

Lesson Five: If You Did It, Admit It

Focal Text: Psalm 51

Background: Exodus 12:21-23; 2 Samuel 12:7-13

Main Idea: When people sin, they should go immediately to God.

Question to Explore: When I sin do I confess it to God?

Quick read: When David recognized his sin, he went to God who alone could forgive him.

Introduction

When individuals face their personal sin, they often completely deny any wrongdoing. At other times, they might angrily cry, “How dare you accuse me!” If it is impossible for them to deny, they may plead, “I’m not the only one,” or they may claim powerlessness: “I can’t help myself.” Each of these reactions--denial, anger, universality, or helplessness—are normal ways people face their sin.

Very rarely, when confronted with their sin, will individuals simply admit wrongdoing. It is human nature to lash out as a form of defense. Vulnerability and grief occur when someone removes all excuses and encounters and owns up to their wrongdoing.

In the 1996 film “Secrets and Lies,” Cynthia, a middle-aged woman from East London, meets with a young lady at a café and learns that she is the young lady’s mother. The audience watches as Cynthia goes through denial, then anger, then grave sorrow. As the weight of her actions comes to mind, she falls apart into deep remorse and regret.

It is this type of remorse that is captured in Psalm 51. For most of the psalm, a grief-stricken person pleads with Almighty God to forgive him of his sin and guilt. No other psalm in the book captures emotional grief as well as this one does. Consequently, the psalm is among the most well known in the book.

Commentary

Psalm 51 is a psalm of lament. Rather than focusing upon whatever sin the psalmist has committed, it instead focuses upon the grief and emotional pain itself. The writer shared how deeply distraught he was, and how he sought forgiveness. Yet, he did not simply want relief; he wanted to share his experience with others, so that others could experience the same forgiveness.

The psalm, however, does not end with forgiveness; instead, it shows how prayer and forgiveness work together. Further, the writer hoped that his people as a nation would learn the same lesson, so that worship could truly happen in their midst once again.

Since each of the parts of Psalm 51 are different, it might be easier to think of them as separate “movements” within a symphony. The first movement, the Superscription, allows readers to visualize the psalm. The second movement is the prayer of an individual who confessed his sin and asked God for forgiveness. It flows from his remorse, his contrition, and his praise of forgiveness (vv. 1-15). The third and fourth movements lift readers away from this personal encounter, and it serves as a teaching tool. Movement three (vv. 16-17) reminds readers of the kind of “sacrifice” that God truly requires. The fourth and final movement serves as the grand finale, entrusting readers to follow suit so that life may return to a proper worship of God (vv. 18-19).

Movement One: The Superscription

Unlike the usual superscriptions which share the addressee (“to the choirmaster”) the type (“a song”), and possible author (“of/to David¹”), this psalm contains an additional line.² Several other psalms in this section of the book do the same. Each superscription has something to do with David’s life, normally before he became king.³ Perhaps at one time, many of these psalms were sung as an early type of cantata.

Psalm 51’s second-line superscription poses a problem: how is it to be understood? On the surface, it recalls the encounter Nathan had with David soon after David’s affair with Bathsheba.⁴ However, readers of the incident would be quick to remember that Nathan “encountered” David after David “encountered” Bathsheba. The narrative connection between the two “encounters” would have been clear to ancient readers.

In 2 Samuel 11-12, David was at his worst. He lusted after a woman who was another man’s wife. He committed adultery with her, and after attempting to cover up their pregnancy, David had her husband put to death. When the narrator stated that “this greatly displeased the Lord” (2 Sam. 11:27), readers understood that “this” meant the entire matter. Nathan came to address the issue to David, and it was up to the king to decide how he would react.

David could have easily denied any wrongdoing, been angry with Nathan, or made other excuses. He could have even had Nathan killed. Instead, David admitted his sin: “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:13). The superscription of Psalm 51 reminds the reader of David’s confession.

Movement Two: A Sinner Calls to God (51:1-15)

In a systematic fashion, the writer went through the process of contrition. He addressed God (vv. 1-2), confessed his terrible iniquity (vv. 3-5), asked for cleansing from his sin (vv. 6-9), and pleaded for restoration (vv. 10-12).

The psalmist⁵ opened with a plea for mercy from the Lord. He asked God to “blot out” his transgression (v. 1). Not only does this plea introduce the writer’s sin, but it also introduces God’s amazing love. Only God’s love and compassion could wipe out such a great transgression.

The verse follows a chiasm:⁶

Have mercy (forgiveness) a
 Love b
 Compassion b’
 Wipe away (forgiveness) a’

“Blotting out” describes the erasing of words from a board; the sin no longer exists. In verse two, the writer asked God to thoroughly wash him⁷ from his iniquity and purify him of his sin. Although the “washing abundantly” refers to the laundering of clothes, it could suggest the ritual baths (*mikvot*) that were near the Jerusalem Temple.⁸

In these two verses, the writer has pleaded three times for cleansing (“wipe out,” “wash,” “purify”) and used three different words for sin (“transgression,” “iniquity,” “sin”). Rather than interpreting this as three different cleansings from three different sins, it is best to consider them as synonymous. The writer intentionally shows how weighty his situation was, and how badly he longed for forgiveness.

After addressing his need for cleansing, the psalmist described the severity of his sin (vv. 3-5). In verse three, he emphatically noted his sin (“I *know* my transgressions”), and it was inescapable. Since he could not run away from it, he had to address it directly. He also realized that his sin was against God. Without overlooking that his sin had offended and affected others, he recognized that his ultimate judge was Almighty God (“Against you, you only, have I sinned”). As his sin was obvious, and his Judge was righteous, there was no question about his guilt. He was culpable.

Once he acknowledged his sin, and identified God as his Judge, the psalmist shared his raw emotions. “Surely I was a sinner at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (v. 5). While many theologians have used this verse to explain original sin and its transmission, this seems to stretch the poetic couplet beyond its context. Instead, the writer spoke hyperbolically, to declare what a terrible person he was, and that there was nothing good in him.⁹

While the writer understood the severity, extent, and depth of his sin, he also realized the extent, depth, and generosity of God's forgiveness. The next three verses inform the reader of that forgiveness. First, God desired truth in the innermost part (v. 6). This could mean the "inner organs,"¹⁰ but it could also simply mean that God longed for transparency from His followers, both from without and from within.¹¹ He then asked for that wisdom in a "closed place," so his life could change for the better.¹²

Second, the psalmist asked for cleansing. If God was willing to purify him and wash him, he would be clean from his iniquities (v. 7). The term "hyssop" probably refers to a brushy and spongy plant, that could hold and spatter blood during purification ceremonies. Such ceremonies took place for those with skin diseases (Lev. 14:4, 6) or those who were in contact with a corpse (Num. 19:6, 18).

Third, with his sins forgiven, the psalmist wanted to hear joy and gladness (v. 8). He wanted the very "bones" that God had crushed to rejoice. The poet invited God to hide his face from his sins, and to blot out all his iniquity (v. 9). This brings readers back to verse one, and it allows them to see a grand chiastic structure of the psalm thus far:

- a Wipe away (v. 1)
- b Wash me (v. 2a)
- c Purify (v. 2b)
- d I acknowledge (v. 3)
- e I have failed (v. 4a)
- f You are faithful (v. 4b)
- e' In failure (v. 5)
- d' Make me acknowledge (v. 6)
- c' So I may be pure (v. 7a)
- b' Wash me (v. 7b)
- a' Wipe away (v. 9)¹³

Once the poet addressed God, confessed his sin, and asked for cleansing, he pleaded with the Almighty for restoration. "Create in me a pure heart O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (v. 10). The verb "create" (*bara*) is used only 53 times in the entire Old Testament. Each time it is used, God is the subject. Most of the time it refers to the creation account in Genesis chapter 1. Only God can create. The psalmist, therefore, called on God to do something only God could do: a full "re-do" of his life. He called for a renewal of steadfastness in his innermost place. He did not want simply to revert to his former self; instead, he wanted a new beginning, a fresh start, a clean slate.

Terrified, the psalmist pleaded that God would not hurl him from His presence (v. 11). Also, he did not want God's holy spirit taken from him. The word "spirit" (*ruach*) recalls the spirit of Creator God in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. This spirit guided and prevented chaos from ever appearing.¹⁴ Lastly, the writer asked God to return ("restore") the joy of salvation to him, to

supply him with a willing spirit (v. 12). Although his egregious sin came from a spiritual drifting, he pleaded that he would never be separated from God.

Once free from his sin, the psalmist planned his response to God's mercy. First, he would teach transgressors of the ways of God (v. 13). With other sinners in his audience, he wanted to show them that the God who forgave him could also forgive them. Consequently, these sinners could return to God as well. Forgiveness begets forgiveness, and others would want what he had.

Second, as God delivered him from his "bloodguilt" ("guilt of bloodshed"),¹⁵ the writer would give a ringing cry out concerning his deliverance (v. 14). He could not keep quiet about God's righteousness.

Third, the writer asked the Lord to open his lips; when God did, he would declare praise unto the Lord (v. 15). As God had forgiven, so he wanted to sing boldly about what God had done. In so doing, he prayed that others would want what he possessed.

Third Movement: A Valuable Lesson in Forgiveness (51:16-17)

Verse 15 could have concluded the psalm; instead, the writer created a third movement which explained the use and limits of sacrifices to God (v. 16). God did not "delight" in these sacrifices, nor in any burnt offerings. While God appreciated sacrifices upon the altar, these offerings never did—and never would—forgive anyone of their sin. The Old Testament sacrifices did not in themselves bring forgiveness; they symbolized repentance and God's grace that made forgiveness possible.

The sacrificial system served a symbolic and instructional role. If these sacrifices had to be given each time a person sinned, that person would never have done anything else except present sacrifices. Not only would this perpetual offering be frustrating, but it would also be devastating for the animal kingdom!

Several Bible passages support this symbolism. In Micah 6:8, God called His followers simply to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him. Hosea 6:6 states: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice." When David uttered, "I have sinned against the Lord," Nathan simply said, "God has taken away your sin" (2 Sam. 12:13). David did not need to do anything more than simply to ask for God's forgiveness.

It is this asking, and receiving, that links David's story to Psalm 51. "My sacrifice O God is a broken spirit and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). Greater than the crushed bones that rejoice (Ps. 51:10), God can take the "crushed" heart and accept it as His reason to forgive. It cannot be expressed more clearly: all a sinner needed to do was to be sorry for his sin, and God would forgive him.

Fourth Movement: A Call to Worship (51:18-19)

With a sorrowful heart that received the forgiveness of God (vv. 1-15) and the assurance that contrition was all that God required (vv. 16-17), the writer ended the psalm with the fourth and final movement. He dreamed that one day, everyone who called on the name of the Lord would understand and receive the forgiveness of God. When that day came, he prayed that God would restore Zion and Jerusalem to their original glory (v. 18). It was not to be a glory of opulence as much as it was to be a place where worship is truly practiced.

These sacrifices—burnt offerings, whole burnt offerings, and bulls—would be given, but not for the forgiveness of sin, but to recognize that their sin had indeed been forgiven. In this sense, the offerings that they gave would be joyful gatherings that would bring the kingdom of God to its rightful place (v. 19).

Conclusion

When read in its entirety, Psalm 51 not only speaks of a guilty man who implored God for forgiveness, it also informs readers how they can do the same. Verses 1-15, then, serve as a paradigm of how one “came clean” before the Lord, from the recognition of guilt and its repercussions to an entreaty for forgiveness and the plans once forgiveness had taken place.

This forgiveness does not come from the blood of animals or sacrifices on the altar. It never did. Instead, it always came from a shattered and contrite heart that became fully devoted to God. Forgiveness, then, is a God-ordained act, and a human-responsible act.

Sometimes individuals ask why the sacrificial system has disappeared. Honestly, it did not disappear; instead, it is found in the life of a believer. When the apostle Paul wrote that Christians are to be a “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1), it corresponds to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament as thanksgiving, and it fulfills what Micah 6:8 called believers to do.

When believers understand the power of forgiveness, they are called to become “living sacrifices” —nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else.

1. That David was the author of the psalm is up to debate. The phrase *lēdāwid* could mean “of David” (as in authorship), but it need not mean this. The preposition before the name could mean “of,” “from,” “to,” “about,” or “for,” to name a few possibilities. However, Hans-Joachim Kraus was convinced that the phrase meant authorship (*lamed auctoris*). See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, A Continental Commentary, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 22–23.

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2. Verses one and two of Hebrew Psalm 51 are the same as the superscription in the English versions. Consequently, the Hebrew version has 21 verses. For the sake of simplicity, this study will follow the NIV numbering of the verses.

3. Other psalms that have additional superscription information include Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 52, 54, 57, 59, and 60.

4. The name Bathsheba means “daughter of oath.” In Hebrew, it is spelled as two separate words. Hence, she does not have a name, but more like a title (like “Uriah’s wife”).

5. Although the superscription allows David to be the person praying, it still seems best to call the writer “the psalmist” as a form of simplicity. This will be better understood after verse 16.

6. For further information on chiasm, please consult Prayerbook PC1.

7. The term *kābas* implies a thorough washing, as if a “small cleansing” was not enough.

8. See Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 774.

9. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 643; Ralph L. Smith, *Old Testament Theology* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 288; Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), 18–19. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 3, *The Writings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 133, notes that the Hebrew verb *yāḥam* is associated with animals in heat: “The speaker of this poem certainly feels permeated with sinfulness.”

10. Alter, 133.

11. Wilson, 775.

12. The NIV translates “innermost part” as “womb” and “closed place” as “secret place.” However, this seems way too specific for the generalized terms that the Hebrew uses.

13. John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2, *Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 130–31.

14. While some have expressed a connection here to God removing his spirit from Saul (and David’s fear of God doing the same), it is more likely to be the guiding force of creating and maintenance—since it is so close to verse 10.

15. The Hebrew word is *dām* (“blood”), so the translator must explain what the word implies. If it is “bloodshed,” it would connect the psalm more to the account in 2 Samuel 11–12.

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