

Psalm 51

Today's lesson is on Psalm 51. Some of the psalms in the Bible provide us with no information concerning the identity of its author or the time period in which it was written. This particular psalm, though, is a striking exception. If you look up this psalm in your Bible and look at the text right above verse 1, you will see this:

To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bath-sheba.

This tells us a great deal! Not only do we know that this psalm was written by David, but we also know the context. The psalm was written after the prophet Nathan confronted David about the sin he had committed with Bathsheba.

Since this psalm is about repentance, we need to understand what happened before we can dive into the psalm. Everything started when the king of Ammon died and his son Hanun gained the throne. Since David had been friends with Hanun's father, David tried to comfort Hanun for the loss he had just suffered:

2 Samuel 10:1: "And it came to pass after this, that the king of the children of Ammon died, and Hanun his son reigned in his stead.

2 Then said David, I will shew kindness unto Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father shewed kindness unto me. And David sent to comfort him by the hand of his servants for his father. And David's servants came into the land of the children of Ammon."

David was genuinely trying to comfort the son of a man that he respected. The son, however, decided that the best way to respond to David's gesture was to be as insulting and rude as possible:

2 Samuel 10:4: "Wherefore Hanun took David's servants, and shaved off the one half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks, and sent them away."

Hanun went out of his way to humiliate David's servants and send them home naked. He then decided that since he had already insulted David, he might as well hire an army of mercenaries and send them to kill David:

2 Samuel 10:6: "And when the children of Ammon saw that they stank before David, the children of Ammon sent and hired the Syrians of Bethrehob and the Syrians of Zoba, twenty thousand footmen, and of king Maacah a thousand men, and of Ishtob twelve thousand men."

Things had rapidly gone from bad to worse. David tried to comfort Hanun over the loss of his father, and in return Hanun declared war on him. This war, though, did not go in Hanun's favor. The mercenaries that he hired were killed and the ones who survived refused to work for Hanun again:

2 Samuel 10:18: “And the Syrians fled before Israel; and David slew the men of seven hundred chariots of the Syrians, and forty thousand horsemen, and smote Shobach the captain of their host, who died there.

19 And when all the kings that were servants to Hadarezer saw that they were smitten before Israel, they made peace with Israel, and served them. So the Syrians feared to help the children of Ammon any more.”

At this point David had defeated Hanun's hired mercenaries but he hadn't dealt with Hanun himself yet. The battle had been won but the war was not finished. So after the year was over the armies of Israel went out to attack Hanun and defeat the Ammonites. But David made a critical mistake. Instead of joining his army he stayed home:

2 Samuel 11:1: “And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem.”

As the passage explains, this was the time of year when kings went out to battle. David had unfinished business with Hanun – but instead of dealing with it himself, he sent someone else and stayed home. David should have gone out with his armies, but he didn't. David should have been the one to confront Hanun, but he didn't. Instead of doing his job he sent other people out to fight his battles and stayed home.

If David had been out in the field with his soldiers, he would never have seen Bathsheba and none of the subsequent events would ever have happened. David was only tempted because he wasn't where he should have been.

Since David was at Jerusalem, he saw something he should never have seen:

2 Samuel 11:2: “And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.”

Should David have been watching this woman bathe herself? Absolutely not! David should have immediately gone back inside. The only reason he could see her at all is because he lived in a palace, and his palace was taller than all of the surrounding buildings. Bathsheba thought that she had some privacy – but David violated it.

At this point David could have walked away, but he didn't. He made things worse. Even though he already had multiple wives, he decided that he wanted Bathsheba as well:

2 Samuel 11:3: “And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?”

David was told that this woman was *married*. In fact, he was married to Uriah the Hittite – one of David's famous mighty men. She was the wife of one of David's most committed and loyal soldiers. She was also the granddaughter of Ahithophel, David's trusted counselor. In other words, *she was not available*.

At this point David could still have walked away from this – but he didn't. He decided that he

didn't care that she was a married woman. He didn't care that she was the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers. He didn't care that her husband was risking his life on the battlefield to fight David's war. David wanted to have sex with her, and so he took her:

2 Samuel 11:4: “And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house.”

Keep in mind that David had a *lot* of wives. Yet, in spite of that, he still choose to forcefully take someone else's wife. David thought that no one would ever find out what he had done, but he soon learned that she was pregnant:

2 Samuel 11:5: “And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child.”

David knew that he had a problem because Uriah would never believe that the child was his. After all, Uriah was currently on the battlefield, fighting in Joab's army. Instead of confessing what he had done, David decided to hide his sin by making Uriah think that the child was his. He called Uriah home from the battlefield and tried to get him to go home to his wife, but Uriah was too honorable to do that. Since David couldn't trick Uriah, he decided to have him murdered:

2 Samuel 11:15: “And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.”

As you can see, it took a lot of sins to get to this point. All of this started when David refused to go out and fight his own battles, and decided to stay home while his soldiers were dying on the battlefield. He then decided to spy on a woman who was taking a bath, and then he had sex with her even though she was married to someone else. He then tried to deceive one of his most loyal soldiers, and when that failed he decided fix everything by murdering him. In all of these terrible sins David was successful. He killed Uriah and took Bathsheba to join his large collection of wives. No one was the wiser:

2 Samuel 11:27: “And when the mourning was past, David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.”

David deceived a lot of people, but he was unable to deceive the Lord. God saw what David had done and God was not pleased. So God sent Nathan the prophet to confront him. God was not going to allow David to get away with this. He was not going to cover up David's sin. What David had done was exceptionally evil, and God was going to confront David and punish him.

Now, usually when God's prophets confronted kings with their sin the kings rejected it. The only king who ever repented of his sin and turned from it after being confronted by a prophet was actually David. In all other cases the prophet was rejected, or put in prison, or killed. But this time – this one time – the king listened.

Nathan first used a story to get David to understand the great evil that he had done, and then he told the king what the Lord had to say:

2 Samuel 12:7: “And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;

8 And I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given unto thee such and such things.

9 Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon.”

God had blessed David *tremendously*. David was the king over the entire nation. He had started out in life as a lowly shepherd, despised by everyone – even his entire family. Now David was an honored king, with a long line of victories on the battlefield. He lived in a palace and had riches and honor and glory. He even had a wife – in fact, he had *multiple* wives. David had everything he desired, and if he had wanted more God said that He would have given him more.

Yet, instead of being grateful for the immense riches that he possessed, David decided to steal from someone much poorer than himself! Uriah wasn't nearly as rich as David. Uriah was not a king and he did not live in a palace, but Uriah did have a wife that he loved dearly. David should have let him keep his wife, but instead David callously murdered him and took his wife for himself. This was a horrific, wicked thing to do.

God was not going to let David go unpunished:

2 Samuel 12:10: “Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife.

11 Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun.

12 For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.”

Since David brought trouble into the house of Uriah, God decided to bring trouble into the house of David. God did exactly what He said He would do. God raised up Absalom, David's son, who launched a rebellion against David. Absalom raped David's wives in broad daylight, in the sight of all of Israel. Since David took Uriah's wife, God took David's wives. God did to him what he had done to Uriah.

That brings us back to Psalm 51. Unlike all the other kings, David sincerely repented when God confronted him with his sin. This did not spare David from the consequences of his actions, but he did find forgiveness. Look at what David wrote:

Psalm 51:1: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.”

As you can see, David confesses his sin. He doesn't hide it or pretend that it was just a mistake. He is open and honest with God. David repents of his sin and humbly asks for mercy. David doesn't demand forgiveness; instead he humbly asks for it. He appeals to the love and mercy of God.

David also wants to be cleansed from his sin. He doesn't want to obtain forgiveness just so he can go right back and do it again. David views his sin with horror and wants to be cleansed of it. He doesn't want to be a slave to sin; instead he wants to be freed from it. He wants to be a new person.

It is critical to understand that in order to obtain forgiveness *we must repent*. There can be no salvation apart from repentance. Jesus was very clear about this:

Matthew 4:17: “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew 9:13: “But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinner to repentance.”

Matthew 11:20: “Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not.”

Jesus came to command people everywhere to *repent*. David is a great example of this. When he was confronted with his sin he acknowledged it, asked God to forgive him, and asked God to cleanse him from his sin. David no longer wanted his sin to have any part in his life. He wanted to be a servant of righteousness, not a servant of sin. David abhorred what he had done and he did not want to ever do it again. That is what genuine repentance looks like.

Some people like the idea of forgiveness but they don't believe in repentance. What they want is for God to give them a free pass. They believe that they can come to God without ever admitting that they had ever done anything truly wrong. These people have no intention of ever turning from any of their wicked deeds. They love their sin and have no intention of changing – and so they are not going to be forgiven.

Do you think that God would have forgiven David if David had told Nathan that he wasn't sorry and had no intention of changing his behavior? In order to be saved you have to repent of your sins. You have to declare war on your sin. Those who cling to their sin will not find forgiveness:

1 John 2:3: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”

Those who are genuinely saved will try to keep God's commandments. This doesn't mean that they will never sin or that they will always keep them perfectly, but it *does* mean that they abhor sin and are seeking holiness. It means that they are seeking to do what is right. Those who refuse to repent, who are not sorry for what they have done, and who continue to pursue sin are not saved. The Bible is very clear about this. David only obtained forgiveness because he repented.

After David confesses his sin he says something that at first seems a little strange:

Psalm 51:4: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest."

David said that the only one he sinned against was God. But didn't David murder Uriah? Didn't David take Bathsheba? Why did David think that the only person he had sinned against was God when all of these other people were involved?

Well, in order to answer that question we have to step back a moment and understand what sin actually is. Why was it wrong for David to murder Uriah? Because it was a violation of God's commandment. Why was it wrong for David to take Bathsheba? Because it was a violation of God's commandment. Sin is a violation of the commandments of *God*. The laws David had broken were not Uriah's laws or Bathsheba's laws. They were God's laws.

We must also notice that David doesn't call his sin a "mistake" or an "error", as so many people do today. No, David says that what he did was *evil*. We need to call sin what it really is, and not try to make light of it.

Not only does David confess his sin, but he goes further and confesses that he is a sinner:

Psalm 51:5: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me."

David isn't saying that he was the product of adultery, or that his mother was sinning when she got pregnant. What David is saying is that he inherited the sin of Adam. He was already a sinner before he was even born – from the moment of conception. You see, the truth is that there was never a moment in our lives when we were sinless and perfect. We did not become a sinner from the moment we first sinned; we were already guilty from our very first moment of life. The New Testament explains that we all inherit the guilt of Adam:

Romans 5:18: "Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous."

The reason it is possible for all of us to be saved by one man is because we were all made guilty by one man. It is the offense of *one* that caused all of us to be condemned. We were *already* condemned the moment we were conceived – and that makes it possible for Christ to save us. Since one man's actions condemned us, one man's actions can make us righteous. Our salvation depends upon us inheriting the guilt and condemnation of Adam.

David's confession is not done. He goes on to bring up another critical point:

Psalm 51:6: "Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom."

It is easy to live a lie. It's easy to make everyone around you think that you're a good person when in reality you're not. It's not that difficult to show up to church on Sunday morning and act like a righteous child of God, when in fact your heart is very far from the Lord. Remember, Judas managed to

trick everyone into thinking that he was one of Christ's most loyal disciples – but Jesus knew right from the start that he was evil. You can fool the people around you but you can't fool God.

God isn't interested in an outward display of religion. He isn't looking for people who can fake it for an hour or two on Sunday morning. What He wants is a heart that is perfect toward Him. He wants the *real thing*. He wants sincerity. Putting on a convincing outward show while staying the same wicked person you've always been is not going to save you. It is impossible to deceive God.

So how do you find righteousness? Well, you can't obtain it by your own works. You can't earn it or create it yourself. Righteousness only comes from the Lord:

Psalm 51:7: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

If the Lord forgives us then we will be forgiven indeed. If the Lord cleanses us from our sins then that settles the matter for all of eternity. However, if we try to obtain our righteousness somewhere else – through our own good deeds, for example – then we will be found guilty when we stand before God. There is only one way to be made clean, and David knew exactly what it was.

David actually felt *guilt* over his sin:

Psalm 51:8: “Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.”

Another word for this is *conviction*. People who are not sorry with their sins and who feel no remorse over them are not going to find forgiveness. Why would God forgive you if you're not sorry, and if you think that God has no right to tell you what to do in the first place? David was *crushed* by his sin. All of the joy was gone out of his life. That is why he asked the Lord to forgive him and restore the joy that he used to have.

David doesn't put any blame on anyone else. He owns his sin and takes full responsibility for it. When David seeks forgiveness he doesn't go to a priest or to anyone else; instead he goes directly to God. Only God can forgive sins.

We can see that David wanted his sins to be forgiven. But he also wanted something else:

Psalm 51:9: “Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.
10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.”

David wanted God to change his heart so that he would not return to wickedness. He didn't want to repeat what he had done. Notice that David doesn't promise to try harder or to change himself; instead he asked *God* to change him. He asked God to give him a new heart so that he no longer even had the desire to sin. He wanted to be a different person.

God granted David's request – and God will also grant that request of all who ask of Him, and who seek it with all their heart. For the rest of David's life he never again took someone else's wife or murdered anyone. He really was a changed man. His repentance was sincere and he truly did turn from his sin with all his heart.

During David's confession and repentance he asked God to not take the Holy Spirit from him:

Psalm 51:11: “Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.”

During the church age it's impossible for us to lose the Holy Spirit, because it is sealed within us (2 Cor 1:22, Eph 1:13, Eph 4:30). We can grieve the Holy Spirit (which is a serious matter) but God will never take it from us. However, in the Old Testament that was not the case. Very few people in the Old Testament were ever given the Spirit, and if they sinned they were in grave danger of losing it. A great example of this is Samson. When he violated his Nazarite vow, God removed His Spirit from him and Samson lost his great strength:

Judged 16:20: "And she said, The Philistines be upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him."

David knew that he was one of the few people of his day who actually had the Spirit, and he was worried that God would remove the Spirit from him because of the terrible sin he had committed. That is why he asked God to let him keep it. Since there is no indication that God did remove his Spirit, it seems that God granted this request.

We've seen that David confessed his sin, repented of it, and asked God for mercy. But David didn't stop there. He also promised to teach other people the ways of God so that they would also turn from their sin:

Psalm 51:13: "Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee."

David doesn't just want to address the sin in *his* life; he also wants to help the people who are around him. Once David has cast the beam out of his own eye, he is in a position to teach others. This is a natural consequence of repentance: when you come to hate the sin in your own life you start wanting to help other people overcome sin as well. Sin is a horrible thing with deadly consequences; it's only natural to want to see your friends and loved ones cured of it before it's too late. How can anyone hate sin and yet be unconcerned about the affect it had in the lives of others?

As you can see, David confronted his sin very aggressively. Do you know what he did once God forgave him? He sang God's praises:

Psalm 51:14: "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.
15 O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise."

David was *grateful* – so grateful that he wanted to sing about what God had done for him! He praised the Lord for the tremendous mercy and grace that God had shown to him. We have to understand that it is very expensive for God to forgive our sins. Since God is just He cannot sweep our sins under a rug and pretend that they never happened. Sin *has* to be punished. That means the only way we can be forgiven is if God punishes an innocent person in our place. The only innocent person is Christ – and so Jesus died in our place and took upon Himself the wrath that we deserved. The fact that God is willing to forgive us at all – and willing to pay such a high personal price in order to do it – speaks volumes about the tremendous love and mercy of God. We should definitely be singing the praises of God and thanking Him for His tremendous gift of forgiveness and salvation! We have so much to be thankful for.

David understands what forgiveness is all about. He knows that what God is looking for is a repentant heart:

Psalm 51:16: “For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

David knew that he couldn't just sacrifice an animal and walk away. We can't purchase forgiveness through good deeds, or giving money to the church, or helping the poor. What God requires is *repentance* – a heart that is broken over its sin and seeks to turn from it and do what is right in the sight of God. That is a person who will obtain forgiveness and everlasting life. Those who refuse to repent and who try to bribe God through gifts will not find the righteousness that they seek.

David ends this psalm with a peculiar request. Our lesson skips it, but I want to include it because I think it was put in the Bible for a reason. Look at what David asks for:

Psalm 51:18: “Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem.

19 Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.”

At first glance this seems strange and out of place. Why would this be included in a psalm about repentance and forgiveness?

Well, let's take a step back and think about it. Today Jerusalem is surrounded by a wall that is more than two miles long, but that wall did not always exist. In David's time the city of Jerusalem was not surrounded by a wall. It wasn't protected the way it was in the days of later kings. This was a cause for concern, because it meant that Jerusalem was much easier to attack. Remember, this entire episode with Bathsheba started when Hunan decided to attack David. A military threat against Israel began the chain of events that led to the writing of this psalm.

Do you know who built the wall around Jerusalem? It was Solomon – the son of David and Bathsheba:

1 Kings 3:1: “And Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter, and brought her into the city of David, until he had made an end of building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem round about.”

In David's prayer of repentance he asked God to build the wall around Jerusalem – and God answered that prayer through Solomon, the son of Bathsheba. Solomon built the wall. He also built the first temple, in which burnt offerings and sacrifices were made. God did indeed build up Jerusalem and created a place in the city for the offering of sacrifices – and He did it through Solomon.

This psalm provides a very clear picture of what genuine repentance looks like. God is able to forgive of all our sins, if we will come to Him and confess our sin and repent. If we do not – if we choose to continue to walk in our sins and refuse to separate ourselves from them – then we will not find forgiveness. Genuine repentance is a matter of the heart. The Lord will not despise a heart that is broken and contrite. God resists the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.