

(2) Guilt

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Preacher: Nat Charles

[0 : 00] Today's reading is Psalm 51 and it can be found on page 568 of the Church Bibles. Psalm 51 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. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

Purge 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 that you have broken rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

[1 : 18] Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God.

O God of my salvation and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice or I would give it.

You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure.

Build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings. Then bulls will be offered on your altar. Thanks, Andrea, for reading.

Well, good morning. My name is Nat Charles. I'm a member of the church family here at Grace Church Dulwich. And this morning we're continuing our Songs in the Night series, working through some of the psalms.

[2 : 25] This morning we're looking at Psalm 51 and thinking about the theme of guilt. There's an outline of this morning's talk on the reverse of your service sheet, so please do turn to that if you find it useful.

I guess for many non-Christian people, the theme of guilt would be an entirely unsurprising choice for a Sunday morning sermon.

One of the popular cultural misconceptions about Christianity is that it's a religion that's based upon, or at the very least induces in its followers, a form of guilt.

So the question before us this morning, as we look at Psalm 51, is should we feel guilty? My hope for this morning is that we will see that for the Christian believer, there is no place for guilt because of the merciful, compassionate character of God, and because of his work through the Lord Jesus and the cross of Calvary.

However, guilt is clearly running through Psalm 51, and verse 14 takes us right to the heart of it. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God.

[3 : 39] There's a very good reason that David, who wrote the psalm, is wrestling with guilt. Because David wrote Psalm 51 after the events of 2 Samuel 11 took place.

There's no need to turn to it now. But 2 Samuel 11 finds David at the high point of Israel and his kingship. The ark has been brought into Jerusalem, and Israel's enemies are gradually being subdued under David's leadership.

But the events of 2 Samuel 11 are disastrous. David commits adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, when Uriah is away with the army fighting Israel's enemies.

Bathsheba soon realises that she's pregnant by David, so David tries unsuccessfully to cover his sin. When he fails to do that, he orders that Uriah be placed at the front line of battle, where the fighting is fiercest, and that the troops be withdrawn from around him.

So David has Uriah murdered. It's against this background, then, of adultery and murder, that Psalm 51 begins to reveal the depth of human sin and the extent of God's forgiveness.

[4 : 55] We're going to start this morning just by looking at the problem of sin and ask why sin is such a problem. And as we do that, we'll see that sin is a problem because it is against God, because it is David's nature to sin, and sin incurs God's judgment.

So firstly then, the problem of sin, and sin is against God. I had the joy last week of spending some time babysitting my two-year-old nephew.

Mum was off having a morning of a luxury, so I and my brother and my nephew were having some boys' time. During lunch, my nephew decided very deliberately to lift up a glass of water and pour it all over the table that we were having lunch on.

The smile on his face as the water went everywhere was a sight to behold. His mum, who fortunately had rejoined us by then, moved him to another table until he was ready to apologise for getting us all absolutely soaking.

That moment of apology arrived, of course, with pudding. My nephew, in Psalm 51 terms then, had sinned against us.

[6 : 21] The list of people who David has sinned against through the sorry episode in his life is very extensive. He's sinned against Bathsheba in his adulterous relationship with her.

He has sinned against Uriah through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and through having him murdered. David has sinned against his own army as he has used it for his personal gain.

He's sinned against his own people as he has jeopardised the war that his army was fighting. The list of people that David has sinned against is long indeed. In which context, verse 4 is a real shock, isn't it?

That David would say to God, against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. David's guilt in Psalm 51 is not caused by how Bathsheba is feeling.

It's not caused by what his courtiers or army commanders are thinking of him. It's caused by the knowledge that he has sinned against God. Even though his treatment of others has been horrific, David is aware that his sin is serious because it is against God.

[7 : 32] Now let's not stand and play the significance of his sin in terms of how it affects others. But at its core, sin is against God. I guess very often, even within the church today, we think that sin is serious because of the consequences that it has on others.

We think that sin is bad because it affects our relationships with people we have sinned against and people who have sinned against us. and affects what others will think of us. In other words, we often think about sin in terms of the relational consequences that it has.

Yet for King David, although the relational consequences of his sin are absolutely enormous, he recognises that his sin is serious because primarily the length and breadth of his sin is directed against God.

And secondly, sin is not something that David can easily get rid of. Perhaps you've had conversations with non-Christian friends that have gone something along the lines of, if sins are a problem for you, why not just stop doing them?

Perhaps a non-Christian friend has said, if sin is that serious, why don't you just stop doing it? The problem, however, is that this attitude underestimates the true nature of sin.

[8 : 51] Sins aren't just the bad things that we do and regret, but David recognises that sin is his very nature. So, verse 5, Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

There has never been a time, laments David, when he has not been sinful. Not because he has never done anything good. By contrast, in God's grace, he has achieved some wonderful things for the Lord.

But sinfulness characterises his nature. Sin cuts deeper than we know, affecting our nature at its very core. And David's lament is thrown into greater relief, given, verse 6, what the Lord desires his heart to be.

You delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. There is a gulf between what the Lord desires in David and what David has just confessed, that from birth his nature is sin and not truth.

So, if sin were simply a matter of the bad things that we do, then we could conceivably just stop doing them and not sin anymore. But the problem is, sin is far more serious than that, as we cannot change our own nature however much we might want to.

[10 : 14] So, finally then, in our thinking about why sin is a problem, is God's reaction to our sin. And that sin is justly judged by God.

If, as we've suggested, sin is primarily directed against God, it comes as no surprise that God reacts against sin in judgment of it.

And his judgment is not an irrational, lashing act, but a just reaction to a people that have rejected him. So David recognises the justice of God's judgment against his sin in verse 4.

Against you, you only have our sins and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

I guess the idea of judgment is deeply unpopular today, even amongst some Christian circles. It's thought of by many to be outdated or perhaps even incompatible with the God of love that the Bible speaks of.

[11 : 17] In fact, for many people today, God is the one who must prove that he is really fair and just. When people ask questions about how God can be good or fair or loving in the face of natural disasters, international terrorism, armed conflicts, they are putting God in the dock and pronouncing judgment on him.

Yet the picture the Bible paints turns that understanding on its head. We are living in God's world and he is justified in judging our rejection of him. We are in the dock because of our sinful nature and God's judgment against sin is justified.

So the problem of sin. David's sin is serious because it is against God. It is his nature and it brings God's justified judgment.

Well, it's worth pausing there, I think, just for a moment to consider the effect that his sin has on David because the consequence of these things is that David feels overwhelmingly guilty because of his sin.

And it's the seriousness of David's sin that produces the heart-rending cry that this psalm is. So this psalm is a deeply heartfelt poem that captures the emotional and spiritual turbulence that sin causes.

[12 : 40] David's sin is no abstract concept but actions that are firmly rooted in the world. And when David realises the consequence of his adultery and murder, the consequence of his offence against God, his response is one of remorse, repentance and horror.

he longs to be washed and cleansed, verse 2. He desires to be purged of his sin, verse 7.

To have God's joy restored to him, verse 12. And these responses to sin are familiar to us, I think, because our sin is just as serious as David's.

Although none of us have committed the things that David did, the point remains that we have offended the same God and that any sin is primarily against him. It is precisely because sin is so serious that it causes such guilt, no matter how insignificant it may seem to us.

When our sin stands before us and we have that blinding moment of self-realisation that we are not the people that we think we are or the people that we would like to be, our response very often is one of longing that we could do something about our sin or deal with it in some way.

[14 : 10] Well, if Psalm 51 were a Hollywood blockbuster, this would be the pivotal moment of the plot where Tom Cruise or Bruce Willis, no matter how bloodied and battered they may be, no matter how beaten and how much suffering they have endured, would find that inner strength to fight their enemies and save the day.

Except that in Psalm 51 the hero who sorts out the problem isn't David. David doesn't find that inner strength to defeat the sin and guilt in his life but he trusts that God can.

See, above all, Psalm 51 is a psalm that is full of hope. it's not a sign of despair and it's not a sign of despair because David has confidence that his sin will be dealt with.

There are two reasons for his confidence, God's character and God's work and we'll think about those in turn. So firstly, David's confidence in God's character and it's worth just noting as we begin that it is God who deals with David's sin.

David doesn't deal with his own sin. He doesn't find that in a hero. He doesn't make up for his sin through intense religious ritual or good works but God deals with his sin and bearing in mind what we've said about sin this morning, it has to be that way round, doesn't it?

[15 : 43] You see, if David's sin is primarily against God and not himself or Bathsheba or Uriah or his people but against God, therefore it's no surprise that it must be God who deals with that sin.

That's just clear, isn't it? From verse one, have mercy on me, O God. Verse two, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity.

Verse seven, purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. And verse nine, hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquities.

David is pleading out with God to wash away his sin because God is the one who can deal with his sin. Secondly, David is confident in God's character because God is a saving God.

This emphasis in the psalm on God's work in David's life is reflective of God's dealing with his people ever since he has revealed himself to them. The God of the Old Testament is a saving rescuing God.

[16 : 55] Verse one points us towards the reason that David can be confident that deal with his sin. It's because it is the character of the covenant keeping God to be merciful and compassionate to his covenant breaking sinful people.

And this is just how he has revealed himself through his dealings with his people from Adam onwards. So just before God gave the law, for example, before he gives the Ten Commandments, God reveals himself to Moses as the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

David's hope is in the God who will have mercy according to his steadfast love, who will blot out his transgressions according to his abundant mercy.

David is hoping that God will act according to his character. David's hope through the psalm is in the God who does not treat David as his sins deserve, but provides a way to deal with David's sin and to remove his guilt.

David's hope is in this God, the God he has offended and sinned against, and the means that he has provided to deal with sin. So David is confident in God's character, and he is confident that God will deal with his sin as he is a God who will rescue his people.

[18 : 21] However, David's hope is not only in God's character, but in God's saving work. David is confident in the means that God has provided to deal with his sin, and the nature of that saving work is sacrifice.

So firstly, in confidence in God's work, sin is dealt with by sacrifice. As we've been saying this morning, sin is primarily against God, and as a just God, sin must be punished.

It is, of course, a good thing that God does punish sin. If nothing else, it demonstrates that he is just, that he is a God who loves good and hates evil.

It demonstrates that he is no corrupt judge or untrustworthy politician. Yet God does not punish his people for their sin, which they deserve, but he provides a sacrifice on their behalf.

And David's lament in Psalm 51 is suffused with this language of sacrifice, particularly the language of ritual cleansing in verses 2 and 7.

[19 : 36] So verse 2, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Verse 7, purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

The sacrificial system in the Old Testament was a means of demonstrating that sin was serious and serious enough to be punished by death, but that God would lay that punishment on another so that the offender may go free.

So in the Old Testament particular animals were prescribed by God as a suitable sacrifice for sin. The punishment for sin was not paid by the sinner but by a substitute.

So God's justice would be maintained, sin has been punished. But God's mercy, overflowing to the sinner, would be demonstrated as he does not punish the sinner or treat him as his sins deserve.

So David's confidence in God's work is that his sin has been dealt with by sacrifice. But David would also be confident that his sin has only been, has been punished, punished sufficiently by that sacrifice.

[20 : 57] You may find this hard to believe today, but as a small child, I had a rather mischievous, cheeky streak. And the unfortunate recipient of the larger part of my mischief-making was my younger brother.

One of the more regrettable incidents between us involved a bucket of water being precariously balanced on the top of an outside door, and a good half hour endeavouring to make my brother walk through that door.

When the joke finally worked, and my mother found out, she was absolutely furious. One of the few times that I've actually been genuinely scared of her. Needless to say, the appropriate punishment was dished out, and I've never played that prank again.

But the amazing thing was, after I had been punished for being unspeakably mean to my brother, my relationship with my mother and brother was restored. I was not going to be punished for that prank again.

And I take it that one of the great encouragements of the sacrificial system prescribed by God is that the sinner would see that his sin has been punished and dealt with.

[22 : 15] You see, if God were just to ignore sin, to sweep it under the carpet, there would be no assurance for the sinner that his sin has been dealt with, and his relationship with God restored.

Could God still decide to punish sin later? Was the sinner really forgiven if the sin was still there, bulging underneath the carpet? But the great encouragement for David, as he looks at the sacrifice that has been made for his sin, is that he knows his sin has been fully dealt with, and that once the punishment has been paid, it would not have to be faced again.

And it's worth saying at this point, that God's expectation of his people is genuine repentance and trust in his character and work. Verses 16 and 17 looks slightly odd, don't they, in view of all that I've been saying about sacrifice, that David would say in verses 16 and 17.

You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. O God, you will not despise.

These verses are a reminder to us that God is not like some sort of cosmic slot machine, that you put in the right sacrifice and out comes the desired results, in this case forgiveness.

[23 : 44] No, none of that. God is a loving father who has taken it upon himself to deal with his rebellious children. And David recognises that sin cannot be taken lightly, and God's provision for dealing with sin cannot be made into a merely superficial ritual.

We can't presume upon God on the basis of sacrifice. Rather, sacrifice must be accompanied by genuine contrition and repentance. The only way that David can come to God is as a humble sinner, thankful for God's saving work, the sacrifice paid on his behalf, and trusting in that work rather than his own righteousness or merit.

So David's confidence is in the character of the God who saves, and in God's provision of a means to deal with sin. David is confident in God's saving character and his saving work.

And just as we pause to note David's response to the sin in his life, it's worth looking at David's response to God's saving character and work. And it's worth noting that David's hope and his confidence results in praise and adoration.

So the assurance that David has, the confidence that he has, results in praise and thanks that is as heartfelt as his longing to be rid of sin. And verses 15 to 19 are full of the language of celebration, of praise and worship.

[25 : 17] And the difference between the David of verses 1 to 6 and the David of verses 15 to 19 is God's saving work in David's life. And what a difference that is.

The downhearted, mournful, despairing sinner at the start of the psalm becomes the joyful, singing, delighted, saved sinner at the end of the psalm.

And what's brought about that change? The reminder that God is a rescuing, saving God who has fully dealt with sin. And finally, this morning, God has dealt with our sin.

As we finish, let's remind ourselves that God has fully dealt with our sin. just as David had confidence and assurance in God's character and saving work, how much more assurance do we have as we look back to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and see there sin fully dealt with once and for all?

the system of sacrifice that God provided for his people in the Old Testament was not the way in which God would finally and ultimately deal with sin.

[26 : 42] It was instituted to remind his people of their need to have their sin dealt with and to remind his people that God would deal with sin and that he would deal with it ultimately and finally through the Lord Jesus.

It sounds obvious, doesn't it? But an animal could never adequately represent a human, could never stand for a man. The writers of the Hebrews puts it like this, in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin every year, for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

And again, for if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of heifers sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

God has provided the perfect sacrifice for sin. He offered up the Lord Jesus as the once for all acceptable sacrifice for our sins.

So that's our relationship with God would be restored and so that we would know that our sins have been punished and have been dealt with if we genuinely and with heartfelt contrition trust in that saving work.

[28 : 12] And what confidence we can have in that sacrifice made by the Lord Jesus. Knowing that the judgment against our sin has been faced by him, knowing that through his death our sin has been paid for and the sentence carried out.

What assurance we have knowing that if we have genuinely repented of our sin and believe the gospel there is nothing held against us, that we are not treated as our sins deserve. There is great confidence for every Christian in the knowledge of the death of the Lord Jesus because we have seen that in him God has punished our sin, he would be unjust to punish it again.

So we return then to our central question this morning, should Christians feel guilty over their sin?

Well the answer is a resounding no, because we have seen objectively that the work of our great high priest has freed us from God's judgment and cleansed us.

If our trust is in God's character and his saving work, then our sin has been punished. So where we are feeling weighed down by guilt over our sin, let's remind ourselves of God's saving work and his saving character and say with the Apostle Paul that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

[29 : 42] Why don't we pray together? Heavenly Father, we do thank you for the sacrifice made by the Lord Jesus. we do thank you that in him you have punished our sin and restored our relationship with you.

Thank you for the assurance that that gives us, that our sin has been dealt with and that we do not have to face punishment for it again. Father, help us to encourage one another to remind each other of the wonderful sacrifice made by the Lord Jesus and live with confidence that we do not need to feel guilt for sin now that that sacrifice has been made.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.