

PSALM 51, "SIN AND SALVATION"

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

- [1] Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- [2] Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
- [3] For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- [4] Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
- [5] Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- [6] Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- [7] Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- [8] Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
- [9] Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- [10] Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
- [11] Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- [12] Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
- [13] Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
- [14] Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
- [15] O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- [16] For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
- [17] The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
- [18] Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;

**[19] then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.**

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David wrote this Psalm at a real low point in his life [2 Sam 11-12].

He was something like a celebrity pastor
who had really let his power go to his head.

He had other people to do his real work for him,
lit. out fighting his battles where he should have been, on the front lines,
while he was enjoying himself.

He had the power to take what he wanted,
& what he wanted was this other man's wife.

The situation got out of control when she got pregnant—
if he couldn't control the situation up front,
at least he could do damage control to preserve his celebrity status.

So, while David *should* have been
faithful to his own calling as a shepherd & servant of God's people,
faithful to his own marital vows,
faithful to his loyal friend, Uriah, one of his mighty men,
instead, he used his power to serve himself,
to fulfill his own lusts, to bend others to his will,
& to escape the consequences of his faithlessness.

He abused his authority, abused people under his authority,
& did further evil to hold on to his authority, to keep his abuses secret.

He committed adultery & he murdered to cover it up...
he even swept others into his crimes as accomplices.

& I don't think David even allowed *himself* to know
the *full* magnitude of what he had done.

He compartmentalized & shut this evil out of his mind.

When Nathan the prophet confronted him,
& told the story about the rich man who destroyed the poor man's life,
at first he didn't recognize himself in the story.

He was in such deep denial that he even reacted w/ righteous indignation,
& said that the man who did this deserves to die.

Nathan had to tell him directly, *point blank*: “David, *that’s you.*”

Then, by the grace of God, through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit,
the Word of the Lord broke through all his defenses / denials / deceptions.

Maybe good king David preferred to think better of himself,
but now, acc. to the Scriptures and even his own admission,
he deserved death a couple times over.

& *knowing this was a mercy*—

God *mercifully* set him *free* to know his sin and be able to confess it.

When you sin, don’t do damage control. Confess it.

The Lord sent Nathan to David...

to bring him to a place of greater self-awareness, contrition, confession.

[3] I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

“I can no longer escape the reality of what I’ve done.”

& here’s the deepest reality of what David has done:

**[4] Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.**

This is one of the most important things God teaches us
that barely makes any sense to us the first time we consider it
but that we become more convinced of as we grow & mature.

[4] Against you, you only, have I sinned & done what is evil in your sight.

When David abused his power,
he had failed his army / nation as a self-centered leader,
he betrayed his own wives, he violated Bathsheba,
he made her a widow by killing a better man than himself.

David hurt a lot of people.

So how could he *possibly* say so dogmatically, so emphatically,
against you [God], you only, have I sinned...?

Is he a complete sociopath?

totally insensitive to the ways he has betrayed & hurt everyone?

Listen, this is one of the most important things you could know about yourself & about your sin...

*Against God, and God only,
have you sinned & done what is evil in his sight...*

If sin isn't essentially, first, & foremost something about your rel. w/ God, then it is *nothing*. Absolutely nothing at all.

The only reason sin is sin is b/c of God.

Sin isn't sin because it hurts other people.
Sin isn't sin because it's self-destructive,
or b/c it makes you feel guilty, like a bad person,
or b/c it breaks some abstract moral code.

Sin is sin b/c it's against God.

The nihilists are right: apart from the reality of God, anything goes... it's dog-eat-dog, survival of the fittest, everybody pursue your own interests at the expense of others, do whatever it takes to get power, use power, keep power.

So this is related to that apologetic argument that without God there is no foundation for morality / good and evil / sin.

But this is not some abstract, philosophical argument— this is the relational reality behind the argument.

If not for *God*, for his *reality* and David's *relationship* to God, it wouldn't matter at all what David did to everybody in his life.

The main thing wrong with what David did, the thing at the very heart of all the wrong David did was *sin against God*.

This is how all the Scriptures understand sin.

[Gen 39:9, Joseph when tempted by Potiphar's wife]
"How can I do this great wickedness and *sin against God*?"

[Prov 14:31] Whoever oppresses a poor man *insults his Maker*...

[1 Sam 12:23, Samuel to God's people] "Far be it from me that I should *sin against the LORD* by ceasing to pray for you."

When Jesus forgave that paralytic, his enemies were right:

“Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

because *sins are against God alone*, even when we hurt others by our sin.

The way you relate to other people is ultimately, essentially, first & foremost the working out of your relationship to God, your response to God.

When you sin against God, yes, it has real effects on other people, to be sure.

But we need to admit the deepest, truest reality: that *it is sin against God*, against the one who is the fountain of all life & goodness & love.

God even says so to David through the mouth of Nathan the prophet...

[2 Samuel 12:7–13] Nathan said to David, “...Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. [8] And I gave you your master’s house ... and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. [9] Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites... you have despised me... [13] David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Everything David had done w/ regard to Bathsheba & Uriah was a violation of his rel. w/ the God who had made him who he was.

[Tim Keller] Every sin is cosmic treason—
it is overthrowing the rule of the one to whom you owe everything.

That’s true even if you don’t realize that’s what you’re doing.

Hardly anyone consciously thinks, when they’re lusting,
“God doesn’t satisfy me, the will of God isn’t enough for me,
so I’m going to pursue my pleasures over here.”

Hardly anyone consciously thinks, when they’re hating someone,
“I hate God & his providence, & I’m going to direct that anger here...”

But God says that, when we sin, we’re despising him—
even if you haven’t explicitly thought of God at all.

In fact, ignoring God while we sin might be the worst slight of all.

You are meant to live your entire life, every moment,
loving God *with all your heart... soul... mind... strength*.

You're meant to live by every Word that comes from the mouth of God.

If you ignore his Word, you're far from thoroughly devoted to him.

This is why James says, **[James 2:10–11] Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. [11] For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.**

Being a transgressor of the law
doesn't just mean you've violated a cosmic code of conduct—
it means you've violated your relationship w/ the God who gave the law.

It's only b/c of God's revelation of his reality
that we can know what a rel. w/ him should & should not look like.

Sin is defined with reference to God, alone.

That means that the brokenness of our human relationships
isn't the main thing wrong with the world / me / you.

The way our racial injustices affect others...
the way our sexism affects others...
the way child abuse or sexual scandals or corruption of power affect others
these are not the *main* things wrong with the world / me / you.

The main thing wrong with us is our rel. w/ God,
& you haven't truly understood sin—either your own, or others'—
unless you've understood it as being against God alone.

& you won't be able to help anyone with their *main* problem
unless you help them understand it is sin against God alone.

When you yell at your kids, you sin against God alone...
when you complain about the circumstances of your life, you sin...
when you harbor bitterness in your heart, you sin against God alone...
when you're self-righteous & arrogant, you sin against God alone...
when you're being controlling,
or when you're obsessed with your own comfort,
or when you've given yourself to alcohol, you sin against God alone.

From the full-fledged adultery & murder God said not to commit,
all the way down to eating a piece of fruit God said not to eat,
it's cosmic treason because of *who it is you're sinning against*.

Which means you can *never* say, “Oh, this particular sin isn't a big deal...”

Yes, we believe some sins are more heinous than others,
but did you commit cosmic treason?
Did you violate your rel. w/ God, the Creator,
the one who stands at the heart of all reality?

Then it's a big deal, even if it was just picking a fruit & tasting it,
even if it was just losing your temper that one time—
even if it was just *not considering him* as you went about your day.

This is something we generally can't stand to admit.

Thinking about our sin on that level is overwhelmingly unmanageable—
I cannot hope to fix the problem of my sin against God.

So we find excuses. We minimize. We shift the blame.

“I was just tired and lost my self-control.”
“*He* started it.”
“The devil made me do it.”
“That's not who I am, it's so out of character for me, I promise.”

Nope.

**[5] Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.**

This is who I am. I sin against God, because I'm a sinner.
It's completely in character for me.
It goes all the way down to my nature, my identity, in-and-of myself.

That's impossible to face about yourself, apart from God's grace.

But *because* of God's grace,
I can face this about myself better now than I did when I first believed.

This is what Luther meant, I think, when he said “sin boldly.”

[Martin Luther] Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong [or *sin boldly*], but let
your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over
sin, death, and the world.

Let your sins be what they really are,
b/c then and only then will Jesus be who he really is to you.

He is the Lord who forgives cosmic traitors,
& in his great mercy he sets you free to confess: that means you / me.

I can *only* face this reality about myself
because I know the even greater reality of the love of God in Christ.

Ult., I'm going to be OK w/ whatever terrible truth I discover about myself,
or that others might learn about me,
b/c God knows all about it, loves me anyway,
and gave his Son's life for me.

And his blameless judgment is all that matters.

Convincing you of *that* is the whole point of convicting you of your sin.

The point of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit
is to convince you of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God doesn't bring you to greater self-knowledge to make you despair—
he does it so that you will be *free* in his forgiving love.

When your sin appears <this small>,
you might have <this small> appreciation for God's grace.

When your sin appears like an UNSCALABLE MOUNTAIN,
& you realize that *Jesus died for that, even though you had no idea*,
THEN HIS GRACE WILL BE EVERYTHING TO YOU.

**[6] Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.**

“You aren't done with me...
You teach me what to do about this sin prob. on the most personal level.”

God is teaching us to believe how great his love really is,
that he would forgive sinners like us.

**[1] Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love [lang. remind of covenant promises];
according to your abundant mercy [deep, visceral, fierce compassion]
blot out my transgressions.**

It's an audacious prayer. Outrageous!
Blot out my transgressions...

When God judges sinners, he blots *them* out...
out of this world, out of existence, out of memory, out of his Book of Life.

[Gen 6:7, Flood] “I will blot out *man*... from the face of the land.”

[Ex 32:33] “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.”

But David, the cosmic traitor, is bold enough to ask...

“Don’t blot out *me*... blot out *my transgressions*.”

The sinner asking God to forgive him is *imposing* upon God for something he doesn’t deserve.

“Do not deal with me acc. to what I deserve, acc. to my sin... deal with me acc. to your *mercy*.”

Do you have the right to ask God for forgiveness for cosmic treason?

Only if God gives you the right.

Only if God says you may impose on him.

Only if God says you may appeal to his mercy.

[2] **Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin! ...**

[7] **Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**

Where did David get this bold idea of appealing to God’s mercy?

David has learned from God, from his Word, from the Scriptures,
how it is that God will forgive his sins,
& he asks for it very specifically.

Purge me with hyssop...

Hyssop is just a little plant, a little medicinal herb.

It has antiseptic properties, but that isn’t why David prays this way.
(He isn’t saying, “Mix up a little cleaning solution with hyssop...”)

In the Bible, *cleansing* is pictured by sacrificing an animal,
dipping a sprig of **hyssop** in the blood,
& sprinkling it on the unclean person.

David is asking for his sins to be purged
by the blood of a substitutionary sacrifice.

Rather than *his own* blood being spilt for his sins,
he is asking that God’s justice would be satisfied
by the shedding of *another’s* blood for the forgiveness of sins.

He only asked this because God taught him / gave him the right to ask it.

Only God can forgive sins,
and God has said he would do it through a substitutionary sacrifice.

& that's exactly what happened when Jesus came into the world.

The holy Son of God took on our humanity,
the sinless one joined himself to us in a sinner's baptism,
pledged himself to be our representative,
submitted himself on our behalf to the verdict: "guilty of cosmic treason."

Jesus, the only human with a truly pure heart, a clean heart & a right spirit,
went to the cross, a willing substitute & sacrifice,
to give his life for ours, his blood for ours,
for the forgiveness of our sins, once and for all.

This is what it looks like for God to deal with you according to his mercy,
what it looks like for God to fix the main problem with the world,
the problem of our sin and our broken rel. w/ him—

it's the free gift of the life of his beloved Son
& eternal life w/ God in his name.

So let your sins be what they really are
so that you can know who Jesus really is for you,
so that you can know the joy of his salvation,
so that you can live as a new creation,
live with the heart of the new man, Jesus, himself,
so that you can teach transgressors his ways
& sing aloud his righteousness.

Amen.