

December 12, 2021

A GUIDE TO CONFESSION

Psalm 51

*(11 of 11 in a series of selected Psalms)*

Confession of sin should be a regular task in the life of a believer. When Jesus instructed us to pray, part of his instruction included our prayers voicing a request to the Lord to “forgive us our debts.” Similarly, John encourages us to confess sins by reminding us in 1 John 1:9 that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” And so the idea that believers—who find forgiveness for our sins through faith in the finished work of Christ—should regularly confess our sins is the clear teaching of Scripture. However, this might only raise a question that many of us wouldn’t feel comfortable answering, namely, what does confession of sin look like? After all, if this is something that should be a regular pattern and habit in our lives, then we should be able to answer this question of what it should look like. And that’s why Psalm 51 is so helpful.

Psalm 51 arose from a very painful time in the lives of some individuals in Israel’s history. The superscript of the psalm tells us that this psalm was written by David “when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” The incident that is being referred to here, of course, is David’s sin of adultery and murder. We actually reflected on this moment in David’s life recently as we looked at Psalm 32, but it doesn’t hurt to have a refresher.

According to 2 Samuel 11-12, during the season when kings go out to battle, David—the king—decided that he would stay home. And as often happens when we’re in a place we don’t need to be, David found himself in a very tempting situation. As he was looking out over the kingdom, he spotted a beautiful woman named Bathsheba bathing on the roof. And, since her husband Uriah was out fighting in battle (where David should have been), David ordered the woman to be brought to him, and he was intimate with her.

The problem was that Bathsheba soon sent word to David that she was pregnant. So David began to scheme how he could hide and cover his sin. But every attempt failed. He first brought Uriah home from battle and gave him the opportunity to go to the house and spend the evening with his wife—the thought, of course, being that he (and everyone else) would think the child was his. But Uriah wouldn’t go down to his house and know the joys of being home when his brothers were in battle. And so David tried again. He got him drunk, but even then Uriah’s integrity didn’t wane, as he once again just slept in the servants’ quarters. Therefore, David’s fail-proof plan was to send Uriah back to battle with his own death sentence, a letter instructing the commander to put him at the front of the toughest battle, then draw back from him, and allow him to be killed. Once dead, David would quickly take Bathsheba as his wife, and everyone would just think she’d conceived quickly afterward and perhaps the baby would be seen as a premature birth. And everyone followed orders, and it worked out exactly as David had envisioned. He had gotten away with it—only he hadn’t!

Because the Lord knows all, he of course was aware of David's sin, and so he sent Nathan the prophet to confront him. David, when confronted, admitted his sin, and Nathan pronounced to David that he wouldn't die for his sin—which would have been the punishment for adultery and murder under the law. And so, at some point during all of this, David composed Psalm 51, a psalm of confession. As I mentioned, it reflects back on a very painful moment in the life of David (who had to come face-to-face with his own sin and would end up losing his infant son), for Bathsheba (who lost her husband), and for Uriah (who lost his life). And it's a very personal confession by David in the midst of this. And it's that note of personal confession that makes this psalm so odd.

A lot of people have written autobiographical accounts over the years. These might be filled with heroic exploits and even deeply personal struggles, and yet very few (if any), I imagine, include a prayer of confession made to the Lord after the most embarrassing and painful moment of one's life. And yet that's exactly what we have in Psalm 51. A personal confession made public. In fact, it wasn't just made public for some who might be interested to read it; because the superscript contains instructions for the choirmaster, it must have been sung corporately in Israel's history. Can you imagine writing down a prayer of confession based on your lowest moment and it becoming a regular song we sing on Sunday mornings? My guess is that few would volunteer for that.

But I think there's a purpose in this. David's prayer of confession is a public psalm to be read (and even sung) by all after him because it is a guide for us as to what confession is to look like. Therefore, what I want to do this morning is take some time to look at the elements in this prayer of confession and highlight them for us so that we might be better equipped to confess our sins—even today. What are the elements of confession that we should be aware of, then, in this psalm? I'll note them from David's perspective and then apply them to us. So, first, David turns to his merciful God.

### **David turns to his merciful God**

As David begins this prayer of confession, he writes, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy" (v. 1). Now, there is a huge difference between David and us. David lived under the administration of the law of Moses, where one would go and offer sacrifices at the tabernacle or temple. We see this reflected in the final verse of Psalm 51 where David speaks of the Lord delighting in right sacrifices, "in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings" as bulls are offered on the altar (v. 19). And of course, we don't make animal sacrifices because on this side of Christ's resurrection we understand that his once for all sacrifice on the cross is the basis for our forgiveness. And yet David finds himself in a tricky situation here.

Here's what I mean. Even under the law of Moses, there wasn't a prescribed sacrifice for a high-handed, intentional sin. In Numbers 15:27-31, for example, we are told, "If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins

unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven. . . . But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD and broken his commandments, that person shall be utterly cut off; he iniquity shall be on him.”

So, when we consider David, then, what was he to do? What was his sacrifice? There is none. He can't claim he made a mistake or accidentally committed adultery and murder. What then was the prescription for a murderer and adulterer under the law? Well, it carried the death penalty. So, in light of David's sin, he has no hope. Well, it's better to say that his only hope is found in the mercy of God. He has nothing to say in defense of himself.

Consequently, that's what he turns to in verse 1. Notice how he asks for mercy, asks God to act in accord with his steadfast love and in accord with his abundant mercy. In other words, David is saying, in essence, “God, I know you're the one who revealed yourself to Moses as the God who is ‘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’ (Exod 34:6-7), and so I'm not turning away from you but toward you, seeking your mercy and grace. You're my only hope.”

This is instructive for us as well. We are fully aware that Jesus' death didn't atone simply for unintentional sins but for all our sins. If his sacrifice were only for mistakes, we'd all be in trouble. Therefore, when we turn to the Lord for mercy, we're turning to the one who has sent his Son to atone for our sins and who invites us to approach his throne with boldness. So, there is a difference as we consider Christ's sacrifice versus the sacrifice of animals under the law of Moses.

But where there is similarity and where we need to follow David's example precisely is in his turning to his merciful God. And the reason this needs to be said is because we sometimes get the idea that when we've sinned we should distance ourselves from God. We convince ourselves that he wants nothing to do with us. Well, nothing could be further from the truth. He tells us not to sin; that's for sure. But if we do sin Scripture us that we have an advocate with him—Jesus Christ our Lord—*so that* we will run to him and know forgiveness, mercy, grace, and cleansing. And that brings us to the second element in this prayer: full acknowledgment of sin.

### **David fully acknowledges and owns his sin**

One of the instructive (and refreshing) things we find in Psalm 51 is that David fully acknowledges and completely owns his sin. In verses 3-6 he completely bears his guilt. Let's take it a verse at a time. First, he notes, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (v. 3). In other words, though he was attempting to hide his sin from everyone else prior to Nathan's confrontation, it had always been at the forefront of his mind. And so he's laying it bare now, hiding it no longer. Then he adds, “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” (v. 4). Now, this could be confusing to us because we might want to say that he's

sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba both as well, and that's true. But what David is saying is that as judge, the forgiveness he ultimately needs comes from God. After all, even if Uriah could forgive him, he's gone. But the one before whom we'll give an account on the day of judgment will not be our fellow man but God himself. This is what David is acknowledging, and he knows that when God pronounces judgment, it is just and right.

But then David goes a place where you might think he's giving an excuse. He talks about the sinful nature that he was born with. He writes in verse 5, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Now, as I've mentioned, we could read this as David making an excuse. We could read it as David saying, "I couldn't help it. I was born with a sinful nature. It's not my fault." But that's not what David is doing here.

To picture what David is saying, let's picture a man who is standing before a judge having been pronounced guilty of first degree murder. The man is about to be sentenced by the judge, but he's given an opportunity to speak to make a plea on his behalf. But as the man stands to speak, he says, "Judge, I'm a vile man. From the earliest moments of my life I've loved violence. I've delighted in hurting people. I'm wicked to my core." Would the judge hear that and say, "Well, then, it sounds like you're providing a good reason to turn you back out on the street. After all, it sounds like you're saying you can't help it"? Of course not. This isn't an excuse. This would be a man saying, "I've got no plea. I can only confess I'm evil."

This is what David is saying. He's acknowledging his guilt and confessing that he needs the Lord to change him all the way down. He's confessing that he was born in sin and is in desperate mercy from the Lord. His only hope is God's mercy, nothing David can bring to the table. And then he only adds to it in verse 6 by noting that the Lord has made clear that he demands righteousness and truth in whole, down to the depths of our hearts, and yet David has violated that. Here is a man simply coming clean, if you will, completely acknowledging and fully owning his sin. No one else is getting blamed. No situation is being pointed to as an excuse. He's simply owning his sin.

This is helpful for us. The Lord knows our sins, so hiding them is futile. We may deceive our neighbors, but we'll not deceive him. Moreover, confession of sin must be just that—confession. We admit our wrong, own it, and agree with the Lord that we have sinned. This is a necessary stance of our hearts any time we go to confess sin. And this then leads us to the next element in David's prayer of confession.

### **David asks God to forgive him and cleanse him**

David began this request at the end of verse 1 and into verse 2, writing, "Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" And he continues on in verses 7 and 9, writing, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities."

Here David is using a number of images—whether blotting out his sin, washing him from his iniquities, or cleansing him—but they all communicate the same thing. David wants his sin removed, forgiven, and to be cleansed. Now, this is a bold prayer from one who knows his sin deserves death, and yet he knows that God has revealed himself as merciful to repentant sinners.

You and I are invited to pray this same way, and yet (as we've noted) we have even more reason for making such bold requests. We've seen the sacrifice God has made for our forgiveness in Jesus. Consequently, you and I have been told that if we confess our sins, our Lord is faithful and just to forgive us of all our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Therefore, we do not turn from our sins and acknowledge them before our God, while sitting on pins and needles, wondering if we'll be shown mercy. He's told us we'll be shown mercy. Therefore, there should be no hesitation to confess our sin, owning it, and asking the Lord to forgive and cleanse us from our sin.

Imagine a child with a loving parent who tells him, "If you simply ask me, I'll give you what you need." And the child finds himself hungry one day, yet hesitates to go and ask his father or mother for food. What would we say to that child? Wouldn't we tell him, "You have an open invitation to come. Your father or mother will always give you what you need. You're only withholding from yourself rich blessing by keeping your distance"? So it is here, brother or sister. Do not hesitate. Don't hold on to your sin any longer. Run to your Father, who promises forgiveness and cleansing to that who come to him in confession, seeking his mercy. Run to the one who promises to meet you with mercy.

Now, we might think that we could stop there, but David gives us more. We also see in this psalm that David asks God for preserving grace.

### **David asks God for preserving grace**

In verse 8 David asks God to restore the joy and rejoicing that had left him as he attempted to cover his sin. We all know what that's like. If we try to ignore our sin, it's just there, gnawing at us, ever before us, reminding us that it must be dealt with. It steals our joy and ability to rejoice. But that's not all David asks God for in addition to the cleansing of his sin. He asks for preserving grace. Let me explain.

In order to understand the drive of David's heart, we need to understand Saul—the king of Israel prior to David. In Saul's rebellion against the Lord, we read in 1 Samuel 16:14, "Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul." Now, we should have seen this coming with Saul. The promise of the Lord was never to raise up a line of kings from the line of Benjamin, where Saul was descended from, but rather from Judah, where David was descended from. Consequently, we see ultimately the Lord removing the royal line from Saul and along with it, his Spirit which anointed Israel's kings.

Then along comes David. He is God's anointed and chosen king. He is better than Saul. He's less devious than Saul. He's received glorious promises from the Lord, unlike Saul. And yet here he is having committed adultery and murder. And so in the midst of his confession, he asks the Lord, "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" (vv. 10-12).

Do you see what David is praying? He's asking the Lord not to let him be like Saul. He asks God for preserving grace. He wants to be preserved in that God allows the Spirit to remain on him. He asks to be preserved in that he wants God to transform him and move him to obedience in the future. In other words, he asks God to do everything necessary to allow David to persevere in obedience to the Lord.

Now, once more, our situation is a bit different than David's. We're not in a royal line of kings and we're under the new covenant where the Lord has already promised his people that he'll put his Spirit within us, give us new hearts, and cause us to walk in his ways—all things we see David asking for. And yet it is good and right for us to pray—like David—for preserving grace. In other words, part of our prayer of confession should include a request for grace from God to help us walk in obedience and not return to this sin that we're confessing and have grown to despise. After all, genuine repentance involves us not only confessing but seeking how we might avoid this sin going forward. And that's what we see David doing as he prays for God's preserving grace.

And finally, we see David praising God and seeking to spread his honor.

### **David praises God and seeks to spread his honor**

In verses 13-19 David voices all that he will do as he receives cleansing and forgiveness for his sins. He will teach those sinning to obey the Lord (v. 13). He will sing aloud of God's righteousness (v. 14). He will declare God's praise (v. 15). He will make sure the people offer proper worship (vv. 18-19). But all of this we could put under the heading that David will seek to praise God and seek to spread his honor.

This should be our response as well. We've been shown grace by our Lord in order that we might proclaim his excellencies. And when we see that we're the objects of his forgiveness, cleansing, and grace afresh, we should seek the opportunity to let others know of our great and gracious God.

One way we do that is by coming to the table. This meal is a way of giving thanks and honoring our Lord. We do it publicly to testify that we understand that we have been the objects of mercy and grace that we have not merited but that are ours because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And so let us take some moments now in silent prayer to confess as we need to, and then let us praise and thank our God as we come to the table. Amen.