

Great Prayers of the Bible - Psalm 51

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[0 : 00] Let's pray again before we sit. Father, we thank you for giving us your scriptures. May your spirit open our hearts and minds this morning that we might learn more about how to pray from this great psalm of David.

In Jesus' name, amen. If you like gritty modern television drama, then 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12 has all the hallmarks of the most lurid soap opera imaginable.

The lust and greed of a powerful man, illicit sex, unwanted pregnancy, abject betrayal of the good guy, his eventual murder, and a massive cover-up involving the top brass in the army.

Unfortunately, nothing seems to have changed on that front for 3,000 years. It even has that dramatic reveal-all moment when the wicked deeds of the villain are made public.

Now that I've got your attention, if you don't know, it's the account of the machinations of King David, the desirable Bathsheba, her husband Uriah the Hittite, and Nathan the prophet.

[1 : 26] I want to cover the story very quickly, however, because it's not our main point for today. It's really only the context for consideration of one of the great prayers in the Bible, as Andrew said, Psalm 51, which we read a short while ago, and which we know, if you read the intro, says, when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

We seldom get such a direct point of reference. But in our story today, King David is lounging around on the roof of his palace instead of being away at battle with the enemies of Israel.

He spies the beautiful Bathsheba and immediately he desires her. Either by temptation or coercion, he has his way with her, satisfying his lust.

The story doesn't end there, however. Adultery seldom does. Bathsheba falls pregnant and David doesn't need public scandal, especially since Uriah is one of his top soldiers.

Elsewhere, he's called one of David's mighty men of valor. So David and his counselors hatch a crafty plan, bring Uriah home from the front and get him to sleep with his wife.

[2 : 52] Hey, presto, problem solved. Especially as there are no paternity tests in 1000 BC to worry about. Unfortunately, Honorable Uriah isn't playing ball.

No conjugal visits for him while his men are roughing it in some Judean field. So David is in a bind. And plan B is far more nefarious.

If you can't circumvent the scandal, then you eliminate the obstacle, it seems. Sadly, David instructs his general to ensure that Uriah lands up in the most dangerous part of the battle and is duly killed.

David is now free to marry the available Bathsheba. I can imagine the spin doctors of Israel making a great show of this grateful king taking on the widow of the lost hero, Uriah the Hittite.

David's got away with heinous crime. Or so it seems. But God has other ideas. And enter Nathan the prophet.

[4 : 05] The king is holding court and Nathan approaches to tell a story of great injustice. David is incensed by what he hears and he declares, the culprit must be punished.

And then comes that awful truth, that awful moment. David himself is the perpetrator of this evil and injustice.

And as we will see shortly from Psalm 51, it is evident that David has been struggling with the weight of enormous guilt and shame. He breaks down and admits his perfidy.

And the whole dreadful story is finally encapsulated in this simple statement in 2 Samuel 11 verse 27, which is pivotal to our study today.

David displeased the Lord. So, as we continue in this series on prayer, learning how to pray more effectively and discovering what God requires of us as we come to him, let's look in detail at this great penitential psalm, one of eight so-called in the Psalms.

[5 : 22] And keep your Bibles open as we particularly focused on the role of prayer in seeking to answer the question, what should a believer do when he or she displeases the Lord?

This prayer in Psalm 51 gives us a perfect framework for dealing with our besetting sin. As we understand that we can never make good for our sin, when we cannot live one moment longer pretending that it didn't happen or it doesn't matter, knowing that what we are and what we have done has left us far from God.

And you need to remember as you listen today, before you switch off thinking, you're not like David, David's sin was not exceptional and neither is yours.

So let's look then at verses one and two and we find there the first stage for our model for penitential prayer.

Appeal to God's grace as your only alternative. David had a real problem. There are no sacrifices under Mosaic law for murder or adultery.

[6 : 48] He had no choice but to fall upon the mercy of God. And in the psalm, three times he cries, he begs for mercy.

He knows God and he knows his scriptures too. From Exodus 34 verses 6 and 7 he would have learned the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting iniquity on the fathers of the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generations.

This is our God and this describes his character too. As Jimmy taught us last week in his sermon on Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah, knowing God's character is essential to effective prayer.

Just as it was for intercession, so it is equally true for penitence. And if we belong to him, then we know that love and grace are at the heart of all his actions, even judgment.

This is particularly important when examining a passage like Psalm 51. It demonstrates that true contrition is not merely an expression of human remorse or a preoccupation with our own failure.

[8 : 29] The truly penitent always looks beyond themselves to the God of the universe and counts on the possibilities of outrageous, outrageous grace.

David's conscience had been awakened by God's word, in this case delivered by Nathan, and so he pours out his heart to God in his misery and shame and in his guilt and fear.

he knows. He knows that without the possibility of returning to God's favor, he is lost without a hope in this world.

All that David can do is remind God of his character that he is chesed, as Andrew has taught us so many times, grace and mercy.

And this is the right first move for dealing with sin. We should be reminded of another penitent we find in the Gospels, that tax collector in the temple whose prayer Jesus tells us was also acceptable because unlike the haughty and self-righteous Pharisee, this man came to God with a broken heart and hanging head with tears in his eyes and on bent knee.

- [9 : 58] our posture and our demeanor before God is always important, but never more so than when we come to confess and repent because we know we have displeased the one to whom we owe everything.

the second stage of the true penitential prayer can be found in verses 3 to 6 and that is to acknowledge your sin in all its dreadfulness.

Having come to God, thrown yourself in God's mercy, acknowledge what your sin really is. True repentance must include a realization of the seriousness of sin.

As the example of Judas teaches us, shame and regret are not the same as forsaking sin. David was the model of a good king, right through scripture that is evident.

Yet, even this good man, instead of immediate confession coupled with repentance, descends into a downward spiral of sin compounding sin, until he can bear it no more.

- [11 : 17] Verse 3 says, For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. David's sin is unavoidable. It's hurting him.

And we need to remind ourselves of this before we succumb to temptation too. That sin brings misery and guilt overwhelms our senses, especially for the believer.

Because, and this is the great assurance, we have a God who doesn't leave us alone. Stubborn resistance to conviction often results in God's heavy hand.

In the case of David, he waited nine months before he did anything. Until, full of shame, we cannot rest till we are put right with God and our fellow man.

Another Psalm 32 in verses 3 and 4 tells us, For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

- [12 : 23] For day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. The nightmare will not end until you repent.

In those quieter moments, you know that God will not leave you alone. Deep conviction is more than the cognitive.

It is something heartfelt, experiential in your gut. You remember what it feels like when you displeased your mum, let alone what the pain is of displeasing God.

This is the cornerstone of conviction, but it is also the mark of the true believer. The work of the Holy Spirit reminding us of our obligations before a holy God.

In conviction, David does not attempt to play down the awfulness of his actions and the seriousness of his sin. This part of the process is only about David.

- [13 : 29] No running away, no shifting blame, not calling it weakness, nor rationalizing it. Everyone's doing it so it can't be that bad.

And it must only be about you too as you deal with your sin. Against you, you only have I sinned.

David's not denying here that any number of people have been deeply affected by his evil deeds. However, the seriousness of his sin is that he despised almighty God first and foremost.

And this is what makes sin sin. The height of all my sin is this. My sinning is done in the full sight of God too.

But David goes even further in verse 5. I was brought forth in iniquity, he says. He's acknowledging how desperate the situation really is.

[14 : 36] Because it is not only that we sin, but that we are sinful. We are inwardly corrupt from our very conception.

There's no suggestion of illegitimacy of David's birth because of some deceit on his mother's part when he says in sin did my mother conceive me.

Rather he is exclaiming that we are debased from our very beginnings. We are a product of the fall of Genesis 3.

Verse 6 tells us that we have departed from those divine truths which have been revealed to us which we have already learned.

Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb. You taught me wisdom in that secret place. So we can't claim any extenuating circumstance.

[15 : 50] He taught us already. Nor can we consider that God is acting unjustly when he judges and disciplines us. Hard as it can be to realize this while you are in the midst of conviction, but verse 6 reveals that penitence is also a place of blessing.

There is a fantastic sense in that verse that David is already feeling the embrace of mercy on a heart being put right with God.

Step down that path of true repentance with trepidation as you may, but you will quickly find that our loving God has been waiting to meet with you all along.

So knowing that God is ready and waiting, we can proceed to the next stage in our model for penitential prayer in verses 7 to 9.

And that stage is to plead, to plead for cleansing. In 2 Samuel 12, there is an outrageous statement after Nathan rebuked David.

[17 : 05] In verse 13, he ends with the Lord also has put away your sin. Think about it.

Uriah betrayed and murdered, Bathsheba possibly raped, the whole system corrupted in David's cover-up, yet God is willing to pass over all of these.

Why? Well, we know the answer and it is found in Romans 3, 25 and 26. Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation and atoning sacrifice by his blood to be received by faith.

This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

That's fantastic when you think about it. I quoted from Psalm 32 earlier and it too had a happy outcome to that account of God's heavy hand.

[18 : 27] The very next verse in verse 5, the psalmist confessed and God forgave the iniquity of his sin. Likewise in today's New Testament reading in 1 John 1 in verses 8 and 9 we heard if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves however if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all our unrighteousness having acknowledged the foulness of sin and our sinfulness we are now ready to ask for cleansing the hymn writer Augustus Toplady articulated it perfectly when he wrote foul eye to the fountain fly wash me savior or I die in verse seven

David wants to be purged with hyssop well hyssop was used by the priests to declare a diseased house clean once more and in seven through nine we find David begging for cleansing so that he can take his rightful place among God's people again for the release from that heavy weight of conviction to be pure again remember in ancient times cleaning garments was no easy process so David has no expectation you know of a light spin in the washing machine here cleansing is cleansing something that's going to be tough to remove that which disqualifies to be released from the penalties of sin remember for a Jew to be unclean was a terrible place he needs cleansing to blot out all evidence of his rebellion against

God and last but not least to feel joy again he doesn't want just to know legal acceptance but to feel free from the pain of sin in essence David begs for undeserved mercy that God might completely forget his sin forget it ever happened what a gracious God we serve however David is not content to simply be put back legally and experientially even into a right standing with God he knows that there has to be change if he's to avoid falling back into sin and possible apostasy and so the fourth stage in verses 10 to 17 is to be transformed

David's acutely aware of his need for renewal so he makes a number of petitions a number of requests and promises to God so that he can secure complete restoration with him in verse 10 David asked God to help him move on from sin and guilt to be renewed with a clean heart and to have a right a steadfast spirit purity and perseverance these are two marks of the true believer purity a clean heart perseverance a steadfast spirit in verse 11 do not cast me from your presence or take your holy spirit from me David's acknowledging that the only way for his petitions of verse 10 to be granted is through the work of the holy spirit the taking away of the holy spirit is no idle concern for

David bear in mind he has first hand experience first hand knowledge of God removing his spirit from king Saul this is something that rightfully terrifies David you see it's the sign of apostasy without the holy spirit abiding with us we cannot persevere David had enjoyed intimate fellowship with his God and so he despairs at possibly losing this forever right now you're asking can a believer lose the holy spirit is this a fear that you can attest to we hold to the perseverance of the saints so that when those who truly belong to Christ sin we believe that they will respond to the spirit's conviction and repent and turn those however who give only intellectual assent to the truth of the gospel and who show no genuine remorse when displeasing

[24 : 06] God they show themselves to be apostate when they do not repent they don't truly belong among those to whom Christ will say one day come you blessed of my father inherit the kingdom prepared for you in verse 12 David prays to be restored to the joy of divine salvation and to be upheld with a willing spirit what he's wanting is to experience again that assurance that comes with perseverance but it's not some mountaintop spiritual experience that he's after because verse 13 makes it clear that there is far more practical side to David's requests then

I will teach transgressors your ways so that sinners will turn back to you David wants to be instrumental in bringing other sinners back to God he knows that he can only be effective for the kingdom when he's in a right relationship with his heavenly father and it should be just as true for us back sliders are useless as witnesses to God's grace it's probably because shame at sin gets in the way of teaching others the truth of the gospel and verse 14 makes it clear too we can't worship God as we ought while we are suffering from this blood guiltiness it's because we know the experience and experience the wonders of God's justice and his righteousness that we can sing a lot of them that we can worship him but even from verse 15 it is clear the

Lord that opens my lips so that I declare your praise even our praise even our worship this whole process is of God from beginning to end we throw ourselves at his mercy we count on his grace we count on his spirit to uphold us we count on him to open our hearts and our mouths to praise him God I read mentioned there were no sacrifices that could atone for David's murder and his adultery but as verse 16 makes clear you do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings he knows that ritual and sacrifice offered without a righteous heart and without right motive is anathema to God anyway what God wants is made clear in verse 17 a broken spirit a broken and contrite heart these, these he never despises our God never turns away from the truly penitent soul empty hands with nothing to offer true sorrowing hearts with no demands these he never despises these he never turns away but like Abraham of last week

David comes with a combination of boldness and humility in his prayer boldness though not in any merit of his own but boldness that knows that God's mercy overwhelms his judgment and thus he passed over David's sin as outrageous an act as his willingness to bargain with Abraham if you remember from last week and we have this hope and confidence too that God will pass over our sin also because of what Christ has done at Calvary we sang of it already this morning what can wash away my sin nothing but the blood of Jesus lots of commentators argue that the last two verses are a later addition that they do not fit the tone or the meter of the psalm but I think they give an important closing pointer to our model for penitential prayer and that is to look beyond ourselves

David is not an island his sin has impacted on the whole nation so now he prays rightfully so that the Lord might do good to Zion so that those who have suffered might prosper again and that the nation would be safe under Yahweh's protecting hand and in verse 19 that right sacrifices will once again be acceptable in God's sight the sacrificial ritual commanded by the law which has been perverted because of unclean hands and hearts can be reinstated for the good of all verse 19 however is not a contradiction of verse 16 as you might think at first glance rather it is this that ritual in the right place offered by the righteous confirms that restoration has taken place likewise with us when we are put right with God we are more effective in the kingdom we are able to worship

[30 : 26] God properly and we are able to enjoy fellowship with the community of believers it could be said therefore that when we are restored the congregation is also restored before we end our talk today it's essential that we briefly consider the question how do we displease the Lord today if this prayer gives us a framework a model for dealing with God's pleasure you need to ask yourself what is your besetting sin what keeps you from being effective what keeps you from feeling the joy of the Lord what keeps you worshipping God as you should or being comfortable in the company of believers what deed or state of mind consumes you in your quieter moments that which you know is unworthy of your calling as a disciple and as a friend of Jesus that which you wish you could deal with and put behind you almost certainly they are not

David's sins not adultery not murder not false witness for most of us at least but don't ever forget Jesus holds us to a higher standard in the sermon on the mount he equated lust with adultery and he equated hatred and anger with murder we may not have done anything terrible as the world might assess it nor might we have sunk to that level of shame and anguish that David felt in Psalm 51 nevertheless all of us all of us are sinful wicked since conception in the eyes of God and we sin and displease our father in heaven every single day but as we have seen

Psalms 51 does give us a model for dealing with that sin and that sinfulness turn to the only one who can do anything about it be reminded again why sin is so foul in the eyes of God and then throw yourself upon his mercy for purification and for renewal and then you will be and I will be useful able to promote the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ able to lead others back to God and ready and willing to offer God the praise due his name and when you are right with him as I said already the whole congregation of believers will be the better for it the abiding lesson of Psalm 51 for us today is as

Jonathan Edwards said 200 years ago broken and contrite all the way home amen and him and