

Ps 51/RHC
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Con't this AM with summer sermon series from the Psalms, the great book of songs, prayers, and confessions in our OT. And today we'll be looking at one of the more famous of David's Psalms - and David wrote about 75 of our 150 Psalms - Ps 51. And the backstory to this powerful Psalm is important, and so I'll begin with that and then go to the Psalm itself. This backstory material is found in II Sam 11 & 12 but I'll summarize it for you.

David is King of a united Israel, and is at the height of his career we might say. His journey to this point was fraught with drama: A shepherd boy, the youngest of 8 brothers, he makes a kind of grand entrance into the Biblical narrative by the slaying of the giant Goliath, a Philistine warrior.

He's then brought into the inner circle of King Saul - who today we would prob diagnose as mentally ill - to play music for Saul when Saul was experiencing bouts of depression. Saul eventually became jealous of David - and I'm skimming over lots of details here - and David winds up on the run with a band of fighters.

Eventually David ascends to the throne, and is generally beloved by the people. We (and they) would say he was a good king. In fact the Gospels call Jesus the "son of David," i.e., a David-like king, a massive positive.

The specific backstory to Ps 51 finds David on the roof of his palace in Jerusalem while his army is off at war. And from the roof top patio David spots a beautiful young woman bathing. Read: she's naked.

David has her brought to him and seduces her - for lack of a better term. The "her" is Bathsheba, the wife of one of David's military commanders, Uriah. BTW, if you're keeping a sin "score card", David is off to a bad start .

Add to the situation the fact that Bathsheba becomes pregnant by David. And David, with some sense of panic it seems, comes up with a plan.

He immediately calls Uriah home from the battle field, asks for a sort of pro forma battle field report, and then sends Uriah home to sleep with his wife. Obviously hoping Bathsheba's pregnancy will then be attributed to her husband, Uriah.

Uriah, tho, is a man of noble character, and refuses to sleep in his bed while his men are off in battle. He spends the night on his porch. Frustrated by this, David makes further attempts to get Uriah together with Bathsheba, all of which fail.

So he comes up with a chilling Plan B. He sends Uriah back to the battle, but secretly sends a message to other commanders to have Uriah moved to the fiercest point of the fighting and then pull back from him. Vulnerable, Uriah is killed. Problem solved.

BTW, back to our sin "score card", we now add conspiracy to commit murder to David's adultery.

Bathsheba gives birth, but the baby is sickly and quickly is at the point of death. David fasts and prays for the child, but the child dies.

At this point Nathan the prophet enters the scene. He tells David a parable about a rich man who takes the one lamb of a poor man and serves it for dinner. David is outraged by this, but Nathan, in one of the great punch lines in the Bible, says to David, "You are that man", alluding to the Bathsheba/Uriah incident.

That confrontation by the prophet Nathan drives David to repentance and the writing of Ps 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. 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 bloodguiltiness, 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.

What we see here is a **template for confession for confession of sin**. And I'd like to lift up three (3) elements: **Brutal honesty, a Godward focus, and hope for the future**.

First, brutal honesty. David says "**For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.**" For many of us, the roadblock to confession of sin is rationalization. We're OK with "Well, maybe that wasn't my best move." Or "Ya, I can see why you're upset." Or "But man, It could have been way worse."

In other words, we evade. We minimize. We...rationalize. David doesn't do that. He says, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." David is clear that it's his behavior that's the problem. Today we might say "He owns it."

***Dad joined AA when I was around 12 yrs old. "My name is X and I'm an alcoholic." I.e., step one, of every meeting, is brutal honesty....owning it, facing it. Like a medical diagnosis, honestly, accuracy, is the first step toward healing.

If we rationalize our sin - explain it away, minimize it, we may feel better temporarily, but the cancer remains. Like the ghosts dragging their chains in A Christmas Carol, we'll move thru life burdened, weighted down.

If this morning you feel that weight of unconfessed, rationalized sin, whether from yesterday, or last week, or last year, or 20 years ago, it's time to act. Know it's never too late. Confess your sins to the Lord and have the burden of them lifted. You'll be a happier person for it, and the Lord will be pleased. Which leads us to our second element:

Second, a Godward focus. David owns his sin, and he acknowledges that sin is ultimately an offense against God. Our sins hurts us and other people, yes. But it's the Godward element that captures the Biblical view of sin. It was God who said - thinking of Davids backstory here - "You shall not commit adultery." It was God who said "You shall not kill." David committed adultery, David had Uriah killed. And his offense was ultimately against his God.

David wrote, "**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.**" In my opinion, this differentiates Christian confession from psychotherapy. A good therapist can get us to a place of honesty, with ourself and others. Which is good, or at least a good start.

But ultimately it's honesty with God we're after. If we've hurt another person, we need to confess and hopefully be reconciled with that person. But there's another Person involved too. God, the creator and redeemer of that person.

When we hurt another person, ultimately we're hurting, we're offending, the God who created that person and cares about their wellbeing. This truth is heightened by the Apostle Paul when he refers to others as the "brother or sister for whom Christ died." The "other" isn't simply another human being. He or she is a creation of God and a brother/sister for whom Christ died.

I think of this as the horizontal and vertical dimensions of sin/confession. The horizontal is our relationship with the "other", the vertical is our relationship with God. David's behavior was lethally harmful to Uriah and cruel toward Bathsheba.

But he knows that ultimately it was "against YOU (God), that I have sinned and done what is evil in YOUR sight."

To be really free from the burden of our sin we need to a) confess to and be reconciled with the other, and b) confess our sin to God.

Third point: this brutal honesty with self and God all leads to hope, not despair.

David prays **"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."**

Confession is ultimately liberating and restorative. Confession unburdens us, sets us free. David is described in the Bible as a "man after God's own heart." I use to be confused by this a bit because I thought it was saying that David was...well...kind of "perfect" in the sense of flawless. And when you read the Scriptures you quickly realized that this is far from true.

I now understand the "a man after God's own heart" not as perfection, but as honesty: honest with himself and honest with God. I.e., David was "a man after God's own heart" not in the sense that he was flawless, but that he owned his flaws and brought them to God in honest confession.

There's a NT text that speaks to this point, and I'm sure many of you are familiar with it: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 Jn 1). David trusted in God's faithful mercy, and so should we.

As I was working on this sermon, I thought long and hard about coming up with a really compelling closing story. You know how we preachers do that...end with a really great, maybe even tear producing, story. And we hope that you then say "Wow, that was a good sermon." We actually think that way. Being honest here.

But it occurred to me that that the end of this sermon - if by God's grace I've gotten the Biblical truth of Psalm 51 across this morning - isn't something I say or do. The end of this message of confession is something you may need to say or do. Because only you know what confession business you may need to take care of. Well, you and God.