

PSALM READING FOR AUGUST 2, 2015

START WITH SCRIPTURE: Psalm 51

OBSERVE:

The superscription that precedes Psalm 51 describes the context in which this Psalm was purportedly written: *To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.* The theme and tone of the Psalm reveal a heart broken by a deep awareness of sin and shame. This is a Psalm of confession and lamentation, but also great hope.

Just as a fresh reminder: David committed adultery with Bathsheba and conspired to have her husband Uriah killed in battle. Nathan the prophet is instructed by the Lord to confront David with his sin, and does so by relating a carefully crafted story that appeals to David's sense of justice; and only then does Nathan spring his trap: *you are the man!* David, the powerful king, might have ordered Nathan's execution. Instead, he is cut to the heart with conviction, and confesses *I have sinned against the Lord.*

There is absolutely no shred of excuse or rationalization in this Psalm.

The Psalmist begins by throwing himself on the merciful nature and steadfast love of God for complete cleansing of his sin: *blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity.* He will return again to this imagery of washing and cleansing.

He openly confesses that he is very aware of his sin. But what seems very odd is that he then says *Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment.*

Obviously David's sin has violated the moral laws of God, namely adultery and murder. But if this is David, he has not only violated God's laws; he has sinned grievously against Uriah and even Bathsheba! Is he saying that all sin is initially and ultimately against God? That whatever the social consequences of his sin, it begins with a transgression against God and separates him from God?

He then confesses that his sin is somehow woven into his nature: *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.* This seems a likely proof-text of the Christian doctrine of original sin — that human beings are predisposed to sin by their very nature.

Then he begins to offer a series of petitions and requests of the Lord. He acknowledges that God requires truthfulness in the depths of the human heart; so it would seem that only God can provide what is needed in order for that to be actualized: *therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

The Psalmist then returns to the imagery of cleansing. He begs to be purged with hyssop, which is an herbal plant prescribed to purify lepers in Leviticus 14:6-7. In that passage, it is used in a ceremonial sense, dipped in the blood of a bird and mixed with cedarwood and scarlet cloth, and sprinkled on the leper. It would be interesting to know if the hyssop is to be received internally in this context. Among other references, the hyssop stalk was used during the crucifixion of Jesus to offer him a drink of vinegar wine soaked into a sponge (John 19:28-29).

Suffice it to say, the Psalmist is pleading for complete spiritual and moral cleansing: *wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

Once that cleansing has occurred, he is confident that *joy and gladness* will be restored. Metaphorically, the conviction that he has experienced has been like the agony of broken bones. And he believes that the source of his conviction is from God himself: *let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice.*

Mercy will come only when God will *Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*

And the cleansing that he begs for is not merely symbolic or superficial purgation. He pleads that the Lord will *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.* The old nature, conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity, must not only be cleansed but renewed with the right spirit.

He mentions spirit four times in this Psalm, sometimes indicating his own broken spirit, but also alluding to God's spirit: *Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

He confesses that the relationship with God that was once whole and harmonious has been broken, and he yearns for that relationship to be restored. And this can only happen if God restores that joyful sense of salvation and wholeness, and if God sustains it within him.

APPLY:

Heinrich Heine, the German writer, is alleged to have said on his deathbed, "Of course God will forgive me. That's his business."

There is none of that presumption and no hint of "cheap grace" in this Psalm. And I would venture to say that those who take seriously the consequences of sin in their own lives and have cried out for God's forgiveness can identify more closely with Psalm 51 than with Heinrich Heine.

No, we have not all committed adultery or murder. But Jesus teaches us that sin is not merely the external act but originates in the heart, as with anger and lust (Matthew 5:21-30). The same can be said of covetousness, or pride, or any other sin.

Like David, we all have been conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity. But the theme of scripture is that God does love us with a steadfast love, and his mercy endures forever. He does restore the joy of our salvation and renews his Spirit within us.

God's grace is abundant and generous; but our ability to receive that grace does depend on our willingness to confess our sin and turn to him in faith. This is confirmed in the New Testament time and time again: *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).*

RESPOND:

Until I fully faced the reality of my own sinful nature, I could not fully appreciate the Cross. If sin is merely a "mistake," all we need do is mutter "my bad," and receive the casual response "no problem."

But my own breakthrough happened when I confronted the fact that I am "bad to the bone." I am selfish, prideful, lustful, conceived in sin and broken. Only the forgiveness of God in Christ can possibly restore the joy of salvation.

That message is supremely revealed in Jesus "great David's greater Son." As 2 Corinthians 5:21 says: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Thank you, Lord, that you have anticipated my sin with your mercy, purchased with the atoning blood of Christ! Through your Holy Spirit you have created in me a clean heart, and restored the joy of my salvation. Amen and Amen!

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