

Finding true joy

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Preacher: Richard Hagen

[0 : 00] Psalm 51. To the choir master, a psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him after he had gone into Bathsheba. 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 you. 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.

[1 : 13] 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.

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 the 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 you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings.

[2 : 19] Then bulls will be offered on your altar. Well, as someone has said, if you don't think that the Christian message is the best news in the world, it shows that there's something you haven't understood.

Because that word, as you know, gospel, means good news. But perhaps it doesn't always feel like good news. And my hope and prayer has been that by the end of this morning, we will find that real and broken-hearted joy that David had, as we see in Psalm 51.

This wonderful good news that we treasure in the gospel, yet quite often we don't really enjoy. You will remember the author of Psalm 51 was King David, as it says in the superscription there.

The italics right at the start in the capitals there give us the history behind it. But let's just turn to 2 Samuel 11 just to remember all that happened there.

You remember in 2 Samuel 11 on page 314 in the Bibles in the barn here.

[3 : 34] There was David looking out on Bathsheba. He liked the look of her. And then it ended up in a one-night stand, verse 5. And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, I am pregnant.

So what he did, verse 15, was to put Uriah in the forefront of the battlefield so that it would kill him off. And it worked.

The cover-up seemed to work perfectly.

All was well until the prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin. And if you go on to chapter 12, verse 7, just over the page there, Nathan said famously to David, chapter 12, verse 7, You are the man.

Telling him a story, kind of getting him into seeing the wrongness of a situation and then finally points the finger on David. You struck down Uriah, verse 9.

[4 : 44] And David says in verse 13, I have sinned against the Lord. But here's the shock. Chapter 12, verse 13 says, In Nathan's response, The Lord also has put away your sin.

You shall not die. The Lord has put away your sin. How can that be? Well, Psalm 51 is an expansion of exactly that.

How is it that the Lord has put away David's sin? Having committed adultery and murder. Well, Psalm 51 goes more slowly, helping us understand what was going on.

So turning back to Psalm 51, there are three things that strike us with real force. David's total ownership of his sin. David's total confidence in God's forgiveness.

David's total expectation of real joy. So first we see David's total ownership of sin. So you'll remember from that narrative there, for a while David successfully covered up his sin.

[6 : 00] But after the word of God broke down that deceit, he had nowhere to hide. Now in our society, we can be very slow to accept responsibility for wrong, can't we?

It wasn't my fault. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She made me do it. I blame my parents. The kids. The dog.

Well, it's not just a 21st century problem, is it? That first human pair began the blame game. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. The serpent didn't have a leg to stand on.

I don't know if you've heard the story about the Times newspaper sending an inquiry to famous authors asking the question, What's wrong with the world today? G.K. Chesterton responded simply, Dear sir, I am.

Yours, G.K. Chesterton. More recently, the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, said this, Often people today don't want forgiveness, but a declaration of innocence.

[7 : 05] They want everything they do to be condoned. God has never offered that fake kind of mercy. God's mercy always involves the recognition of our wrongdoing, and then its forgiveness.

Before we can experience real joy, we need to experience real forgiveness. Before we experience real forgiveness, we need to realise our own sin.

And David totally owns his sin. And we see it in five ways in this psalm. He gets personal. Verse 3, I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.

Do you do that with your sin? Think about the past week. Whatever the Holy Spirit touches upon right now. What sin do you need to own as yours?

David gets personal. Secondly, he knows who he's offended. You see verse 4? Against you. Against you. You only have I sinned.

[8 : 30] Yes, often sins are against others. But every sin is against God. Do you see that? The great offence of your sin is not so much the harm it causes other people, but the great offence it is against our holy creator and judge.

David gets personal. He knows who he's offended. Thirdly, he doesn't defend himself. Verse 4 again.

So that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. He says to the Lord, you're right. There's no defence I can put up.

No special pleadings. If God had struck David down and cast him into hell, God would be right and justified. Do you see that God would be right to do the same with you and me?

He would be innocent and fair to strike us dead and cast us into hell? He doesn't defend himself. Fourthly, he sees that he acted entirely in character in that adultery and murder.

[9 : 45] Verse 5. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin. Did my mother conceive me? We inherit a sinful nature from the moment we exist.

From the moment we are conceived in the womb. From the moment we are born. Rousseau is wrong when he says that children are not born good.

They're corrupted by society. Children are born in sin and grow up to live a life of sin. I love that there was a Times newspaper article a few years ago. And the heading was, children can lie as soon as they talk.

I think, really? It was earlier than that with our children. We've got four children. And, you know, before they even talk, they're up in the high chair. And there's a splodge of food on the floor.

And then you ask the little one. They can't even talk. They say, right, did you drop the food on the floor? They understand exactly what you're saying. And they go, and you just see them do it.

[10 : 52] They can lie before they can talk. But that's the great challenge, isn't it, of parenting. And of living in this world, we're all sinners. From the moment of our conception.

That's what David saw about himself. You see, sexual sin wasn't the problem. Chronic, lifelong sin was the problem. There hadn't been a day of existence when he hadn't sinned.

One day it was adultery. Another day it was lies. Another day it was murder. The symptoms might be different in each of us. But the disease is the same. For some of us, we're persistent grumblers. If we're more of a sunny disposition, we might think, well, look at me. I'm not. But then what's your problem? Is it pride or deceit or addiction? Or selfishness or theft or lies or arrogance or drunkenness?

All these things aren't out of character for any of us. Our problem is lifelong and deep-rooted, as David saw here. When we hear of David's story, we should be thinking, it could have been me.

[12:04] John Bradford, the 16th century English preacher, saw criminals being executed and he said famously, there but for the grace of God goes John Bradford.

In other words, see that criminal? That could have been me. There's no room for pride or self-righteousness, is there?

And as Christians, we're to be unshockable in this world, knowing the truth about human nature. We're to be compassionate as we hear of someone else's sin in the media or in the church, thinking it could have been me.

And I'm alongside you with the same problem. Fifthly, he saw that he'd sinned against the light and the ESV has apparently got it better than the NIV, which we use in our church.

And verse 6 says, In other words, God had taught David things.

[13:12] David knew the right thing, but he'd sinned against the light. You see, the great problem in the world isn't lack of education. It isn't even lack of moral instruction.

It's sin. David had had moral instruction, good education, but he still sinned. David owned his sin totally.

Do you own yours? No ifs? No buts? No squirming? Because if you do, there is really good news for you as we go through this psalm.

But it's good just to press the pause button and think about how this should affect what we do in our church life together. I do hope you keep having a confession in church.

Church is pretty much the only place there will be something like that in our society now. A weekly admission of our wrongdoing and our culpability before God.

[14:17] And is that the attitude that we have as we come as beggars who have found bread in Jesus Christ to church?

It transforms relationships when we think this way. There was somebody a few months ago who we interviewed in church and he was very open about his porn addiction.

His openness and willingness to be sharing something so personal as that has opened up all kinds of other conversations among people in church.

It's good just to, with wisdom and sensitivity, to share the fact that we are sinners. And then the person next to us might say, oh, that's me as well.

We should bear one another's burdens with wisdom and not always be totally open. But sometimes some of us aren't open enough, recognizing that we're just sinners saved by grace.

[15:21] So first we've seen David's total ownership of his sin. Secondly, David's total confidence in God's forgiveness. Now, think about the backdrop to this psalm.

It is shocking, isn't it? Here is a murderer and a rapist, probably, and an adulterer expecting God to overlook all that.

Well, as we saw before, after David confessed his sin, the very first thing he heard from Nathan, God's mouthpiece, the prophet, were these words, the Lord has taken away your sin.

It's mind-blowing. Henry Garek was a U.S. Army chaplain in the Second World War. After he died, he found a thick wadge, his son found a thick wadge of letters stored in a secret compartment in his desk.

These letters called his dad a Jew hater, a Nazi lover. They said he should have been hanged at Nuremberg. Why? Because he was chaplain to the high-ranking officers at the Nuremberg trials.

[16:31] One by one, he visited these men in the prison and offered them forgiveness in Christ's name. Talk to friends around us and we'll soon discover they'll think some sins are unforgivable.

The less we are into recognising that we're all sinners in society, the more judgmental we become. My wife, Corinne, was doing Christian Explored with a couple of ladies recently.

The week they really struggled with was the week on grace. It was a scandal to them. That God should be willing to forgive people like rapists and paedophiles and murderers.

But here is a psalm confident in the mercy of God. This is the way it begins. Have mercy on me, O God.

According to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. But I find verses 7 and 8 just deeply moving and striking.

[17:37] Almost kind of cheeky, if you like. Verse 7 and 8. Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Remember that famous hand-washing scene in Macbeth? Macbeth and Lady Macbeth murdered people with daggers, blood on their hands.

It used to wash off the blood, but it wasn't washed away, was it? She goes mad as the guilt of her sin crushes her. And Lady Macbeth famously says, What, will these hands never be clean?

Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. It's a very powerful part of it.

You can tell I'm not an actor. It's a really powerful part of Macbeth, isn't it? You know, the guilt is there, but this excessive hand-washing is not doing it. There is no forgiveness for her.

[18:39] And here's King David saying, So how can David come so confidently before God? Well, that word hyssop in verse 7 gives us the answer.

Probably referring to the plant used at Passover. Remember where the lamb would be sacrificed. The blood collected underneath would show that a death had occurred.

So as it was painted on the doorframe of the house, showing that the death penalty for sin had been paid by another, the angel of death would pass over. Exodus 12, 30.

Not a house without someone dead. Either the death of the firstborn son, or the death of the lamb as a substitute. Probably in David's mind is the Passover.

And there he is totally confident that God's provision of a substitute sacrifice would be enough for his cleansing, to such an extent that he would be whiter than snow.

[19:47] I love the calm when the snow falls over a filthy street or a grotty backyard. And that is the beautiful image of somebody who is washed and cleansed by God.

There's nothing more corrupt, is there, than someone who turns a blind eye at wrongdoing. But that's not God. He pays for our sin at his own expense, so that we can be cleansed and whiter than snow.

1 Corinthians 5, 7. Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. So we're even better off than David, knowing that Jesus has died, as I discovered as a teenager, paying the ultimate and once-for-all sacrifice for a lifetime of sin.

But the question is, do we really believe that? What confidence do we have in God? I mean, we should have greater confidence than David, shouldn't we?

Knowing that Jesus has come, that this psalm points towards. But so often, as we are confronted by our sin, we run away from God. But knowing God in the richness of his mercy and his steadfast love and the forgiveness that he offers, we should be running to him, shouldn't we?

[21:15] The great missionary Hudson Taylor famously said, there is a living God. He's spoken in the Bible. He means what he says. And he will do all he has promised.

Do we really believe that God means what he says when he says we shall be clean, when we shall be whiter than snow?

As time goes on as a Christian, we just pile up more sins, don't we? We look back with deeper regret as the years go on and there are more and more sins that we pile up.

Maybe you're someone who needs to hear verse 14. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation.

Is there something that you just haven't let go of when God has? That blood guilt of, you know you've done that thing wrong and it's a skeleton in the cupboard and it plagues your mind.

[22:22] Be assured in this psalm that God means what he says. If you come to him, you are washed whiter than snow. He means it.

Von Ribbentrop was Hitler's foreign minister and after hearing the gospel from this US Army chaplain, Henry Goerregg, this is what happened.

Not long before, Herman Goering, the head of the Air Force, took a suicide pill. He wasn't interested in the gospel. But this is what happened to Ribbentrop.

He was condemned to death by hanging. He was marched to the first of the three scaffolds. He climbed the 13 steps to the trap door. The impassive soldiers and press representatives looked on.

A guard tied his legs. An American officer asked for his last words and in Goerregg's hearing, Ribbentrop responded, I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. [23 : 26] May God have mercy on my soul. Extraordinary, isn't it? To be such a high-ranking Nazi with blood on his hands, yet having total confidence that the Lamb has made atonement for his sins.

And he turned to Goerregg, this US Army chaplain, and his very last words were, I'll see you again. The black hood was pulled over his face, the 13-coil noose was put round his neck, and he dropped through the trap door.

That is the wonder and astonishing grace of God, isn't it? But do you have that same confidence in God as David?

And as von Ribbentrop and billions others? Have you stopped doing the hand-washing and taken God at his word?

So we've seen first David's total ownership of his sin, secondly, David's total confidence in God's forgiveness, and thirdly, David's total expectation of real joy.

[24 : 46] Now, don't put me to test on this. I've been trying to memorise this psalm, and I'm really slow at memorising things, and I haven't got there yet, so maybe another year you can ask me, and I've got there.

But as I've been trying to memorise this psalm, one of the things that really has struck me about it is how much it says about joy and gladness. And it's even more striking when you know that it's David who has written this psalm.

Have a look at verse 8. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Doesn't that sound presumptuous?

With somebody with his kind of background, surely he shouldn't be asking for joy and gladness. That's just cheeky. But he says it in verse 12.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation. He says it in verse 14. My tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

[25 : 53] He says it in verse 15. Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. Well, it's not a superficial joy as if he hasn't done these terrible things.

It is a broken-hearted joy, is it not? Verse 17. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

But being broken and contrite is not against being joyful. You can be both at the same time. So we shouldn't think, well, I'm be broken and contrite and being like that.

But no, we can be broken and contrite and joyful in the forgiveness and grace of God. Jonathan Edwards, in his book on religious affections, not the triple jumper, the theologian guy from America, he says this.

All gracious affections, that's feelings or emotions, that are a sweet aroma to Christ, are broken-hearted affections. A truly Christian love, either to God or men, is a humble, broken-hearted love.

[27 : 11] The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires. Their hope is a humble hope, and their joy, even when it is unspeakable and full of glory, is a humble, broken-hearted joy.

So church is a place to own our sin and not hide it. But church is a place to come confidently to God, who is rich in mercy.

Church is a place to show broken-hearted joy as we gather together and treasure that God means what he says and he does what he's promised in making us whiter than snow.

We need to be echoing these words of David, don't we? That we might honour God and show that the gospel is good news among our families and friends.

asking that God would do, verse 12, restore to me the joy of your salvation. Verse 14, deliver me and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

[28 : 20] Verse 15, open my mouth that I might declare you. Open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. Because so often, and it comes and goes, it's a constant fight for this broken-hearted joy.

You might feel we've got halfway there and then something happens and it's gone. But every day we need to show those dogged daily disciplines in seeing these stages we should go through to get to this point of broken-hearted joy.

Because if we're not praising God, then there's a blockage somewhere, isn't there? And where is the blockage with you? Is it because you haven't realised so much recently that you're a sinner? Is it that you haven't really owned your sin like David does in this psalm? Or maybe for some it's, you're conscious that you're a sinner.

There's no question of that. But you just don't really take God at his word at what he says here in these beautiful pictures of cleansing and washing and whiteness.

[29 : 37] There's the blockage there. You just need to say, dear God, you mean what you say when you speak in the Bible and I just want to take you at your word.

Give me the joy I long for. And today, as you kind of break out into groups and talk among friends, ask that God would help you with those blockages, that you would really own your sin.

Sometimes it's good to share it with others. Other times it's just good to share it with the Lord. But that you'd really take God at his word on this business of forgiveness and that you'd ask him to open your lips, that you might declare his praise.

Christians have always been a singing people, people broadcasting good news. But so often we can be a bit glum because the blockages are there.

I was reading on the BBC website the fatberg that you Londoners have kind of put together. And it's an extraordinary length of the fatberg in the sewers, isn't it?

[30 : 48] Now that is a blockage that takes a big bit of clearing. It may be a small blockage. It may be a big blockage. But just work out what the blockage is for you as a Christian to get to that point of broken-hearted joy, which is where God wants us all to be.

I'm going to pause there. I'm going to lead us in prayer and then hand over to Simon for whatever happens next. Heavenly Father, we praise you for the wonder of this psalm.

We praise you that you are merciful, that you show steadfast love and abundant mercy and have demonstrated that most clearly in the Lord Jesus Christ, that Passover Lamb who has made the sacrifice for all our sins.

We pray that you would give us help now to own our sin, to take your word in the expectation of forgiveness and that you would open our lips that we might declare your praise with broken-hearted joy.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.