



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 5 Prayers That Rocked the World

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It seems to me that within the Christian community, there is a lot of confusion around the topic of confession. Maybe one end of the scale would be those who believe that Jesus died for our sins—past, present and future—and when you trust Christ, all sins are forgiven, and therefore, confession is really irrelevant; it's minimized. At the other end might be those who believe that every time they sin, they have to confess the sin; in essence, you keep losing your salvation until you confess, and you gain it back. And then there are views all the way in between those two extremes.

The question, of course, would be, "What does the Bible say about confession?" I would suggest what the Bible says is kind of in the middle there. I do believe the Bible teaches that Jesus died for our sins—past, present, and future. The moment you trust Christ as Savior, all our sins are forgiven—past, present, and future. So, I don't believe confession has anything to do with salvation. What I think it does have to do with is living out the Christian life. It's about staying on the path and experiencing the life that God desires for us. The word confession literally means "to agree with". I find that actually very helpful. The very heartbeat, the essence of confession, is I am saying to God, "I agree with You, that this particular behavior or attitude, whatever it is, is sin." Confession is closely linked with repentance, because if I'm going to say with sincerity to God, "Yes, I agree with You; this is sin," then what's implied in that is: then it must stop! There is repentance—there's a change of mind—something has to change.

Now I mentioned, my conclusion would be over the years, that the overwhelming majority of Christians really want to do this right. They don't really want to play games with God. They want to walk the walk. They want to experience the life that God offers, so I would suggest to you that confession, rightly understood, would be a necessary requirement to face sin, to stay on the path and not drift off and find yourself in the weeds, again and again and again. This raises the question then, "What does confession look like?"

Psalm 51 is very helpful in understanding that. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is a Psalm of David. The superscription, the little writing under the number of the psalm, tells us the background. This was David's confession after his sin with Bathsheba. As a matter of fact, the superscription, the little words there, are a play on words. Literally it says, "Nathan went into David because David had gone into Bathsheba." So, Nathan is confronting David because of his sin with Bathsheba.

If you don't know the story—2 Samuel 11 & 12—David is the King of Israel. He's on kind of a high. Everything's going his way; he gets reckless, has an affair with Bathsheba, a married

woman. She becomes pregnant; he tries to cover it up. And when that doesn't work, he has her husband killed in battle, takes her as his own wife, in hopes he can cover all this up. Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 are the two psalms written about David's confession. Psalm 32 covers a little bit more of David's year. We can tell from that psalm that it's about a year later that David finally confesses his sin, and the year has been miserable physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically—he's been in the tanker.

Now David does not come clean without confrontation. Nathan has to go into the presence of the king and confront David over his sin. I find that helpful to remember. Over the years, there are those people who, because of their guilt and shame, just on their own come clean with sin. There are others who need to get caught; there are others who need to be confronted. Often, I have heard people say, "Well, so-and-so didn't come forth on his own; you know, he was caught, or he was confronted," and usually when we are saying that, we are dismissing or diminishing somebody's confession. It's not sincere or it's not real, just because they got caught. So, it's helpful to remember that probably the most impressive confession in the Bible came out of someone who did not come forth on their own. It was someone who was busted, somebody who was confronted, and then, and only then, was there confession. But it was real, and it was true, and it was life changing. I think Verses 1 and 2 set the tone for the psalm:

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin. (*NASB, Psalm 51:1-2)

It's worth noting that David, as King of Israel, does not come before God with an attitude of entitlement. It's not like, "God, I'm the King; You owe me," or, "I've done this; I've won all these battles," or, "I've led Your people." As a matter of fact, David comes before God, not on the basis of anything related to himself, but on the basis of the character of God. "God, I am coming to You because You are gracious." That Hebrew word could be translated merciful. "You are compassionate; You are kind; You are loving, and on the basis of Your character, I come to you."

Now this is really helpful to think about. There are those of us—many of us—as Christians, who struggle to really live in the forgiveness of God. We continue to carry our guilt and shame. We tend to lock ourselves in the dark room; we have a habit of beating ourselves up over and over again, even after we've acknowledged our sin before God. And the reason we do that is because we want God to know how truly sorry, we are. "So, God, if I beat myself up for a while, if I live with this shame and guilt, if I lock myself in the dark room, then I can convince You how truly sorry I am." But this is where we get into trouble. "God, I will show You how truly sorry I am, in order that I might, in some way, deserve Your forgiveness."

This represents the very same attitude that got us off the path in the first place. It's rooted in human pride. It was pride that got us off the path in the first place. "I can do this myself"—and now I've made a mess of things, so now I'm thinking if I beat myself up enough, if I carry enough shame and guilt, if I spend enough time in the dark room, somehow I can earn this forgiveness from God. It's helpful to understand that attitude is actually offensive to God. You

cannot earn God's forgiveness; that's the whole point. We come to God confessing sin on the basis of God's character. God is merciful; God is kind; He is loving; He is compassionate, and He promises to forgive. The only thing He is asking is, "Would you believe Me and take Me at My word, and then get on with your life?"

So, Verses 1 and 2 kind of set a tone. In my opinion, Verses Three and Four are the most important verses in the psalm.

Verse 3:

For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.

The word know is the Hebrew word yada. It's the word used to describe the sexual relations between a husband and a wife. It is a term of great intimacy. Some of your translations translate that word acknowledge; "I acknowledge my sin." In my opinion that term is way too mild. The Hebrew is not, "I'm acknowledging it." The Hebrew is, "I am deeply, intimately acquainted with my sin; my sin is ever before me." He is saying basically for the last year he has been miserable; he has been carrying this burden; his life has become emotionally and socially and spiritually and psychologically a disaster, and there's this sense in which this confession is saying, "I get it." It is critical to understand this. There is a huge difference between being sorry and confessing sin. Being sorry is kind of an emotional reaction. Usually there is kind of a momentary meltdown. There is a level of embarrassment and shame and guilt, but quickly we move on and don't really face it. There is not really an acknowledgement, "This is sin and it's offensive to God". Consequently, there is not a real serious understanding that this must stop. As a matter of fact, I would go so far as to say, "If there is sin that just keeps repeating itself over and over again, you may be sorry, but you are not understanding confession. With confession comes a sense that: this is wrong; it must stop!

He goes on in Verse 4 and says:

Against You, you only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak
And blameless when You judge.

Sin is always, ultimately, against God. God sets the standard. God is the standard. Therefore sin, ultimately, is always sin against God. We have a habit, I think sometimes, of thinking of certain sins as "little" sins. Maybe we would never say that, but we think that, and consequently we excuse them. But, it's helpful to remember that little sin is a sin that cost Jesus His life, and I doubt that Jesus sees it as a "little" sin.

[In] the second part of Verse 4, David is essentially saying, "Sin has consequences," and David was well aware that there would be consequences to his sin, because Nathan laid them out for him. So what was ahead would be the consequences of David's sin and what he is saying is, "God, as I go through this, I want the nation to know that You are justified, that You are right, that You are blameless, that You are holy." In other words what he is saying is, "I have this coming. I sinned and sin has consequences and now I have to live with those consequences." I think we have a tendency to think that once we confess our sin, God should push the clear button and all consequences go away. Then we seem somewhat shocked by the fact that there are actually real consequences that we have to deal with—as if God didn't keep His promise.

Over the years I would say I have become pretty good—and I would say most of our ministry staff has become pretty good—at sorting out the difference between those people who are sorry, and those people who get it. As a matter of fact, it takes about five minutes to start to see the difference. When I'm sorry, there is kind of this emotional meltdown. I'm embarrassed; there's shame and guilt; I kind of move into damage control: Who knows? Who doesn't know? I'm trying to control all that. There is a sense in which I start to point fingers; I start to blame other people; I start to analyze the process: "You know, technically, yes, so-and-so confronted me, but they didn't follow the steps of Matthew 18, and they shouldn't have done it that way, and so it's their fault, and it's his fault, and it's her fault, and it's my past's fault." And all of a sudden, you start to realize that there is this deflection away from facing the reality that, "I agree with God; I have sinned and the sin must stop, and I understand that there will be consequences to sin, and that's my fault."

[For] someone who truly gets it, there's a sense of brokenness. There is a sense in which I am no longer doing damage control; I'm no longer trying to hide this; I'm not blaming anybody; I'm not blaming a process; I'm not trying to deflect the discussion onto anybody else. This is ME and this is MY fault, and this is what I did before God, and even though that is extremely difficult, it is the first step back. It's the first step of restoration. The whole idea in Verse 4, of acknowledging that God is just, and He is blameless as I go through these consequences, is very important to understand, because here's what often plays out when somebody is sorry, when somebody is embarrassed, when somebody is exposed.

It kind of goes like this: Let's say this sin is against my wife, and so finally something happens and it's exposed and I say, "I'm sorry...I'm sorry; I was wrong," and my expectation is that she is required by God to forgive me. And part of the mindset is: she just needs to forgive me and pretend like it never happened and let's move on. So that's kind of how it lays out. "I'm sorry; I was wrong," and my expectation is, "You should forgive me," and we move on with no consequences. We move on as if it didn't happen. But the person who has been deeply wounded—she has a check in her spirit — "I'm not sure he gets it; I'm not sure he understands what he did. I don't know that he understands the pain, that this is really deep; I don't know that he really gets it," and the fear is that if he doesn't get it, it is almost guaranteed to be repeated again. So, there is the sense in which: I don't think you get it. You are just wanting this simple, "I'm sorry; I admitted it; let's forget it and let's move on." But the person I've wounded can't just move on, and so now here's where it gets interesting. It's as if everything turns upside down because now I, as the one who committed the sin, start presenting it this way, "Hey, I said I was sorry; I don't know what else I can do. I was wrong," and what is implied in that is: "You are

supposed to forgive me. As a matter of fact, if you don't forgive me and let us just move on, then it seems to me you are the one who is now disobedient." So now it turns upside down and now suddenly I am taking the high road and you are the one that is wrong. I have seen that happen over and over and over again. For confession to be real and true there has to be a sense in which, "I get it. I did it; I blew it; it's sin before God, and I have to face that and there are consequences. I've hurt people I deeply care about, and it may be a long, difficult road back, and it's all my fault." There is a very different spirit among those who genuinely confess sin.

Arnie: Bryan, thank you so much for helping us understand more about confession, but what happens in our relationship with God, when we either ignore our sin or gloss over it? "Hey, I'm sorry; won't do it again." What's that all about?

Bryan: Well, I would refer to it as minimizing sin and boy, that's a very dangerous thing to do. It tends to grow like a cancer and eats away at us. And what could have been dealt with, with a little bit of damage, ends up causing a lot of damage. So, what I see a lot is a Sin - Sorry, Sin - Sorry cycle. People take it lightly, and they just keep repeating the behavior until they're in so deep, it's hard to get back out. People start thinking there's no escape. You know a lot of people look at Romans Seven, when Paul's talking about, "There are things I don't want to do, I do, and the things that I should be doing, I don't do," and they kind of see that as a description for Christian life. What they miss is at the end of that chapter he says, "Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from this bondage?" and the answer is Romans Chapter Eight: "The spirit of Christ sets us free." Nobody has to live that way.

Cara: Well, you look at David and I'm sure he never imagined waking up one morning and saying, "Hey, I'm going to commit adultery with my friend's wife," but then he just keeps digging in. Then he has his friend killed in battle and he takes his wife for his own and then he's living as though nothing is wrong. He fell for a lie and he lived that lie for some time.

Bryan: Yeah. So definitely a progression. And interestingly enough, it starts with the goodness of God. David has become so powerful. He doesn't even go out in the Spring to fight like he's supposed to. One thing leads to another. He's in so deep and before you know it, it's just a huge mess.

Cara: I find that so odd. It's Spring, so it's fighting season; need to go out. You know, [Right.] it's like, [when kings go out] on the farm, it was calving season. I've got to go out and gather, but nope, it's Spring. Let's go fight.

Bryan: It actually had to do with the conditions. When it was wet and muddy, you couldn't get out and fight. So, you had to wait for seasons when you could meet and duke it out.

Cara: Just wait for the weather to clear up, [Right.] and I'll just hold this grudge. So, he was spiritually, emotionally, and even physically miserable about this sin for a long time before he

actually confessed it. Finally, God has to send Nathan to confront him. And that tells me that God wasn't about to let him sin very successfully.

Bryan: So, there's a couple things there. One is David is king. He's God's king. So, there are serious consequences to this in a unique way. And you're right, God will not let him have his way. And in this case, the damage was extensive.

Arnie: It seems like in our culture, we love to build people up, maybe even put them on a pedestal, and then, if not the same group of people can turn around and tear them down. And then if it's a Christ follower who's caught in doing something wrong, people really love to have a heyday. Matter of fact, I think there's a saying, Christians love to shoot their wounded, but we forget God is faithful to forgive and restore, even though we get caught up in sin.

Bryan: Right. Really important to remember that. I think for some, and I think Paul would identify them as legalists in Galatians, they find a certain satisfaction in the failure of others, because it makes them look better. And that's why Paul in Galatians Six says, "You who are spiritual should help restore those who have fallen."

Cara: When you sin against someone, does your confession to them mean anything, if you haven't also confessed to God?

Bryan: Yeah, so I'd say it's certainly incomplete, but in my experience as a pastor, usually the problem is the other way around. I don't see it very often where people confess to someone whom they've hurt, but they don't talk to God. What's way more common is people talk to God about it, but never make it right with the person. So, it's easy at the end of the day to say, "Oh, hey, I'm really sorry I did that to Cara," and then go on with my life. What's much more difficult is to look you in the eye and say, "I hurt you, I sinned, please forgive me." So, I think when we can, until we've taken the necessary action to try and restore or fix the damage we've done, it's probably incomplete.

Cara: Confession is essentially agreeing with God - I get that from you, Bryan Clark - wanting what He wants, and that's the bigger picture,

Bryan: Right. So, it is very important, and I actually really find that language beneficial when I talk to God. So, confession is agreeing with God that it's sin and offensive to Him. When I use that language, I can't help but realize that means it needs to stop. And when I use that language, it is much more likely to cause me to be serious and do something to stop the behavior.

Cara: There's no wiggle room with that. [There really isn't.] You can't really talk yourself around anything with that.