam's guilt. Now, some traditions don't like to speak so much of guilt, but it's there. And I think the remedy has to get to the heart of the matter.

For as in Adam all die, says Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 22, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. In Adam all die.

So from what sin is and how extensive it is, we see what sin does. Have a look with me there in verse eight, if you will, and following.

In verse eight, David declares that sin deprives us of joy and gladness. How true that is, isn't it? Verse 10 implies that sin leaves our hearts filthy and our spirits without direction and confused. And then to complete the picture, verses 11 and 12, remind us what sin feels like.

[ 17 : 16 ] that's why, well, we feel far from God without the least bit of will to obey. And that's why David pleads, cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit. This is wonderful how Nathan's, how God's justice and his mercy is displayed in Nathan's ministry to David and how God's mercy and love for us is displayed in the words that name our problem and give us words and give us the language to turn to God in repentance.

If that's really where sin leaves us, then we can understand why Paul says that the wages of sin is death, Romans 6, 23, and why the libertine or the permissive way really that way or the ways they really don't deal with the problem.

They really get us nowhere. So what's the remedy? Well, that's part two. Well, it comes down to a denial that the performance of good works, the way of just trying harder and a little harder after that will fix the problem.

Where do we see that in the psalm? Well, it's there in verses 16 and 17. For you, you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

[ 18 : 55 ] The sacrifices of God, I hear this, are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Under the old covenant, as we know, temple sacrifices were still the practice, and we see that in the last verse. But here David is already teaching us, isn't he, that external things, not that they're nothing, but they're of no use at all if there is no heart change.

And that takes us to the solution to our predicament. Look back at verse 10. create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

It's our inner parts, it's our inmost parts that God is concerned about because the first part of verse 6 says it, behold you delight in truth in the inward being.

The only kind of change that really lasts is the kind that starts there with the heart. So as we see in verse 8, once we acknowledge our sin and we repent, we can again rejoice.

[ 20 : 09 ] We find the way of rejoicing, having repented, and it's such freedom to know that and to experience it. Oz Guinness, one of my favorite thinkers, is fond of saying that contrast is the mother of clarity.

He likes that phrase, and I think we can appreciate what a joyful thing it is to return to delighting in God's word by considering how dark, things can become when we ignore it deliberately and persistently.

Let me illustrate. Some years back, my wife, Stella, and I, we attended a very post, let's call it post-Christian funeral.

We were living in England. Our friend's mother had died, and I say that the funeral was post-Christian because it recalled at least some of the forms of Christian burial, so we had certain fragments of it, if you like.

We were taken into the woods where there was a little chapel, and from a pulpit, family and loved ones spoke of her life as an exemplary mother.

[ 21 : 28 ] the urn containing her ashes were placed on something that appeared to be an altar or a table, and after the formal part of the ceremony, her immediate family took, just her immediate family took that urn and buried it outside beside a tree as a symbol of well, what?

The meaning wasn't clear, and that's where the post-Christian element came in. We didn't learn why the ashes were buried, for instance. Our friend said that they all stood there in silence as they put the ashes in the ground.

So we never learned why they needed to be buried specifically, as opposed to, say, just tossing them into the river. The faith of his mother was never mentioned, and neither was there any word about the one who came and died on the cross for our redemption so that we might know the hope of eternal life.

All these Christian fragments were there somehow, and yet God's word was never heard. No promise, no hope, no promise of new creation, of resurrection, of life with God through the cross and repentance.

So it was a doubly sad, even dark occasion, that was made darker still by the pleasant and fresh surroundings out there in the woods. It made me think of our cultural rejection today of the God who speaks, of who actually speaks, and doesn't leave it to us to make up truth as we go along.

[ 23 : 15 ] It's as if God's word had been collapsed into all words, into any word in the end, so that there would be no word really that ever comes to us from outside our own resources.

It made me think of how post-Christian we will become if we, as J.I. Packer has written, if we embrace a theology that knows nothing about the God who speaks to us in Scripture, that knows nothing of the sin that's there in the human heart and mind.

the remedy then is with God, and it's full of the mercy that flows from his grace. And we can be confident that with Jesus the burden is light, because that's what he's promised.

We hear that often as we break bread, and as we hear the comfortable words. So we come in the third place to the benefits of repentance.

They're spelled out. Some of them are spelled out there in the rest of the psalm. The blessings that are ours as we ask God to cleanse us and renew us. I've mentioned the joy and the gladness that come in verse 8, and that's linked to an awareness that we're walking with God once again with the assurance of our salvation in verse 12.

[ 24 : 38 ] But there are at least three more blessings that are promised. See, if you can see this in verse 13, the first is that knowledge of God will spread to others.

David says, then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. In other words, since you and I have experienced God's forgiveness and have come to a deeper understanding of his ways, this will help us then to lead others to him as we explain God's way to them.

We'll see lives transformed. And the second thing is that God will be glorified. Verses 14 and 15 say this, Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will do what? My tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. So with our voices we'll praise the God who saves publicly.

God will be glorified. The third is that we'll have a renewed desire to see God's city, his church, in fact, flourish.

[ 26 : 03 ] Verse 18, in verse 18 David prays this, Do good to Zion, in your good pleasure. Build up the walls of Jerusalem. As hearts are renewed, so we see signs and even anticipation of God's kingdom that is forever.

What really struck me about these three blessings is how they point us to Jesus, to his work as prophet, as priest, and as king, that threefold work of our Savior, and to the way that by grace we are privileged to participate in that work as we remain in him.

Where do we see this? Well, in Christ who's prophet, what do we do? We declare and teach God's will in the world so that others too will come to trust in him.

In Christ who's our high priest, we offer a sacrifice of praise as a people, declaring his salvation. And in Christ who's our king, we do works that build up his church.

That's what kings do. Kings gain victory. Kings protect. Kings defend. Kings build up. And here we are privileged in Christ to see the church built up, his holy city, and so to look for his kingdom to be extended throughout the earth.

[ 27 : 37 ] And it's there, I think, that we can answer that lingering question that some of you, perhaps all of you, might be puzzled over right now.

That lingering question that comes up when we think about that inner struggle, that constant struggle that we experience, that struggle with sin. And we can put the question like this.

Paul wrestles with it in Romans, but we can ask this. If we've really been set free from sin, as Paul says in Romans 6 and 6-7, in fact, then why do we continue in sin?

What's the point of being set free if we continue to sin? Now, I know I'm going against a certain tradition, and it happens to be a tradition that was very much in the air when I was growing up and in my family background, when I say that I don't think in this life we're ever sanctified wholly or completely.

Some traditions long to see that happen, and I think they've always been concerned to see that salvation is, I should say, discipleship is taken very seriously, and that's important, but I think it has the tendency to confuse the things God has seen fit to do in a moment as when he regenerates the human heart and what he's seen fit to do gradually as when he sanctifies us by the same spirit fitting us for heaven.

[ 29 : 20 ] We leave it to God as to why he has done it that way. He's the author of salvation. He knows what he's doing because, in fact, we know that he could do, if he so choose, to do a whole bunch of things instantly.

He could have turned Eden into paradise in a second, in a moment. He could put us as his people permanently on the mountain of transfiguration so that there'd be no more longing and waiting for his coming.

He could do, he could heal all the world's diseases and conflicts in a flash, but he hasn't. And this doesn't remove the seriousness of sin, our predicament, but it does teach us to depend on God. It teaches us to turn constantly to his word and to depend on the Holy Spirit who uses us to further Christ's kingdom. him. And along the way to the promised land, we learn this, that it's the awareness itself.

Have you been aware, have you been made aware that you have done wrong, that what you've done is an offense against God? The awareness itself is what God uses to bring us back to him.

[ 30 : 42 ] And once we're back in the race, as justified sinners, we're given boldness to teach others. That's why David can say that then he will proclaim, then he will share with others what God has done.

Then we have the joy and boldness to tell others that God is a good and gracious God and rich in mercy. So let me end with a challenge. As we think of the basic human need to find peace with God, after all, that's what he made us for.

He made us for a fellowship, to be at peace with him, the options for dealing with sin really come down to three. Here I'm coming back to that theme I started with.

We can go the way of that Russian monk. We can go that rigorous, ascetic way, try to get away from the world and all its temptations and distractions. But what do we find in that case?

Well, we find that relocation, you know I've relocated a lot through our line of work. Relocation of the body does not necessarily translate into a reformation of the heart, which is what we need most.

[ 31 : 59 ] We can go the opposite way. We can take that broad and easy way that doesn't take sin into proper account. And here we adopt a philosophy that says something more or less like this.

You know, discipleship and all that sort of thing is really for those super Christians, those pastors and those missionaries who are called to the front lines.

Surely God doesn't hold the rest of us to the same standard. At any rate, if he does turn out to do that, we can take our faith seriously once we come into that final stretch of the race.

Well, there are at least two problems with that second way. If we're in Christ, we've been made new. We simply can't remain in sin because, as John says, if we say we have fellowship with God while we walk in darkness, while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

The second problem with the broad way is that it's just plain irresponsible. It's kind of making us think that sin just affects me, right? But when we let ourselves off the hook persistently and deliberately, we're hurting others.

[ 33 : 19 ] As David learned so well, sin has that wider family and social impact than we can imagine. It started when he decided to watch things from the sidelines and not go to battle.

The third option, and the only one for you and me, if we have truly known God's mercy and have given our lives to him, is this. Don't despise God's word, but instead, and here's the wonderful thing, it's not just don't despise God's word, but here's the positive command.

Delight in it. Delight in it. This is the same as giving thanks, as simply giving thanks, and through that gratitude, we find the strength to flee from idols.

And it will be the only way to truly look forward to the promised city of God as we long with joy and with patient hope for the kingdom that is coming.

So shall we pray? And I ask you to bow your heads there where you are, and we'll pray together, using the psalm to kind of help fashion our prayer.

[ 34 : 29 ] prayer. According to your steadfast love, O God, have mercy on us. According to your abundant mercy, blot out our transgressions and make us clean.

When we face temptation, help us not only to look the other way, but to you and to your word. By your spirit working in us, keep us in the race.

remind us that we're here but for a moment, and grant us joy and gladness as we look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

For it's in his name that we pray. Amen.