

"AGAINST YOU ONLY HAVE I SINNED"

SERIES: "YOU ARE THE MAN"

by Steve Zeisler

Ray Stedman used to tell a joke about a man who had a guilty conscience. He wrote a letter to the IRS saying, "I haven't been able to sleep because last year when I filled out my tax return, I misrepresented my income. Enclosed is \$500. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

The need for a cleansed conscience is universal, and we have turned to the Bible's account of King David's life for help in this regard.

At this point in our study we've finished with the narrative in 2 Samuel, in which David withdrew from his responsibilities, committed adultery and murder, lied, eventually was exposed, and confessed. In the last message we considered some of the hard outcomes in the lives of his sons. Now we're going to devote two messages to Psalm 51, one of the best-known and best-loved of David's psalms. It's a description of a man with a guilty conscience who learned about the redeeming love of God. This was obviously written after David was able to reflect on all that had happened to him. It was well past the time in his life when he was blaming others and rationalizing his choices, when he wanted to change the subject or hoped it would all go away. This is a great testimony to what happens when we face ourselves as we are and let God deal with us.

WHY WE NEED TO HEAR ABOUT SIN AND FORGIVENESS

We were discussing Psalm 51 in our staff Bible study last week, and one of the questions that came up was whether this material is pertinent in the modern world. Aren't we living in times when people, especially the younger generations in this culture, have given up believing in the sinfulness of such things as adultery and lying, when firm categories of right and wrong no longer exist? The simple notation in the superscription, "When the prophet Nathan came to [David] after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba," is clear, unambiguous, straightforward. Consider verse 3,

**"...I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me."**

David was clear on what his transgressions were. He knew them by name. He knew why they were wrong. Yet some might say, "Is that true any more for people in our culture? Does this psalm talk to people in the modern era, or should we go on to other things?"

Let me just make some comments as to why the language of this particular psalm remains critically important in every time and place. Cultures do change, and what people learn about morality and how they regard their behavior does change from time to time. It is important for us to learn how to represent the gospel in a world that is different from the one many of us grew up in. But even so three things remain true.

First, everyone in the world is made in the image of God. That does not change. We have a God-awareness that is at the core of who we are. It cannot be altered by what we're taught or not taught in school or what we hear through the media or anything else. The great Biblical statements of right and wrong (e.g., the Ten Commandments) come from God's heart. They aren't arbitrary, transient notions. The law is an expression of God's nature. Therefore, because we are made in his image, there is something very deep in us that will resonate with these great themes. So no matter what we're taught on the surface, at some deep place in us we all know that, in the case of David, for example, adultery is wrong and sexual fidelity is right, that we were made sexual beings for reasons of high purpose, not of just momentary pleasure. We all know that telling the truth is right whether we are taught that in classrooms. So when we are speaking of these great themes of what it means to be human, we are inevitably going to connect with something very deep in people, even if it appears that it is out of fashion.

Second, we should remember the witness found in the second chapter of Romans. Part of the argument is this: Even if you never heard one verse of the Bible or any analysis that grows from Biblical truth, you do have a conscience, a set of moral conditions. Further, you violate your own moral code and do what you believe to be wrong. That's one of the conditions of being human. We fall short, even if we get to choose the categories of right and wrong for ourselves. Moderns are likely to consider loyalty to one's friends to be a very important conviction. Perhaps sympathy and being concerned about the feelings of another are highly valued. But whatever is called good, every person, if they're honest with themselves, must admit that they fail to do what they have decided they ought to do. Everybody is guilty. So the language of forgiveness that occurs throughout this psalm is important for everyone.

Lastly, the Scriptures declare that "...the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23). It remains true that sin always deals death even if we assess ourselves to be more confused than rebellious. We live in a world in which every generation, perhaps especially the younger generations, are living with the results of sin and death. There is an enormous amount of loneliness, fear, hollow relationships, confusion, and heartbreak. So if there is language that we can speak that talks about a God who restores and forgives and changes, then we're saying the things that people need to hear. These things remain pertinent and important because modern men and women are experiencing darkness, and this psalm has a great deal of light to shed. Let's read verses 1-9:

**Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.**

**For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.**

**Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.**

MOURNING FOR OUR UNCLEANNES

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said a great many things that are contradictory to the way we naturally think. One of the most challenging is this simple statement (Matthew 6:4):

**"Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted."**

It is a good thing to experience mourning, to look hard at sin and death, to acknowledge sorrow, to mourn especially for one's own sins, to grow sick and weary of ourselves. Those who mourn are comforted. This psalm has some wonderful language of self-discovery, of mourning for who we are and what we have done, and about the God who comforts us as we take our sins seriously.

Let's look at this psalm through the lens of Jesus' statement: "Blessed are those who mourn...." What does it mean to mourn for one's sins, to be honest about the real person we are? David uses three images in verses 1-9.

The first image is of the laundering of clothes. In verse 2, we read,

**"Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin."**

In verse 7,

**"Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow."**

David is speaking of his life as a garment, if you will, that is soiled and reeking. One commentator even suggests that we might think of dirty diapers when we consider what David is trying to say here; he has become objectionable and repulsive; there is something that makes people withdraw from him because of his uncleanness.

You may have seen the movie *Ben Hur*, one of the great Biblical dramas of about thirty years ago. Toward the end of the movie, Judah Ben Hur, the protagonist, finds his mother and sister after having been separated from them for a long time.

They have become lepers, and he approaches them in a scene filled with darkness and foreboding. They are wearing tattered clothes, and, as lepers were required to do at that time, they call out, "Unclean!" to warn other people not to come near and be contaminated by them.

I heard a woman named Marilee Strong interviewed on the radio this week. She has written a book called *A Bright Red Scream* (1) about people who cut themselves, burn themselves, starve themselves, and in other ways physically punish themselves because of self-hatred. Princess Diana was a cutter. She slashed at her arms and her torso and other places. There was a sixteen-year-old girl quoted in this book as saying that when she saw herself bleeding from the arm it was a relief, because everything in her was so foul and repulsive to her that its leaving her body gave her some hope.

David is using the hard language of being stained, repulsive, unworthy of the company of other people, unclean, to describe himself. He is offensive, and he needs help.

MOURNING FOR OUR GUILTY STANDING

A second way David acknowledges his problem is in a legal construct. Verses 3-4:

**"For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge."**

This is a courtroom setting, if you will, and God speaks rightly when he points to the specific, objective things that David has done and says they are wrong. "You took a woman you had no right to, knowing exactly what you were doing. You killed her husband, and you killed other soldiers needlessly. You lied to everyone. Those are the objective facts. The court finds you guilty." David is saying God is right to accuse him, and he even says he accuses himself. "My sin is ever before me."

The head coach of the Raiders, John Gruden, was arrested for drunk driving recently. There is a realistic prospect that a judge will say to him: "Because of what you've done, you're unfit to get behind the wheel of a car in California." Such an experience forces you to acknowledge, "Yes indeed, that's what I've done."

So David is saying, "If judicial proceedings were enacted, I would be guilty. And I condemn myself, if no other voice does."

Let's consider another phrase in verse 4 that's often noted, "Against you, you only, have I sinned...." Many readers ask, "Didn't he also sin against Bathsheba, Uriah, and the rest of his nation? Why does he say he sinned against God only?"

If we consider sins in human interactions it's easy to get confused. There are always extenuating circumstances and shared blame. In the case of Bathsheba, David might have said, "Well, I know I shouldn't have acted as I did, but there she was bathing on the rooftop, and she ought to have known better. She was being provocative...."

But David acknowledges in verse 4 that God didn't do anything wrong. God didn't forget him. God wasn't unloving. David sinned with a stiff neck and a high hand. God had the right to have Uriah and Bathsheba live out a full life honoring him with their marriage, and David took away what God had a right to. God had a right to have the children of Uriah and Bathsheba grow up to be healthy young people who had a respect for the God of heaven, and David took that away from God. God had a right to Uriah's long life as a soldier and a man of God in the kingdom, and David took that away from God. At the bottom of all this, David says, "You are the one I've offended most of all." He's not saying that he didn't hurt other people. Of course he did. But his sin against God was much deeper.

MOURNING FOR THE TOTALITY OF OUR SIN

Lastly, as David is being honest about the tragic person he is, in verse 5 he searches for a golden age in his life, if you will:

**"Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me."**

He's a grown man, a soldier, a king, a husband, a father. He's lived a long life by this time, and he knows that he became a violent offender and an adulterer, that his heart was hard. But we can imagine him casting back over the years of his life, wondering, "Wasn't there a time when I was a good guy, when I was courageous and thoughtful and kindhearted? Wasn't there a time when my motives weren't mixed, when I did the right thing for the right reason rather than always having some selfish bent to everything I did? Didn't I have a good chapter sometime?" He searches farther and farther back, finally to his birth, then even to his conception, and he can't find the golden age, the attractive David, the chapter of his life that was good and pure and clean and innocent. From the beginning, as far back as he can go, what he finds is selfishness.

So David mourns. You may recall the famous line of Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." And David does not once

in this psalm offer an explanation, embellish the story, or soften the blow. He grieves as one who repels other people by who he is, one who has acted inappropriately and stands judged for his actions, one who from his heart does what he ought not do. "Blessed are those who mourn..." is well illustrated here.

COMFORT FROM GOD'S MERCY, UNFAILING LOVE, AND COMPASSION

The second part of Jesus' statement is also critical: "...For they will be comforted." What is the comfort that comes from honesty about oneself? What will God do to help? What is the positive outcome that can come from this? Let's look back across these nine verses again and see what David says about God. Verse 1:

**"Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions."**

There are three wonderful Hebrew words here: the first translated "mercy," the second translated "unfailing love," and the third translated "great compassion." They sound similar but have different nuances.

The word for mercy speaks of the tenderness of God. When he sees you cry, he cries. When he sees you in pain, he hurts. His nature is to join you in your sorrow, very much as a parent feels horrible when their children are hurting.

Second, he is a promise-keeper. That is what the word *hesed*, "unfailing love," in Hebrew means. God has made a covenant, and he keeps it, although we don't deserve it. "When God made his promises to Abraham, since there was no one greater to swear by, he swore by himself, saying 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.' And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised." (Hebrews 6:13-15) No matter how difficult we make it for God to love us, he overcomes all the difficulties. His love doesn't fail.

The last word, "compassion," tells us that he not only feels our hurt, but he is always motivated to do something about it, not only because he promised but just because of who he is. He is actively compassionate by nature.

Now, David begins his prayer in verse 1 with these things not because he's hoping for a good outcome, but because of God's self-disclosure, because God has already declared himself to be like this. In Exodus 34:6 God introduced himself to Moses with this announcement: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." The God who disclosed himself to be these things is the one David prays to. He is bold to call upon God to be who he has said he would be.

COMFORT FROM GOD'S POWER TO CHANGE US

In addition to wonderful motives, God has the power to do what he says, and David is also thrilled with this. It's great to have a God who wants to help me, but it's even greater if he's strong enough to help me. If I have a list of complaints that are rightly lodged against my name, God can blot out my transgressions and iniquities (verses 1, 9). He can erase the past. He can gather sins up and throw them into the deepest ocean. He's strong enough to do that.

He can blot out not only the past, but the present. "Cleanse me...and I will be clean..." I've already made reference to that, but he says in a few different ways, "If you choose to cleanse me, I will be clean. There's no question that you have the power and authority to take away what is repulsive about me and make me worthwhile, instead of somebody to withdraw from."

And lastly, verse 6 says that God can change the inside, not just the outside:

**"Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place."**

So when I delve into myself, instead of finding a fountain that produces brackish water, I find it's cleansed. He can teach me righteousness on the inside. One of the marvelous announcements of the gospel is that we can become new from the inside out. We are united with Christ, we are the residence of the Holy Spirit. We find ourselves wanting to do the right thing instead of the wrong thing. We find to our surprise that we are engaging in acts of courage and generosity because there's something changed, something Jesus-like about us. This is very good news as David prays. Having mourned for his sins, he's speaking words that offer great comfort to the mourner.

Let me make a couple of further observations from the language that David uses. First, there is security in having God love us. If we were depending on anything else, the possibility of assurance would be very shaky indeed.

What if our president has honestly repented of his sins? What if he is genuinely converted, a man made new? Who will ever believe him? Whatever is true of him, he may live the rest of his life with a high percentage of the people in the world saying, "Nothing you can say will convince me that the changes are genuine." If he needed to depend on public sentiment, there's no hope. He can't even depend on himself. If he declares, "I know I'm converted, I know I've changed; I'm secure in the fact

that I know I'm a different man," that's not secure, because often, if it's up to us to believe in ourselves, we even fail at that.

But what David declares is that it is God who is for him. "You've acted on my behalf. You're compassionate. You love me no matter what. You're committed to me. You cleanse me and I'll be clean." The witness is not what other people think or even what he thinks. It's what God says. Nobody gets to vote on it. If the Lord names you his beloved child, then you are his beloved child.

RESTORATION BETTER THAN OUR BEST HOPES

But there's even more. There are two phrases that come toward the end of these verses. In verse 7 David alludes to one of the provisions in the law for lepers. Anyone who was healed from leprosy was supposed to go to a priest, who would take a series of steps to reinstate the sufferer in the community. These steps included sprinkling with a hyssop branch. Psalm 51 uses that language of cleansing here: "If you sprinkle me with hyssop, I will be clean."

But David doesn't end with just cleanness. He says, "...I will be whiter than snow." David could have seen the extraordinary beauty of the new-fallen snow up on Mount Hermon, the great mountain in the north of Israel. He isn't just saying that God will make him acceptable-he's saying that God will make him beautiful; not just good enough, but breathtaking. And in verse 8 he says,

**"Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice."**

The New English Bible translates it this way: "Let the bones dance which thou hast crushed." (2)David is not just asking God to make him good enough to walk, perhaps with a limp. He is saying, "Let me become someone who dances on the very bones that once were broken and inadequate."

Remember the occasion in Acts 3:6-8 when Peter and John were going by the Beautiful Gate into the temple, and there was a lame man there who made his living as a beggar. He asked for alms, and Peter said, "'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God." He wasn't just walking, he was dancing, leaping, praising God. It was far more than he had asked for. Peter said, "Walk," but that wasn't enough. David is suggesting something remarkable here: If we really mourn for our sins, the comfort of God will be beyond what we can anticipate, hope for, or conceive of.

NOTES

1. Marilee Strong, *A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain*, © 1998. Viking Penguin.
2. *The New English Bible*, © The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press 1961, 1970.

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Catalog No. 4595
Psalm 51:1-9
Sixth Message
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November 22, 1998

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