

Psalms: Turn to God for Forgiveness Sunday, 7/25/21

Last week, we experienced the age-old practice of crying out to God in lament. We learned that, regardless of our circumstances, crying out to God for help can serve to increase our faith and trust in God. This week, we'll consider the importance of confession. The psalms teach us that the brokenness of sin can be forgiven and made whole when we turn to God in confession.

Before we read our second psalm, it's helpful to understand the context that's assumed for both of today's psalms: The monumental sins of King David, as recorded in 2Samuel 11 and 12. I encourage you to read it again this week and then go back and read these psalms. The short summary is that God's anointed king, the one God describes as "a man after my own heart," took it upon himself to abuse his power, assault one of his subjects, and then secretly kill her husband, Uriah, so he can take her as one of his wives. Both Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 are largely taken to be David's response of remorse and confession after this cataclysmic series of sins. In fact, Psalm 51 even includes these words in the title: "A psalm of David, regarding the time Nathan the prophet came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba."¹

This doesn't mean that you can rest easy if you've never committed adultery or murder, although you are excused from the message today if your life is completely without sin. {Pause}. Nobody? Of course not.

These psalms speak to the universal human condition of sin and the brokenness that our sin produces: Broken relationships with God and others; lives broken by irreversible consequences; and broken souls, stained by the unholy choices we make. Thankfully, the psalms don't leave us in our brokenness, but show us a path forward to forgiveness, restoration, and wholeness. Let's read our next psalm responsively. You'll read the bold text that you'll see on the screen. We're reading from Psalm 51, the first 15 verses, in the New Living Translation. {Read Psalm 51:1-15 NLT}

As I was reading these psalms, I wasn't surprised to find words like these describing David's fall. Each one of us have had moments in our lives that could equally be described

¹ Psalm 51. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

with these same words. I invite to ponder whatever sin might be heaviest on your heart this morning, and to make that your own context for this reflection.

The psalms tell us that our sins against God makes us God-defiers, people who are against rather than for God. We're guilty of rebellion, haunted by our guilt, stained by our crimes, and banished from God's presence. Our broken state comes about as a result of our orneriness, a refusal to go the way God has directed us. The longer we try to live with our unconfessed guilt, the more pressure we experience in our bodies, minds, and souls, with the pain of our guilt turning our bones to powder and our speech to daylong groans.

I'm presuming that, like David, each of us has a basic openness to listen to God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's people, and we have at least some awareness of the sin in our lives. Without that, it's pretty much impossible to move forward. These are the words from the psalms that describe our sin problem. I imagine we've experienced most them, although some might hit home harder for you than others. Now let's look at the other side, the surprisingly hopeful words that describe the healing path to David's salvation.

Can you see how many more hopeful words there are in these two psalms that speak to salvation instead of condemnation? Think again about the sin in your life and dare to imagine that you can be forgiven and restored. The psalms teach us that God's unfailing love, compassion, and mercy offer us a fresh start, wiping clean our record of wrong and renewing our spirits, if only we'll honestly confess our sin, letting it out instead of trying to hold it inside. We can be washed clean of our stains, forgiven and saved, turned into God-affirmers instead of God-deniers, praising and celebrating God because our joy has been restored. We can sing a new song, standing high above the floodwaters, secure in our standing with God. Doesn't that sound like a better way to live? Is it even remotely possible for us to do so, given our track record of sinning, sinning, and sinning yet again? On your own, there's no chance. With God, absolutely there is!

The first step that we have to take in seeking and receiving God's forgiveness is turning to God and admitting our guilt, our need for God's forgiveness, and God's authority and power to forgive us. This is less about constructing the laundry list of what we've done wrong and more about being clear about our standing before God. Humbly admitting our guilt and need for restoration has to proceed any true confession. In human terms, it's like

those apologies you've received that aren't really apologies- know what I mean? There's a big difference between a perfunctory and frowning, "Sorry!" and a heartfelt, "I am so sorry that I've hurt you!" David makes a good start when he writes in Psalm 51, "Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just."² Imagine leading off your next apology to your spouse with those words! That might not be such a bad idea.

Incidentally, do you suppose guilty people ever come before a judge and plead for justice? Probably not, right? Justice would lead to their judgment and punishment. So what is it that the guilty ask for when they approach God's bench? Mercy and forgiveness. We see it in the very first lines of Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin."³

If we can manage to humbly approach God with a genuine admission of guilt, the next step is to make our confession. I've often said that I think the protestants got it wrong when they did away with the confessional. Why? Because when we make our confession, especially when we speak it aloud and hear our own voices, there's a kind of reckoning that happens with our own souls. Confession causes us to linger a while on something unpleasant that we're responsible for, allowing the harm we've done to be more real and present for us. When we demonstrate to the one we're confessing an awareness of the fullness of our wrong, and our responsibility for our part in it, it provides a window of hope for a restored relationship, whether it's with God or other people.

David seems to point to his murder of Uriah as his most urgent sin, saying in Psalm 51, "Forgive me for shedding blood, O God who saves."⁴ If you had to identify one thing this morning that has most broken your relationship with God and others, what would it be? Holding that inside your soul, unconfessed, won't work. Unconfessed sin is like unforgiveness. It will eat you alive, sapping your strength, turning your bones to powder. I actually prefer the New Living Translation of that verse, your "strength evaporated like

² Psalm 51:4. Ibid.

³ Psalm 51:1-2. Ibid.

⁴ Psalm 51:14. Ibid.

water in the summer heat.”⁵

It’s one thing to be aware of your sin. It’s another thing to confess it. And that means more than just acknowledging your sin in the quiet of your mind. It means speaking it out loud, to God in earnest prayer and to whomever you have in your life who you can trust with your confession. It also assumes repentance, or at least the desire to repent, or “turn around” and walk the other way from your sin. God will give us the strength to do that, but we have to choose to accept God’s help. How eager are you to offer forgiveness to someone who fully intends to hurt you again tomorrow? God is in the business of transforming lives, and after confession, transformation requires repentance.

God renders a verdict on our sin like a courtroom judge. In the New Living Translation of Psalm 32, David writes of his criminal record being expunged, “cleared of guilt.”⁶ But God also judges us like a high priest. In Psalm 51, David asks God to “Blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.”⁷ Thankfully, God’s verdict doesn’t stand solely on the evidence of our guilt. Grace intervenes, and God’s justice is satisfied by the sacrifice of Jesus, allowing God’s compassion to deliver a verdict of “not guilty.”

I don’t mean to make this all sound simple, because it’s not. God’s grace isn’t a get-out-of-jail-for-free card that we can play and then go along on our merry way. God’s forgiveness may be released to us over time, transforming us as we have the capacity to receive it, and leading us through a process of restoring our lives and the lives of those individuals or communities we’ve sinned against. John Wesley was very process-oriented in his view of salvation, and so am I. There are ebbs and tides in our faith lives, and moments of victory in confession and repentance, and inevitable moments of backsliding. But that doesn’t mean we stop trying, with each and every moment of every day, to faithfully face God with an honest reckoning of who we are and who we hope to be, trusting in the unfailing love of God to hold us and lead us on. The brokenness of sin, even the worst sin you imagine you’ve committed, can be forgiven and made whole when you turn to God in

⁵ Psalm 32:4. Ibid.

⁶ Psalm 32:2. Ibid.

⁷ Psalm 51: 1-2. Ibid.

confession.

Please take some time now to reflect on your need and thankfulness for God's forgiveness.



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