Confession and Assurance

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[0:00] When Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg on the 31st of October 1517, as you all know, could he have imagined at that the storm that was about to be unleashed?

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, repent, and he put his reference for that, Matthew 4 verse 17, when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
The first of Luther's 95. Now, of course, you have to really read the next 94 to begin to even get an idea of what Luther was saying and why he placed this as the first of the 95.
The first of 95 points that he wished to debate, because that's, he wasn't doing a weird thing, he was actually doing a very regular thing.
He was pasting up or nailing on to the door of the church points for debate. He had 95. He was, after all, master of arts and sacred theology and the regularly appointed lecturer on these subjects at that place, Wittenberg.
[1:38] But one thing is clear, you see, that Luther perceived that what was usual, what was regarded as normal, the regular approach of the church to matters of confession, confession of sin, of course, repentance and assurance of faith, that these were hopelessly, that these were hopelessly inadequate, if not, in fact, completely wrong.

Now, when we come together for worship, it's not just sort of a kind of, you know, off-the-cuff kind of thing. There is an order to worship and how we go about it.
There is a certain structure, and there's a reason, of course, for that structure. Some will call it liturgy. And that is just simply that there is a structure.
There's a reason for everything that we do in worship and that we're going to do in worship and what we're doing right now in worship. Very often, there is some form of a call to worship.
But, you know, that's the start, and you'll work your way through, but you can say there is a start and there is a middle and there is a conclusion to all that we do in worship.
[3:08] So there's a sense of progression when we come to a service like this. But a very regular, in fact, it's really an indispensable part of worship when we come together, is confession.

It is that a moment at least is taken every time the people of God gather together to confess their sins. But along with that confession, an indispensable part, again, of worship is an assurance that with the confession of sin, there is the forgiveness of sin.
So as I say, a typical part of worship, there is the confession and there is the assurance. Now, often this is done in prayer, or at least partly done in prayer, but also in song.
So it's not unusual, as we have had this evening with Psalm 51, to have a psalm or another song that in some way reflects confession of sin, but also assurance of forgiveness.
And of course, given what Luther's first of these 95 theses says, I'll just remind you that when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, repent, he willed that the entire life of believers be one of repentance.
[4:38] And so, you know, given that this was the first of these 95 theses for debate, sermons will frequently reflect the fact that we come together, we confess our sin, but we also receive assurance of the forgiveness of sins.

Because if repentance is indeed the entire life of believers, then confession and assurance must be as well. So we've read Psalm 51 and Psalm 130, and I don't think I have to say so much more. You can see at a glance the relevance of Psalm 51 and Psalm 130 to that matter of confession and assurance. So my plan is to use the structure of Psalm 130 to guide us through confession and assurance, but then also use what we might call the insights of Psalm 51.

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So in Psalm 130, in terms of its structure, well, what do you have? Well, you have the writer of the psalm in the depths. That's how he begins the song. He is in the depths.
However, as you work through the psalm, he is someone in the depths who has thrown a life belt and who, along with others, is rescued.
[6:04] In the depths, he is given a life belt and he, with others, is rescued. So the depths. Well, at the start of Psalm 130, the writer, he is sunk into a pit.

He's gone into, we might say, the depths of the sea. And of course, it's a metaphor. It's a picture of where he feels he's at. It's what he's experiencing.
And it's an experience, we could say, it's in some way general enough for us to also enter into it. It's not literally sinking, but that sense of emotional turmoil, of his great distress, it's an experience that I'm sure all of us can enter into, who can say that we have never felt this way.
As I heard one preacher say recently, if you can say that, you must be very young. But in all honesty, even when you're very young, there are distressing moments, aren't there?
The good thing is that some of them you completely forget about, or your parents might never forget about them, but you might do so. So, although, you know, there's no mention of the exact situation that caused this distress to the author of the psalm, the nature of the feelings, they're found easily enough.
[7:35] When you look at verse 1, when you look at verse 2, when you look at verse 3 together, the nature of these feelings, we can enter into them to some degree easily enough.

The writer is sinking, particularly under the weight of guilt and shame.
Guilt and shame. So, again, who among us can say that we've never felt this? I've never felt guilty. I've never felt shame. Perhaps there's someone here tonight.
I don't know. But really, you've never felt guilt. You've never experienced shame. Now, you see, it is true that this is something we could say our society has wrestled with for more than 100 years in order to be free of shame, in order to be free of guilt.
Because guilt, you know, it's reckoned to be tied to old-fashioned notions, primitive notions of right and wrong.
[8:44] But these are outdated. We know, don't we? We know. You know, this idea that there's right and there's wrong. Well, it's just far too simplistic. And so, for 100 years, we've wrestled with the shame and guilt that gets attached to outdated notions of right and wrong.

And, you know, we're freeing ourselves from this. We've developed a whole system of belief in what is right for you. Because that's why, you know, it's so outdated to say this is right, that's wrong. Because it's about what's right for you. And that's part of an attempt to dismantle any sense of real and actual guilt.
But interestingly, it hasn't really gone away. Guilt has not gone away. A sense or feeling of guilt has not really gone away.
And I think even more so, neither has a sense of shame. Now, some have even reckoned that, you know, where a person no longer thinks or feels they are guilty, because there's no real right or wrong.
[10:00] So, that helps to remove any sense of guilt. And you can reject anyone who's trying to make you feel guilty, because, you know, what do they know?

They don't understand. They don't know what you feel and experience. They don't know what are your deep and personal values and what you measure yourself against.
So, they've got no right and they've no need to try and make me feel guilty. So, you know, guilt probably is a feeling less felt and less widely spread than it perhaps was at one time.
And yet, if you no longer think or feel that you are guilty, have you completely shaken off a sense of shame?
Now, why do I say that? Well, generally, I suppose guilt refers to rules, refers to what is required, what is expected. And in some sense, having failed to live up to these rules and expectations, you may have then a degree of guilt.
[11:11] But shame, how does it differ from guilt? Well, perhaps in this way, that it's more to do with who you are and what you are.

And it's easier in our day, you see, it seems to change the rules, to change the expectations, to change the requirements so that you can lessen or perhaps even remove the guilt.

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But it's far harder to change who and what you are. And that even allows for some even more desperate and extreme attempts to change who and what you are.
You could say that we've ended up in a place where you're no longer guilty of anything. And yet, carrying still somehow an unexplained and unidentified sense of shame.
You end up in the worst of all worlds. You're guilty of nothing. And yet, if you carry a sense of shame, you cannot even give explanation to it.
[12:29] At least when you knew you were guilty of not meeting the requirements, you could make some sense of why you felt shame. And just a wee aside on that, I think we've moved, certainly been moving, but I think we have now moved into a time where new rules are making many guilty.

And the enforcement of shame can be pretty severe. So the idea that shame was that old-fashioned thing, and what a horrible thing that people were shamed.
Well, we've just changed rules or added new ones, and if you fall foul of them, oh, we still know how to shame such people.
What else is no-platforming, cancel culture, as well as a plethora of rules and laws that bring a chilling effect on open and honest debate, which increasingly has been identified as a real issue and a problem in a society like ours.
And that lack of willingness to simply say that you can live with disagreement. You can live without agreeing with everybody about everything.
[13:55] It is possible. And it's actually necessary. And you have to learn how to do that and do it well, rather than just shutting up and shaming those who don't agree with you.

So, look at Psalm 51. Look there at, I'm looking here at verse 5. It's a curious line, but it's very important there in Psalm 51.
It tells us, in fact, what is behind all our sins. Now, David, who's the author of Psalm 51, David is speaking about his mother.
Now, at first sight, and this is particularly true if you're reading from the NIV, so let me just read what the NIV says in verse 5. No, sorry, it's particularly true what the ESV, I'm getting muddled up, so I'll confess I usually use the NIV.
But the ESV, and it's not a criticism, the translation is actually, strictly speaking, more accurate in the ESV than the NIV. But it brings out what I'm saying here, that at first sight, you might think, David's not been very nice about his mum, is he?
[15:09] Because, as it says there in the ESV, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

You know, perhaps he's just maybe over-reflecting a bit on things, his current situation. Remember the heading, title, whatever you want to call it, to Psalm 51, he's maybe over-reflecting on the child that he and Bathsheba had, or were about to have.
But David isn't actually saying anything about his mother's behaviour when he says, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.
He's not saying anything about her behaviour. And of course, the NIV takes this up, and tries to explain it. That's why I say the ESV is actually more accurate. The NIV tries to explain it.
So the NIV reads, Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Which is a fair explanation of what the words mean.
[16:28] So David isn't, in fact, even saying anything about anyone's behaviour, even about his own behaviour, even, as I say, given the circumstances in which this Psalm 51 was written.

What he is saying is that, like every other human being, at his very conception in his mother's womb, he was sinful.
It is the nature that he, and all of us, are born with, sorry, conceived with. And the Bible, what does it tell us?
Well, it tells us that we can thank Adam for that. But not as an excuse, but rather as an accepting of the facts.
And that acceptance is absolutely necessary. The depths of Psalm 130, you see, are not only about feelings, they're also about facts.
[17:32] Now, one other thing about sin, before we move on, and it's to do with the potential that is in every one of us. You know, what do you think are the most horrific sins?

Well, probably we'd all agree that murder is, it's got to be up there if it's not murder's the top. Most horrific of sins, it's murder. In all its forms, murder.

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There's some things that might come close to that, but at the end of the day, taking another person's life, and especially, of course, doing so with no just cause whatsoever, that has to be the worst.
Well, what then of mass murder? Mass murder. After World War II, some of the leading Nazis were caught, and they were put on trial, as I think you know, at Nuremberg, and in fact, it's not just this weekend, a film called Nuremberg has just come out in our cinemas.
It focuses, I believe, on Hermann Göring, but I'm going to speak about Adolf Eichmann. Now, Eichmann actually escaped after World War II.
[18:44] He wasn't tried, he wasn't arrested, and he wasn't tried at Nuremberg. In fact, he wasn't tried until 1961 because the Israelis caught him and put him on trial in Jerusalem in 1961.

And a Jewish writer and author, and I think journalist as well, who was there at Eichmann's trial, she'd also been at the Nuremberg trials.
Her name was Hannah Arendt. So she was there to see the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem. And she spoke of, and used this phrase, the banality of evil.
In other words, just how ordinary one of the men, Adolf Eichmann, one of the men understood to be guilty of some of the worst evils in history. Just how ordinary he appeared sitting in that dock in Jerusalem.
He was not some extraordinary monster, but in some ways, of course, he was. But no, there he was, just an old man who looked no different from the elderly retired gentleman living next door to you.
[20:00] But she got in a lot of trouble. She took a lot of flack for the articles that she wrote and for her coining of this phrase, the banality of evil.

Took a lot of flack for that. But actually, Hannah Arendt had stumbled on a biblical truth. It's, of course, not the case that we all commit the same sins, but the capacity and the potential is there in us all.
Failure to accept, admit, and understand that is the extent to which you will fail to confess your sins. So, I can ask you, how seriously do you approach that moment of confession each time that you come together to worship?
How seriously do you take it? So, that's the depth. But remember, also, in the middle of Psalm 130, there is a life belt. A life belt is thrown and given.
We've been trying to get serious about what sin is because, after all, that part of confession in our worship, that's what we're confessing, sin. It's not just some leftovers, you know, from that traditional culture which always looks to guilt and shame people.
[21:30] You've heard of shame culture as well. You know, it's often spoken about some culture that's elsewhere, not mine, some other place in the world, perhaps, or some other part of the city, but we know all about shame culture as well.

But when we come to confess our sins in worship, it's not just leftovers from the tradition of the past. But even if we begin to see the seriousness of sin, it's still possible to not really confess it.
And that's a disaster. Why? Because you will remain in the depths of Psalm 130. See, confession, when allied to the law, talking about God's law, and redemption, which we'll come to in a moment, is part of the life belt that's been thrown to those who are sinking.
So, not confessing our sins is to do with being more concerned with the consequences of our sin than the sin itself.
Now, what do I mean by that? That not confessing sin is as a result of being more concerned about the consequences of our sin.
[22:51] So, we're not denying that there's sin. We're not even denying that we've sinned, but we're still not confessing our sin because we're concerned about the consequences, not the sin itself.

Think about your girlfriend. Think about your boyfriend, your husband, your wife. you have a tendency to ignore them on their birthdays, or actually don't even remember it as a birthday, or you always forget about Valentine's Day, but actually it's worse than that.
It's worse than that. We can all forget things. This was a personal confession at that point. We can all forget things. Birthdays, yes, we can do that. Anniversaries, yes, we can do that, but it's worse than that.

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You criticize small things you notice and you can't even keep your mouth shut. You criticize small things.
You even shout. At times, yeah, this needs some shouting, so you're frustrated and you shout. When there's a chance to do something nice together, you always find something else to do instead.
[24:08] you always go somewhere with your friends. There's work to do. There's always work to do. There's work to do in the house. There's something that the kids need help with.

do for a oh they just need someone to play with but you're not there you're just not there and then one day they are not there your boyfriend your girlfriend your husband your wife they are gone what do you do what do you do well you panic uh you might even break down in tears you try to find them you want to tell them that you're sorry look i'm sorry i'm sorry and and and you might feel bad you'd feel bad and you might feel bad you've been a bit of an idiot bit of a fool for treating them like this and hey do you know what they actually take you seriously and and they come back they come back and you try harder and for some weeks things do improve things seem to be getting better but then some more weeks some more months further on things are back to the same old you see you've not confessed your sin you've cried you've wept you've panicked you you felt bad you've not confessed your sin you've regretted the consequences of your sin they get they just left they walked out and you didn't want that of course you didn't want that you regret that the consequences of your sin and so when things went back to normal you went back to normal you see when we confess our sin we are sorry for the sin there's another curious line in psalm 51 it's i'm going backwards in the psalms so let's go back to verse 4 psalm 51 against you you only have i sinned and david of course is speaking to god against god against you god you only have i sinned but you know you know again remember the title to psalm 51 david had sinned against the whole load of people had he not and that's true david isn't actually denying it when he says against you you only have i sinned have i sinned but you see in order to fully freely and without simply a mere regret or actually even trying to shift the blame or at least some of it somewhere else in order to fully and freely confess his sin david acknowledges that every sin is firstly a sin against god now how can this help us how can it help us in confessing our sin because it shows us the sin that is underneath all our sin or sins now how's that well all sin stems from us putting something before god why do you always choose to go out with your friends instead of doing something nice with your wife or your husband is it because you know the company and approval of your friends is more important to you more important than your commitment and your promise to your spouse that's a tough question can you answer it honestly now ask yourself another question not so much when but why did you last lie to your boss in work or perhaps a customer who came in to work not asking when i'm asking why
you see you see you fear the consequences of telling the truth perhaps you might even have lost your job if you told the truth so what's happening you're putting fear and your job maybe it's also your reputation your career maybe even just simple need that i need to keep earning money you're putting it before god and in this sense in a situation like i've just mentioned against you you only have i sinned can you admit that can you bring that to god in prayer but of course confession alone is is is not the lifeline we need when we are sunk in the depths confession alone uh now we began this evening by by looking you know you said a few things uh about why why we live in a time where guilt and shame are seen as as well you know they're old-fashioned they're out moded although as i say i suspect they are making quite a vicious uh comeback uh although i think there might also be a kickback against that new shaming and new guilt that that is developed anyway that's you know you could spend another half an hour on that alone but you see confession you see we will never confess where we don't recognize guilt that surely is obvious and we will never be found innocent and without shame if there is no rescue so you know imagine being really honest admitting that you are a sinner and that you have sinned and you can get quite specific about how you have sinned and you you confess it and and you're not just saying you know and hopefully that'll put things right and so i won't suffer the full consequences of my sin but no you're just saying i'm sorry i sinned that and but then that's it you're just left with i've admitted it but that's it what about being put back in your innocence having your guilt removed losing the shame see that's rescue that's the life belt rescue and that's you see what redemption is about that's redemption tells us what has been done and what to do about it is where psalm 51 and 130 that's where they're both heading and it's necessary to show us why we need to confess but also to assure us that there is actually a solution to the real sins that we're really confessing there's progression in the psalms 51

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and 130 as there should be in our worship it's a good it's a good way then of remembering for instance that the law because i've just said you know we need to understand both law and redemption it's a good way of remembering that that law is not a dirty word in the bible that's sometimes the danger when we're talking of the gospel the good news we're talking of grace and law so grace is the nice word law is the dirty one no the bible never says that paul says in romans 7 verse 12 the law is holy and the commandment is holy which you might think yeah it's holy but you know sometimes holy actually yeah makes you withdraw a wee bit we've all met holy people haven't we you know oh yeah they're very holy but rather keep away from it the commandment is holy it's righteous yeah i've met some righteous people too i'm good it is holy righteous and good just in case you're in any doubt about whether the law really is righteous no not a dirty word holy righteous and good but use the law as your life belt as your rescue and you'll sink further into the depths it won't be a life belt you've been throwing it'll be a belt made of lead if the law is part of the life belt it's only because it can show us the only place where absolute rescue can be found and so that's where we finish tonight the rescue as you find it there in fact at the end of psalm 130 but it's at the end of psalm 51 too so we've been in the depths there's a life belt been thrown how is this rescue achieved well quite simply it's found in in in two words in both psalms uh unfailing love so i think it's first it's in verse one of psalm 51 and uh steadfast love is the yesb translation so there are seven of 130 verse one of psalm 51 steadfast love and that's the basis of these prayers these appeals in both psalms the basis of the prayer the basis of the appeal is steadfast love it's a term that appears time and time again in the the old testament to speak of god's love of the faithfulness of god the fact that he will not change he will not be moved but on the basis of his unchanging his consistent his covenant promise love there is assurance that that life belt will bring you up from the depths and set your feet on solid ground and that your sin confessed is forgiven so you see the the writer is recognizing you see that if there's to be any chance of repentance any chance of change and it can only be on the basis of the steadfast unfailing love that is expressed in the covenant promises god has made and what is that covenant it is of full redemption because in the end psalm 130 it is the lord himself who will redeem israel from all their sins that is hope you see hope in the lord hope in the lord it's not even hope in the the the genuineness of your confession it's not even hope in the genuineness of your repentance and change it's not hope in the fact that now i will not disobey i will obey but it's hope in the lord this is your true redeemer this is the price of your redemption it is the cross of christ so finally finally you must grab this life belt but look at how psalm 130 finishes it's a call to the whole community it's a call to the whole body
in other words we must grab the life belt together and that's why when we come together we confess and we receive assurance together this is also why we come together this is why we worship together this is why you don't want to miss worship together instead you want to do it regularly you want to do it persistently and you want to do it consistently amen

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