

Humbled to the Dust

Psalm 51:1-19

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November 30, 2003

Turn with me to Psalm 51. We're working our way through the Second Book of the Psalms—that is, Psalms 42 to 72—on Sunday evenings. And the last time we were together, last Lord's Day evening, we were in Psalm 50. And that Psalm exhorted us to remember that the mighty God, the covenant Lord of His people, has summoned the whole world to court. And in that Psalm we learned the principle which is everywhere apparent in the prophets and in the New Testament, even in the book of 1 Peter: that judgment begins at the house of God. And the surprising thing we learned about that Psalm is that whereas the nations are called to court, the summons is not for God to bring an indictment against the nations, but to bring an indictment against His own people. And so the nations, the pagan nations in Psalm 50, are to witness God's own judgment against His own people. And in that Psalm that judgment is especially in the form of an indictment against the formalism of God's people. Outwardly, they profess to be the people of God, but their lives contradict it. And their worship contradicts that reality, and so God brings an indictment against their idolatry. They are not worshiping God right; they're not worshiping the right God the right way; and their worship is hypocritical. They offer the sacrifices which are indeed commanded in His law, but their heart is not in it and their hands are covered with the blood of sin. And so God in this Psalm sends an urgent warning and call to repentance to His people.

And so it's uniquely appropriate that we turn from that Psalm to the next one, Psalm 51: a Psalm in which David himself, personally and painfully, puts into practice the truths of Psalm 50. This Psalm has been called “the Chief of the Penitential Psalms,” those great Psalms that we find in the Psalter that show us the repentance of God's people in the face of their own sin and in the face of their need for God's mercy, their repentance before Him. And I think that that title ‘Chief of the Penitential Psalms’ is appropriate, but perhaps it falls short of the fullness of this Psalm. I would mention that David's name will appear now in the titles of eighteen of the next twenty-two Psalms. So eighteen times in the rest of this Second Book of the Psalms, David's name will appear in the title, usually as the author of the Psalm.

Before we read this Psalm let's outline it very quickly. There are six parts to this

Psalm before us in verses 1 and 2. We see the first part the Psalm. There David appeals to God for forgiveness and for cleansing. Then, in verses 3 through 5, we see the second part of the Psalm. There David pointedly confesses his sin. The third part of the Psalm is found in verses 6 through 9 where David goes back and he elaborates the appeal. In verses 1 and 2, he had given an appeal to God for forgiveness and for moral renewal, and he now elaborates on that appeal in verses 6 through 9, looking not only for forgiveness of sin but cleansing from sin, not only relief from the guilt of sin but relief from the power of sin. And we see that elaboration in the third part of the Psalm in verses 6 through 9. Then the fourth part of the Psalm in verses 10 through 13 is an appeal from David for an interior transformation. David doesn't want to end up just looking good on the outside; David wants to be changed from the inside out. He wants his heart-sins to be dealt with from the root of the heart, and so his transformation. He doesn't want to be the whitewashing of a sepulcher from the outside in; he wants to see a renewal that comes from the inside out. And you see that appeal in the fourth part of the Psalm in verses 10 through 13. The fifth part of the Psalm is in verses 14 to 17, and there David gives an appeal to God to enable his true worship. And he makes an amazing statement about what it means to worship God and what kind of sacrifice of worship God is looking for. And then finally, in verses 18 and 19, you'll see a prayer for the whole of God's people. Most of the Psalm focuses on David's sin and by extension to the individual sin. But in verses 18 and 19, the sixth part of this Psalm, the attention of the Psalmist turns from simply the issue of the plight of the individual before a just and sovereign God to the whole issue of the people of God as a whole in worship before that just and sovereign God. And so those are the six parts of Psalm 51. Before we read Psalm 51, let's pray for God's Spirit to illumine our hearts as we hear His word read and proclaimed.

Our Lord and our God, we bow before You again, acknowledging that all Scripture is God-breathed. We ask, O Lord, that by the same Spirit who inspired Your word that You would illumine our minds to understand it. Show us ourselves in Your word. Show us our sin in Your word. Show us Your salvation in the word. Show us our Savior in Your word. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is God's word.

For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba. Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when thou dost judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part Thou wilt make me know wisdom. Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I

shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which Thou hast broken rejoice. Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Thy presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation; then my tongue will joyfully sing of Thy righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Thy praise. For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise. By Thy favor do good to Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem. Then Thou wilt delight in righteous sacrifices, in burnt offering and whole burnt offering; then young bulls will be offered on Thine altar.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

You remember the circumstances of this Psalm. They're recorded for us in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12. If you don't remember all of the specifics, you may want to turn there and just refresh your mind. David's armies were in the fields of battle. David was back in Jerusalem. He rose late one afternoon. I guess David had gotten his days and nights reversed and was sleeping in, and late one afternoon he goes out onto the porch of the palace and he spies a beautiful woman. He inquires with his servants as to who she is. It turns out that she is Bathsheba, the wife of one of his mighty men, one of the men who had been loyal to him throughout his career, from the time that he was a refugee and a fugitive in the desert to the time that he had been installed as king in Jerusalem. And David does the unthinkable. While his friend, his companion, his faithful mighty man that is his leading figure among all of the armies of Israel—while Uriah is in the field of battle risking his life for David and for David's kingdom and for David's reign and for the glory of God and for the Ark of the Covenant and for the good of the people, David brings his wife to the palace and they have what we call euphemistically “an affair.” Bathsheba conceives from this affair and immediately David's first thoughts are not a realization of his sin, a realization of his wickedness, a realization of his utter breaking of covenant fidelity and commitment to this man—the way he has wounded this marital relationship; the way in which he has besmirched the kingly office, the office which we've just heard about tonight in the children's devotion; the way he's besmirched that office, that office which is to be a picture of the way that Christ serves His people—no, David's first thought, we're told in 2 Samuel 11, is how he's going to cover it up. It's a very disappointing David that we see in 2 Samuel 11—not just at the beginning, all the way through. His first thought is how to cover his tracks.

And so he begins to do that and his first plan fails. He's gonna cover his tracks by

bringing Uriah home and sending Uriah home for a conjugal visit with his wife. But, you see, Uriah is a man of principle, and while the Ark of God and the armies of Israel are in the field, there's no way. Uriah says to David, his lord, that he's not going to go home and enjoy the company of the wife of his heart. And so he stays there at David's palace. And then David tries plan B: 'I'll get him drunk. His defenses will be weak. Surely he won't be able to resist being with his beautiful wife.' Once again, even Uriah having succumbed to the powers of drink refuses to go and be with his wife. And so David falls back onto plan C. He puts a message in Uriah's hand and he says, 'Uriah, I want you to take this message to Joab. It's very important.' And David knows that Uriah is a man so to be trusted that he will not open that note, and it's a good thing because in that note David has commanded Joab to kill Uriah. Oh, I understand it doesn't put it quite that way, does it? It's 'take the troops up to the wall and then withdraw from Uriah so that he is struck down.' And David can put that note into his friend's hand and send him off to death. So bent is David to cover his own tracks, so bent is David to keep his own sin covered and secret, so self-focused is David that he's not only taken his friend's wife and conceived by her adulterously without covenant commitment and in sin against his friend, but he can send his friend to his death. David's focus is upon himself.

But God comes to Nathan, his friend and perhaps the most esteemed prophet in Israel in those days, and sends Nathan to David. And Nathan tells David a parable. He tells David about a man who was very rich and had all the animals, the cattle, the sheep, the spoils that any man could possibly want, and then a poor man who only had one ewe lamb and that lamb was to him like a daughter. And the rich man had a visitor and decided that he was going to spread a feast for that visitor. And instead of going out to his own vast holdings and taking from one of the choice animals of his own flock, he espied the one ewe lamb of that poor man. And he took that lamb, that lamb who had been to that man as a daughter, and he slew that lamb and he gave that lamb to his visitor to eat. David was enraged by this story and demanded immediately to know who that man was because he was going to put him to death that day. Nathan, David's faithful friend, said to him, 'David, you are the man I'm talking about.'

And so we get this Psalm. That's where it comes from. Can you imagine writing out the confession of the deepest, darkest, most despicable thing you've ever done and giving it to Bill Wymond to write a cantata about? And to be sung, not for a hundred years or two hundred years or three hundred years or five hundred years, but now, my friends, nigh unto three thousand years by the people of God? Singing about your sin and your confession of it, your abject humbling to the dust before an almighty God, that's exactly what David does.

I. The one thing that stands in between David and his sin and confession: the word of God.

And we can't do justice to this tonight, but there are seven things, very briefly, that I want to point you to in this Psalm. And the first thing you actually see in the introduction before you even get to David's appeal and confession proper. You see it in the title. One thing you see stands between David and his sin and David and his confession. One thing, humanly speaking, is the difference between the cynical David of 2 Samuel 11 and the broken David of Psalm 51. And that one thing, my friends, is the word of God. "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet had come to him..." That is the difference between a David headlong on the way to perdition and the David restored to the joy of salvation. That is the difference between a David only concerned to cover his crime and a David wholly concerned to confess his crime, to find forgiveness, and to find restoration—moral restoration and growth and holiness: the word of God. Nathan...Can you imagine rebuking, not simply a king of Israel but David, the man after God's own heart? And yet Nathan brings the word of God to bear upon David's heart, and that one thing stands in-between David and his confession and David and his sin.

And my friends, the truth is still the same today for you and me. Not that much, not that much lies in-between you and going the way of sin and destruction and going the way of confession and forgiveness and sanctification and glory...not that much. And the one thing that stands in-between is the word of God to you. And the word of God is here to press you back from sin. And the word of God is here to woo you back to Christ. And the word of God is here to show you yourself and show you your need and show you your Savior. The word of God stands in-between. And that, I think, is a great lesson to be learned from this Psalm. That's the first thing.

II. David's one hope in appeal: the covenant love and compassion of God.

There's a second thing. Notice the focus of David's appeal in verses 1 and 2. David has one hope in his appeal, one appeal to the living God: the covenant love of God and the compassion of God. Listen to his words, "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions." If you were in David's shoes and you had been confronted with the words of Nathan, how would you have reacted? What would you have said, and what would you have said to God? Well, I'll tell you what David says. David says, 'Lord God, don't treat me as I deserve, treat me graciously and do it for two reasons. Do it because of Your devotion to me, a devotion which you announced in Your covenant promises to Abraham, and do it because You are a God of compassion.'

You know, there's something similar, isn't there, between David and the prodigal son? Remember when the prodigal comes to his senses, he realizes two things simultaneously? First of all, he realizes that he doesn't deserve to be a son. And secondly, he realizes that his father is compassionate. And those words that the prodigal speaks to his father, they speak volumes, don't they? "Father, I don't

deserve to be your son.” And there you see it in David, ‘God I don't deserve to be forgiven, but You're a compassionate God and You're a gracious God and You're a God of lovingkindness, so You forgive me, I beg You. O God, not because I deserve it, not because there's something in me that compels Your love, but because I know what You're like.’

And I just want to say to you, my friends, that as much as David was convinced of the love and the compassion of God, it could not have dawned in his mind what it was going to cost God to answer to the prayer. He knew enough to go to God and to throw his hopes on the compassion of God, but he had no idea what answering that prayer was going to cost God. And it is the same, my friends, every time you go to God and ask for the forgiveness of sins. You have no idea what that is going to cost your God. And God answers the prayer. “Be gracious to me, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion.”

III. David's frank confession of sin: a refusal to blameshift and a complete owning of sin and sinfulness.

Thirdly, look at verses three to five—you can really look back to verses 1 through 3 again as well—and you see David's frank confession here. He refuses to blame-shift. He refuses to look for an excuse. He completely owns his sin and his sinfulness. Five times in verses 1 through 3: “*my sin*,” “*my transgression*,” “*my iniquity*,” “*my transgression*,” “*my sin*.” Five times it's “*my sin*.”

And then in verses 3 through 5, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against *You* and *You* only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in *Your* sight.” You see what David is doing. He's not saying, ‘Lord, I didn't wrong Bathsheba and I didn't wrong Uriah and I didn't wrong Israel, I wronged *You*.’ No, that's not what he's saying. He's saying, ‘Ultimately, though I have wronged all of these people and I have wrought destruction on their lives, ultimately my sin is against *You*.’ He's heightening his sin in his eyes. He can't heighten it in God's eyes. He's doing justice. He's not trying to downplay this. And what is our natural instinct when we're caught in sin? To downplay it: ‘It's not as bad as your making it out.’ To shift the attention: ‘But you don't understand the circumstances’—to divert attention from it. But here's David saying, ‘Lord, it's...it's worse than I ever imagined when I was doing it because it's ultimately sin against *You*.’ And he even goes on to say in verse 5, “I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” Again, he's not blaming his mother for this. The point is not that his mother had done something wrong; the point is that he is all sin within. The point is his whole life is a complex of sin and an affront to. David's teaching what we would call “total depravity,” “original sin.” He frankly confesses his sin.

IV. David's detailed appeal for justification and sanctification: for God to deal with sin's guilt and power.

And then, fourthly, in verses 6 through 9 he expands his appeal. He's already appealed to the covenant love and compassion of God for forgiveness and cleansing from sin. You see this in verses 1 and 2. Notice David's prayer there: "Blot out my transgressions. Wash me from my iniquity, (and) cleanse me from my sin." Blot out. He's wanting God to deal with the sin, to blot it from his memory, to grant him forgiveness. In the ancient world, writing instruments, not just the instruments with which you wrote but the things on which you wrote, were very precious; they were very expensive. And so in the ancient world there were documents called *palimpsests*. When people decided that what had been written previously wasn't as important as what they needed to write, someone would scrub those documents clean of the writing, turn them sideways, and then re-write them with something else. And David's saying to God, he wants God to do something like that with his life: to blot out the record of his life and re-write it; make it clean.

IV. David's detailed appeal for justification and sanctification: for God to deal with sin's guilt and power.

But he doesn't stop there. He asks for God not only to blot out his transgressions, but to wash him from his iniquity. He speaks of himself as if he is some sort of a filthy garment that needs to be scrubbed by the living God, and then he says, "Cleanse me from my sin." This is the language of Leviticus. This is the language of a leper going to the priest to be cleansed by the ritual action of the priest. And so he speaks, you see, about his desire for forgiveness and his desire for moral transformation and cleansing. And he elaborates on that, doesn't he, in verses 6 through 9? "You desire truth in the innermost being," he says. He knows what his God is like. His God is a God of purity. His God is a God who expects us to image who He is. And so David prays that he would be purified with hyssop and be cleaned, washed and be whiter than snow, made to hear joy and gladness. He prays for God to hide his face from his sins and to blot out his iniquities. He wants God to deal with sin's guilt and power. You know how we sing in the song "cleanse me from its guilt and power"? That's exactly what David is asking.

And by the way, that's one of the signs of true repentance. True repentance not only acknowledges our own sin...and that's an important thing. Have you ever been to prison? It's amazing! Nobody's guilty there. They've all been framed. They've all been misunderstood. There was a crooked lawyer or a crooked judge. They're all misunderstood. I'm exaggerating, but 85% of the time that's the way it is, isn't it? David doesn't do that, 'It's *my* sin. I deserve this. I deserve this and worse.' But he's not just interested in being forgiven; he's interested in being holy. He wants God to deal with the power of sin, and so he wants to be purified, and he wants to be washed, and he wants to be made whiter than snow. And

again, he elaborates on this in verses 10 through 13. He desires a heart renewal. He wants forgiveness and restoration. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit from within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." There's a sermon just in that sentence alone.

But just remember this: David had seen a man upon whom the spirit of God had rested, named Saul. A man who was so evidently empowered by the Holy Spirit that it became a proverb in Israel to say of King Saul, "Is Saul to be numbered among the prophets?" And he had seen that man fall from grace. He had seen a man who had been empowered in some measure by the living God, extraordinarily even though not savingly and ordinarily. He had seen a man left, forsaken. And David says, 'Lord, I know what that looks like, and here's what I'm pleading, don't leave me like that! Save me. Change me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation.'

V. David's desire for heart renewal: from forgiven to restored.

And then in verses 14 through 17 he tells you about his yearning for true worship. He wants to sing to God and praise God. Notice what he says, "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. Open my lips, O Lord, 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." He is going to offer to God the sacrifice of repentance. That's the sacrifice that he is going to plop up on the altar. Not a bull or a ram, not a burnt offering, but his repentance he is going to plop up on the altar as his worship.

And, my friends, there is never a time when we as Christians can afford to come in to worship the living God when we do not worship with repentance. Because until this life is over we will always have to deal with our sins. Until God has eradicated the very last one of them, there will always be sin to be dealt with. 'And so,' David says, 'I will worship with my repentance.' And then he prays for all of the people of God, doesn't he, in verses 18 and 19? Because he recognizes that all of the people of God need this restoration. They haven't committed the same sin as David. David doesn't get into the pattern of so many sinners of accusing everybody else of committing the same sin as they have committed and demanding that everybody else repent of their own sin. But David does know that Israel as a whole needs the forgiveness of sins. And so he prays for God's favor to Zion, and he prays that Zion will be able to worship in spirit and in truth with repentant hearts. May God grant that we would sing and pray this Psalm in spirit and in truth. Let's pray.

O Lord, there are so many Psalms in Your divine hymnbook that speak of the sovereign grace which avails to those who humble themselves before You and

wait upon the salvation which is only in Jesus Christ, but we can think of few that are so full of the gospel as this one. And yet even this one is transcended by the glory of what You have done in Jesus Christ. And we pray that there would be an apprehension in our hearts of the compassion of the Father that would correspond to our own sense of need of that compassion, and that that apprehension would draw us to the Savior in spite of our knowledge of our own sin and even because of our knowledge of our own sin, and there we would find forgiveness and cleansing in Jesus' name. Amen.

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