



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

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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. (*NASB, Psalm 51:4)

Over the years, I would say I have 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. 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. 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 part of the mindset is: she just needs to forgive me and pretend like it never happened and let's move on. But the person who has been deeply wounded—she has a check in her spirit. And 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. 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.

Verse 5:

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.

He is not saying that somehow the sexual act was sinful. He is saying that this is deep to the core. He is referring to original sin. We are all sinners. This wasn't just some little mistake, some little blip on the screen, but this is deep and powerful, which is evident by Verse 6:

Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.

We define temptation as the invitation to meet a legitimate need through illegitimate means. In other words: I have a legitimate need, a legitimate desire, but I didn't trust God to meet that desire. So, I decided to be my own god and I would do it my own way, and that's what's now got me in this mess. What is at the core of that is not behavior modification. What's at the core of that is that I believed a lie; I failed to believe the truth. The truth is God will be faithful to meet that need His own way, but I didn't believe that, so I decided to do it myself. So that is why David is saying, "What's necessary to correct this is at the core of my being—to get back to truth—and the truth is God is God, and God is faithful, and God must be trusted, and I no longer can function as my own god and seek to meet my own needs. I need wisdom at the deepest part of my being. I need to change at the core, not just at the level of my behavior."

Verse 7:

Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Yes, it is true; occasionally in the ancient Near East, in the higher elevations, they did get snow. Now think about this: In an ancient world where everything was brown and dirty and, on rare occasions, they would get snow. In those moments everything becomes white and has this unimaginably clean look, and that is the imagery here—that it would be like that—everything just clean and white as snow. The idea of the hyssop is a branch off a tree that had kind of this feathery stuff on the branch, on the bark, that made it actually a very good paintbrush. So, for example, when the Hebrew people were to paint the blood of the lamb on the doorposts on the first Passover, it was with a hyssop branch. It made an effective paintbrush. So, when you read through the Old Testament, it was used for a lot of different religious rituals and ceremonies.

I think specifically the one David is probably alluding to here is when someone had leprosy, they were removed from the life of the community. You literally had to live outside the city in a leper colony. It was a place of ultimate despair and loneliness. If someone reached a point of healing, to where they might be allowed back in, they had to go the priest and the priest would examine the person. If that person was truly healed, they would take the branch of the hyssop tree and use ceremonially clean water, and basically identify that this person has been cleansed; which meant they now had permission to return to the life of the community. Why I think that, is because of Verse 8:

Make me to hear joy and gladness,
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.

That word rejoice is the Hebrew word that literally means to dance. In Psalm 32, David talks about

his broken bones; he just basically means physically becoming so ill. What he is saying is, "God, cleanse me; wash me clean; make me as clean as snow, in order that I might once again enter into the life of the community. I might experience the joy of life, the joy of relationships, that these dead bones might dance again." It's worth noting that you stand no chance for Verse 8, if you don't get Verses 3 and 4. Until you genuinely face your stuff with a determination that, "It must stop!" you are never really going to experience again the freedom, the joy of relationships, of your salvation, of the life that God has called you to. You will never really experience those broken bones dancing again.

Verse 9, I think, is kind of a summary:

Hide Your face from my sins
And blot out all my iniquities.

Verse 10 begins the restoration process:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Only God can create in me a clean heart. The idea of a steadfast spirit, small "s", is basically saying, "God, I want to get back on the path again. I want to once again be going down the path. I want my life to matter. I don't want to be sidelined; I don't want to be disqualified. I want to be useful to you again."

He keeps going with that theme in Verse 11:

Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

Again, my opinion would be that the words cast away are just too mild. The Hebrew phrase means to violently fling. It is the idea of picking up something that is just disgusting and, when we pick it up, it is so disgusting that we fling it away. He is imagining himself—this is how he feels about himself—"God, I am so disgusting that I feel like You should just pick me up and fling me away. But I am asking You, "Do not do that!" It was required to have the Holy Spirit to accomplish something for God. So, in David's language, he is saying, "God, don't take Your Holy Spirit away from me." In other words, he is saying, "God, I still want to matter; I still want to be useful. I don't want to be disqualified. I want to believe that I can still accomplish great things for You, even though I've made a mess of things."

Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners will be converted to You. (Vs. 12-13)

Verse 13 is a very interesting verse to think about. All of us that have made a mess of things—which is probably pretty much all of us in the room—we look back to those moments and we say, "I wish I wouldn't have done that. I wish I would've made a different decision. I wish I wouldn't have made that choice." We look back with regret and wish it was different, but the fact

is, it's not different. That is part of what now defines your story. But what David is saying is, if we understand it this way, it may be that that part of our story is the thing that God may use the most, to bear witness to the forgiveness and grace of God.

In essence, what David is saying is, "God, if you would restore me, if you would use me again, if once again, Your Spirit would empower me to help change the world, it would bear witness to my people that even though I blew it, even though I sinned greatly, that You are a God of mercy and grace and forgiveness, and You have restored me, and You have loved me, and You have forgiven me, and You have once again empowered me. And that witness would tell others who are hiding their sin, that you can come clean. You can confess your sin. You can trust this with God and God will wipe your sin clean, that God will restore to you the joy of your salvation, that God will once again use you to accomplish great things, that you would know that even though you have blown it, failure is never final. If you just come clean, God begins a process where He will once again use you, to accomplish great things for His glory." That is the essence of what that verse is saying. If we would see it that way, we could understand that even our failures become great opportunities for God to use us to invite others to come and also experience His forgiveness.

Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation;
Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
That my mouth may declare Your praise.
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. (Vs. 14-17)

David is saying, "God, I understand what You want from me is not a bunch of religious activity." It is entirely possible, that through this miserable year, David tried some of that, trying to get rid of the shame and the guilt and the burden of this sin, but his conclusion is, "God, You don't want a bunch of religious activity. You don't want me running around trying to do so much good that it somehow hides the sin. What You want is a broken and contrite heart." Contrite means crushed. What God wants is that I would face my sin in brokenness, that I would be crushed with the offensiveness of my sin, that I would agree with God, "This is sin and it is wrong, and it is offensive to You." And what comes with that is the understanding, if that sincerely is true, "It must stop!" With true confession is the understanding, "Whatever it takes, I need to do that; it must stop!" That is what God wants.

Only God could know how much Christian activity is motivated by people trying to somehow deal with their shame and their guilt, with this burden of sin, with this secret life that remains in the shadows; they are doing all kinds of things, hoping, somehow, that will make it go away. When all the time, God is saying, "I don't want that. I don't want a bunch of religious activity. I don't want you pretending to be good. I want you to be broken and crushed over your sin. I want you to deal with it and I want you to once again experience the joy of your salvation. I want you to get back on the path. I want to restore you back, that your broken bones might dance again." But it will never happen until we are serious about our sin.

There is a lot of debate about whether Verses 18 & 19 were part of the original psalm or if they were

added later by an editor. It's really hard to tell, but it doesn't change the meaning either way.

By Your favor do good to Zion;
Build the walls of Jerusalem.
Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices,
In burnt offering and whole burnt offering;
Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.

Simply stated, those 2 verses say, "As the king goes, so goes the nation." The sobering reality is that thousands and thousands of Hebrew people died because of David's sin, and it was a long, long road back, which poses the question, "How many people—people that you love, people that you care about, people around you—how many of them will need to be wounded before you decide to get serious about your sin?" As the king goes, so goes the nation.

There are some of you, maybe many of you, for the last thirty minutes you have been squirming. You don't have to search your heart and, "See if there be any sin in me." You know exactly what it is. You have known exactly what it is from the moment we started this conversation. The question is not, "Are you sorry?" Maybe you've been sorry again and again and again; maybe you feel the shame and the guilt; maybe you feel the weight of this thing, but maybe it's time to confess this sin. Confession means that I say to God, "I agree with You. This is sin." What is implied in that, is then it must stop! Whatever it takes, it's time to get serious and confess sin, and to trust that God is merciful. He is loving; He is kind; He is compassionate. He stands waiting to forgive you, to restore to you the joy of your salvation, to make those broken bones dance again. But it has to start with you being honest about your sin!

Cara: Thanks Bryan. You know, being honest and confessing your sin will likely bring on consequences. How do we get past the fear of those consequences to go forward with faith?

Bryan: Yeah, so you're right. When you deal with sin, oftentimes then certain behaviors get exposed and there's consequences to that. What I've seen over the years is when someone is merely sorry, there's a lot of damage control, there's a lot of secrets, there's a lot of attempts to keep it all hidden. When people are truly broken, they tend to face the consequences, and are willing to do what's necessary to make it right. Those are two really different things.

Arnie: Bryan, you mentioned thousands of Hebrew people died because of David's sin. That just seems so unfair and so wrong that one person's – granted, big sin - caused so much death to so many.

Bryan: David's king. So, the reality is when David trusted God, everybody benefited from that. In the same way, when David sinned, there were consequences. And as the king, everybody experiences that. So how many battles did they lose? It ultimately led to the civil war with Absalom and all the people that died in that. So, the consequences were severe. A lot of people died. Even the battle when Uriah died, he wasn't the only one that died in that foolish battle, so a lot of people paid the price.

Arnie: So, David's sin with Bathsheba caused him to suffer in one way or another for the rest of his life. But his confession brought him back in relationship with God again. And God blessed him after that didn't, He?

Bryan: Sure, He did. David was forgiven and he knew he was forgiven. But sin has consequences. And in this case, we know that those consequences within David's family were because of his sin with Bathsheba; because Nathan names that in the rebuke and the price tag was really high. But in the middle of all that - I mean, I find this just, I'm going to put it in the category of offensive - that David married Bathsheba. That child dies. He has relations with her again, to which I would say he had no right to that, but he did. And out of, that second child that he produced with Bathsheba, is Solomon, who is the next king of Israel, who's in the line of the Messiah. So, in the midst of all the pain is this beautiful picture of God's grace.

Cara: So, David is in total denial of his sin, and it took a confrontation with someone that David knew and respected to bring him to his senses. When we see friends and family living in denial, how are we supposed to approach that?

Bryan: Let's change the wording a little bit. I don't see it as a confrontation. You know, it's unique - Nathan stood before the king who had the power to cut off his head. Pretty brave stuff but sent from God. I would use the language of, we need to just care enough to say something. It doesn't have to be a big confrontation, but when we see, especially people we care about, in sin, we shouldn't just pretend we don't see it. We need to get involved and do what we can to help.

Arnie: So, in our research, we see a lot of people who would rather not go to church until they get their lives straightened out, and it just, it gets them into actually more trouble with drugs, alcohol, or sex. And they'd rather do that than really confess their sins to God and just move on with it. Others try to deal with it in a good way, by being super religious, and that just turns into a mess. So, what's the best way to go here, Bryan?

Bryan: Yeah. So people turn to lots of things to try to deal with their shame and guilt, but all of them, I would say, are rooted in pride, because all of them in some way are trying to somehow cover the sin, [Good point.] other than the grace of God. So, a lot of Christians lock themselves up, in what I call the dark room, and kind of beat themselves up, to convince God how sorry they are for their sin. But that's just full of pride, because we're somehow trying to demonstrate to God, "I'm worthy to be forgiven" and that's not what God asks. He just asks us to believe that He tells the truth, and He's willing to forgive us, if we seek His forgiveness.

Cara: I can assume others spoke or sang these words from David since it's included in the Psalms. In fact, Psalm 51 seems like a powerful prayer for us today.

Bryan: Yeah, totally agree. As a matter of fact, using all of the Psalms as guides for prayer can be very helpful. I think we tend to get in ruts. We ask the same thing. We use the same language, and the Psalms take us places we wouldn't otherwise go, and I think that was one of the ways they were intended to be used.

Arnie: Do you pray Scripture?

Bryan: I often do [Uh huh]. Sometimes I don't know how else to ask. [Oh.] So, you just, I just pray Scripture.

Arnie: Wow. Powerful stuff, Bryan.

Cara: That's helpful because a lot of times I say, God, I don't even know, [Yeah.] what to do here.

Bryan: What's interesting when you pray the Psalms is you go places you would never go otherwise, and I think that's part of the benefit. Eugene Peterson has a book called, Answering God, and that's what the book's about.

Cara: Well, and asking other people to pray for you, because they send things up where they just figure out how to word it, or they can see what's going on. It's like that outside perspective for you. [Yup, um hm].