

Psalm 51:1-2

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[0 : 00] Our text this morning is found in the book of Psalms, chapter 51, part of which we have already sung. And I'm just going to look at the whole of the psalm in the whole, but I'm going to quote particularly verse 10, where the psalmist prays, Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit in me.

Now Psalm 51 is said to have been used in Christian worship more than any other passage of scripture. And right across churches, right across denominations and confessions, this psalm is a psalm which has been used again and again and is being used today.

I want to suggest that this psalm is an appropriate psalm in which to meditate as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

It's appropriate, first of all, because it emphasizes the importance of confession. And as we come before God, and especially as we come to his table, we need to confess our sins.

We need to examine ourselves and confess our sins and to claim again, by faith, the forgiveness which he so freely offers us. That's the first reason, I think, why this psalm is so important and relevant for us in this communion service today.

[1 : 37] The second reason is that this psalm, like the other psalms, comes from the prayer book of Jesus. And it's important for us to remember that God has provided the psalms not only for us, but he provided them for his own son during his incarnation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was assassinated by, executed by Hitler near the end of the war, said, the prayers of David are the prayers of Christ.

And I think it's important for us as we study the psalms to realize that that is the case. And then quoting a former minister of Glasgow City Church, R.A. Findlayson, he used to tell us when we were students that the psalms are the autobiography of Christ.

And we get a glimpse in the psalms into the self-consciousness of Jesus. And when we seek to introduce people to Jesus, we, of course, use the gospels.

But I think we also would find it helpful to use the psalms, because the psalms help us to appreciate, at least to some extent, the way in which Jesus lived in our behalf.

[3 : 04] He not only died for us, but he lived for us. He lived by faith and by obedience. Of course, the question arises, you know, we have just said that this is a psalm which Jesus would have prayed.

How could that be possible? How could Jesus, who three apostles, no less than three apostles, tell us that he had no sin, how could he sing?

How could he pray Psalm 51 and, indeed, the other penitential psalms? How could Jesus say, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin?

How could he say, purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean? Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. I think the answer to that question is found in what Paul tells us in Philippians, in Philippians chapter 2.

And let me read these words to you. Chapter 2, verses 6 to 8. Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, that is not to be used to his own advantage, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[4 : 39] What Paul is telling us here is that Jesus became human, and in doing so he did not use many of his divine attributes to his own advantage.

The catechism, the shorter catechism, reminds us that Jesus lived during his incarnation in a state of humiliation. And that word is taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians, where he says Jesus

humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

And so Jesus, during his sojourn on earth, lived in a state of humiliation, very different from the state of exaltation which he now enjoys in the presence of God, and which he enjoyed before he came into this world.

And so we find that although as God Jesus was all-knowing, he chose to acquire his human knowledge by learning. We read in Luke chapter 2 that as a child, he increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

The writer of the Hebrews tells us that even during his ministry, he learned obedience. So we find the one who is all-knowing learning because he did not use his all-powerful, his omnipotent, his omniscience.

[6 : 24] He did not use that. He, as it were, laid it aside and became a learner. And although all-powerful, all-omnipotent in his divinity, Jesus chose to experience human weakness.

We read that he grew weary with his journey as he journeyed on his way through some area. He knew what it was to get tired.

And it's difficult for us perhaps to grasp the fact that he is the one who is omnipotent and all-powerful, but he is not using these attributes during his humiliation in order that he might be fully human, in order that he might live as our Savior.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses in every respect, tempted as we are, yet without sin.

And so although Jesus, the Son of God, was all prosperous, he became poor. He, though he was rich, says Paul, became poor, that we, through his poverty, might become rich.

[7 : 45] And although he was all-glorious, he humbled himself, as Paul tells us in Philippians chapter 2, becoming fully human in every way, sin excepted.

And we're reminded of this by the apostles. And as I've said, three occasions in three different letters, in Hebrews, 1 Peter, and 1 John. And so we find that in his temptation, for example, Jesus refuses to turn the stones into bread.

He could have done so, but he chose not to, because he was living a life of faith and a life of obedience to his Father in heaven. When the devil took him to a pinnacle of the temple and challenged him to throw himself down, Jesus didn't do that, although he could easily have done that as the all-powerful creator and sustainer of the universe.

He didn't do it, because he was living a life of faith and obedience, living in a state of humiliation.

And it's important to recognize that while Jesus was in a state of humiliation, he continued being in very nature God.

He did not cease to be God, simply because he did not use all of his divine attributes. James Packer, in his book, *Knowing God*, says that Jesus took humanity without the loss of deity.

[9 : 17] And it's important for us to remember that, that Jesus, throughout his life, and even in his death on the cross, continued to be the Son of God, continued to be the second person of the Trinity.

Now, this meant that Jesus was living by faith and obedience to his Father's will. And his Father's will was revealed to him, and this is part of his learning, he discovered, was revealed to him in the Psalms, and of course, in the whole of the Old Testament.

But the Psalms are a special focus. He discovered his Father's will as he meditated, as he read, meditated, and indeed as he sung the Psalms.

Jesus knew that the Father had sent him to be the Messiah. He also knew that David, who wrote many of the Psalms, was regarded as a type of the Messiah, a prototype.

And during his humiliation, Jesus was discovering that David's experience, spiritual experience, as it is expressed in the Psalms, to a considerable extent, to a significant extent, anticipated his own experience as our representative and as our substitute.

[10 : 42] Let me quote Professor Finlayson again. He said, Jesus used the Messianic Psalms to enlighten his own mind and to confirm to him his Messianic vocation by recognizing his own person and his own circumstances in the Messianic portrayal given in the Psalms.

So we still have the question that we raised earlier. How could Jesus have sung this Psalm, which is a penitential Psalm, a Psalm of confession of sin?

It does seem impossible, as we've seen, quoting not only the two verses we already quoted, verses 2 and 7, but the whole Psalm. And yet, I think that Professor Finlayson is right.

We can assume that Jesus did. Jesus attended the synagogue. Every Sabbath, and in the synagogue, they sang, perhaps they chanted the Psalms, we're not sure, and probably they worked their way through this altar, one Psalm after another, Sabbath by Sabbath.

Jesus also attended the festivals in the temple in Jerusalem, these festivals which are held three times a year. We did in the Gospels that Jesus attended these.

[12:07] And the Psalms formed a key part of the liturgy of these festivals. And so, I think it's important for us to recognize that in fact, Jesus did indeed use this Psalm and sing this Psalm and meditate upon this Psalm.

And in what way, we might ask, could his meditation on this Psalm confirm to him his messianic vocation? And I want to suggest that this Psalm would have confirmed to Jesus his messianic calling because it highlights his office as a priest.

This is a priestly Psalm. Jesus occupied three offices during his incarnation. First of all, as a prophet and of a priest and of a king.

And there are Psalms which anticipate these three offices which looks back to the history of the people of God proclaims the Gospel.

And that Psalm is a prophetic Psalm anticipating Jesus coming as a prophet to speak the word of God. And of course, we've got Psalms that are royal Psalms like Psalm 45 which speak of the king.

[13:36] And so, Jesus' fulfillment of these three offices was anticipated or is anticipated in the Psalms.

Now, this Psalm thinks and looks forward to Jesus as a priest. The terminology, the terms that are used in this Psalm are priestly terms.

Words like transgression, iniquity, doing evil. They're words for cleansing, washing, blotting out, purging.

The reference to hyssop which was used by the priests in the Old Testament to sprinkle either blood or water in a sacrifice. And so, this Psalm, the focus quite clearly is on Jesus' priestly office, his priestly ministry.

The Psalm also highlights three key words of the salvation which was anticipated in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

[14:50] A word like mercy, a word like steadfast love, and a word like abundant mercy which in Hebrews is one word meaning compassion.

The reference to being made whiter than the snow also comes from the Old Testament. And so, all of these are priestly terms.

which tell us that Jesus' ministry included that of being our priest. Now, as Jesus would have contemplated this psalm, as he would have meditated upon it, as he would have sung it over many years in the synagogue and at the temple, he would have absorbed these words as confirming and corroborating indicators of the redemption that he'd come into the world to accomplish as our high priest.

And of course, Jesus' priesthood is anticipated and symbolized, it's not, sorry, symbolized rather than anticipated in the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is built upon the Passover of the Old Testament, which Paul tells us that Christ is our Passover and when he died upon the cross, he died as the Passover lamb.

The phrase the lamb of God is a common title for Jesus in the New Testament. and the bread that is used in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is symbolic of Christ's broken body offered as a sacrifice for us upon the cross and the wine symbolizes his blood which was shed in order that our sins might be washed away.

[16:53] And so, the office of a priest is twofold. A priest's task was to, first of all, to offer sacrifices and then to offer prayers.

We find that in his ministry Jesus did both of these. He is a priest in the fullest sense of the word and we rejoice in his presence as our priest this morning as we continue in this service.

And so, we give thanks that Jesus in fact did both. He offered sacrifices and he offered prayers.

Now, in his sacrifice Jesus was both priest and victim and he could do that because he was not only man, he was also God.

In a unique sense, he could be the priest and also the sacrifice, also the victim. he did this in accomplishing an atonement which would effectively wash and cleanse and blot out the moral guilt of our breaking of God's commandments.

And so, as our priest, Jesus offered himself once for all. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that he did this once and for all. Unlike the priests in the Old Testament who offered sacrifices daily, Jesus offered his sacrifice once and for all.

[18 : 31] His sacrifice accomplished what he set out to accomplish. John tells us in his first epistle that we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

He is the propitiation not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And so, Jesus, as he became our priest and as he became the victim that he himself offered, absorbed in himself the judgment of God, absorbed in his own soul the wrath of God, the punishment we deserve.

And he, as it were, diverted the wrath of God to himself, took it away from his people and accepted it on himself and grasped it and took it to himself and he made propitiation for our sins in this way. Now, he did this willingly, he did this voluntarily. He tells his disciples in John chapter 10 verse 17 and 18, for this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.

[20 : 02] And so the task that Jesus came to fulfill was to manifest God's mercy, to manifest his steadfast love and the abundant mercy that David was praying for God.

In the opening verse of this psalm, he did this by offering his sinless humanity as a sacrifice which absorbed into his own soul the wrath of God which all of us without exception justly deserve.

It's interesting that Calvin has a very pertinent comment on this. And let me quote what he says. Because Jesus was our representative and took upon himself our sins, he appeared before the judgment seat of God as a sinner.

Difficult for us to grasp that. But he appeared there as a sinner. He was sinless. But he appeared on our behalf as a sinner.

Calvin again says Christ became answerable for our guilt. And so every time Jesus meditated upon the psalm, every time he sang it or prayed it in the synagogue or at the temple, he was reminded of his priestly calling to stand as our substitute before the throne of judgment, before which all of us must one day stand.

[21 : 39] he stood there on our behalf. And so on his way to Calvary, to become, to offer that unique sacrifice, although he was sinless, he repeats and prays the prayer of a sinner.

And he does that not as his own prayer, but as our prayer. prayer, and he takes it and he makes it his own. He prays for us as he was praying for his people as he went up to the cross.

And so he was taking David's sins and our sins and the sins of all those who prayed his prayer and who seek God's forgiveness.

he was carrying these sins as he went to the cross. And so we find David here bearing our sins on, not only on the tree, but on his way up to the tree.

He stood in our place as our substitute before the throne of judgment. he confessed our sins, absorbing the judgment we deserve.

[23 : 02] And as our substitute he also prayed our prayer of confession on his way to the cross. Peter tells us he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree or literally right up to the tree.

And so he supremely bore our sins when he died upon the cross, but he was carrying our sins ever since he became a man.

And so by praying, singing Psalm 51 during his earthly lifetime, Jesus was interceding for his people on the way to the cross.

And he does that on the cross and of course he does it also beyond the cross because as a priestly psalm, Psalm 51 implies that Christ having interceded for his people in life and death would continue to intercede in heaven.

The wretch to the Hebrews tells us that he always lives to make intercession for us. And so the priesthood of Jesus did, if you like, it climaxed on the cross, but did not terminate there.

[24 : 18] Jesus ascended to the father's right hand because the sacrifice was accepted and God corroborated his acceptance of his son by raising him from the dead and exalting him, the God-man, to sit his right hand in heaven as our representative before the throne of grace interceding for us.

And so Jesus is now ascended and seated at the right hand of God. He holds his priesthood permanently, as we read in the letter to the Hebrews, because he continues forever.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. And so we find that Jesus as our priest is our substitute, substitute, but he's also our representative before the throne of God.

He was our substitute before the throne of judgment, but he is our representative before the throne of grace. And so as we come to the Lord's table, we come at the invitation of a Savior who is risen and who is alive and who is exalted and who is in heaven, but who by his spirit invites us to come to his table.

He invites us to be his guests. As our representative, the Son of God is clothed in our humanity.

[25 : 52] He is in heaven, not only as God's Son, but as a man. He is there as one of us. He is there as our representative. He is there to intercede for us before the throne of grace.

God is there as a man. And when we sing the psalm here on earth as a confession of our sin, and do so intelligently and sincerely and in faith, Jesus is conveying our confession to the Father.

And so it's important to realize the psalms are prayers as well as songs, and this psalm is a prayer as well as a song. And when we adopt Psalm 51 as a confession of our sins to God the Father, we do so through Jesus, our high priest.

And he takes our confession and presents it to his Father. He endorses it with his sinless life and his atoning death. And he presents our prayers to his Father.

And so when we pray, we pray for Jesus' sake. And that's why our prayers are heard and answered. And the prayers that we offer, the prayers that we offer and are heard, are in one sense our prayers, but in another sense they're his prayers.

[27 : 20] Because he takes them and makes them his own, and he presents them before his Father in heaven. Bonhoeffer used to say that when we pray the psalms, Jesus prays with us, prays them with us.

I often wondered what he meant by that, but it may be that if we say use this psalm or any other penitential psalm as a confession of sin in our prayers, then Jesus is presenting that.

He is repeating that confession before the Father on our behalf. So it's important for us to recognize that the psalms in one sense are set prayers, and it's important for us, I think, to learn to use the psalms as prayers as well as songs.

psalms. So this psalm, Psalm 51, previews for Jesus two key components of his priestly ministry, which the Lord's Supper commemorates.

In other words, what it would mean for him to stand as our substitute before the throne of judgment, and to sit as our representative before the throne of grace.

[28 : 44] Jesus has done the first. He has stood as our substitute before the throne of judgment. He's done that. The second, where he is our representative sitting before God, the Father, he is doing that now.

That is the ongoing ministry in heaven of the Lord Jesus Christ. As once crucified, now risen, Jesus invites us, who are his people, to be his guests at his table.

He invites us to come in the light of the fact that he is our high priest, that he has opened up a way through which we may come. And so, the gospel is preached to everyone, but the Lord's Supper is available to those who already accept the gospel, to those who believe the gospel, to those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel is a converting power. The Lord's Supper is not a converting ordinance. It is a sanctifying ordinance, if you like, because at the Lord's table, Christ invites us to commit ourselves afresh to him.

Because he has stood as our substitute before the throne of judgment and sits as our representative before the throne of grace. Jesus will accomplish our full salvation.

[30 : 18] That is absolutely certain. In no wise will the people of God be cast out. That's what Jesus himself said. If anyone comes to me, I will in no wise cast him or her out.

And so David's prayer was answered, answered by Jesus. As Jesus interceded on behalf of David, just as he intercedes on behalf of all his people.

And David was forgiven despite the great sins that he had committed. He was forgiven through the sacrifice of Jesus.

David's prayer was answered and so also are the prayers of those who can say in sincerity, have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin, create in me

a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Let's bow our heads in prayer.

[31 : 45] Our heavenly Father are absolutely astounded that he who is your Son, the Lord of glory, will become not only a man, but a servant, and that he would bear our sins in his own body.

We thank you that he hears our prayers, and he takes them, he perfects them and presents them before the Father. We bless and we praise you for this, and we ask, O Lord, that as we contemplate what he has done for us, help us to reflect on what we might do for him.

Grant, O God, that as we come to your table, we may not only receive from you the grace that we need, but may we offer you the loyalty, the faith, the commitment that you deserve.

Forgive us if so often, Lord, we are ungrateful, and we ask that we may be truly thankful as we gather around your table at this time.

So lead and guide us, we pray, as we come to remember the death of the Lord Jesus as our great high priest. We ask this in his name and for his sake.

[33 : 16] Amen. Amen.