

Psalm 51

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn this evening for a few moments to Psalm 51 that we read just a few moments ago.

Two weeks ago, we began to explore this psalm, and as we did, we indicated that the psalm records three movements in genuine, biblical, God-pleasing repentance.

We noticed how in the psalm we identify the first of these movements, which is recognition of the problem or conviction of sin, to use the more churchy or theological language.

So that's the first movement, this recognition that there is a problem that needs to be dealt with.

Then the second movement we were thinking about last Sunday evening is there's that appeal for help, that cry for mercy.

And the third movement, which will be our concern this evening, is a commitment to renewal. We just kind of remind ourselves a little bit of the first two movements that we thought about over the past two Sunday evenings.

[1 : 07] I guess two Sunday evenings ago, we thought about David's recognition of his problem. We noticed how there was David's actual sin that he speaks of in the introduction to the psalm, David's ownership of his sin, taking responsibility for his sin.

We also noticed David's grasp of the source of his sin, that it's a problem that's embedded in his very nature. But also we noticed David's sense of the offense of his sin, that it is a serious matter that principally offends God.

He is the principal offended one when we sin. And then also we noticed in the psalm how it speaks of David's experience of the weight of his sin, how he felt as if his bones were being crushed by the weight of his guilt.

Well, that was two Sundays ago. Last Sunday we thought a little bit about the second movement, David's cry for help. And there we identified three elements. The grounds upon which David cried for help, we find that in the very beginning of the psalm, have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion.

And we suggested that one way of expressing that is that God is committed to mercy and God delights in mercy. And it is on the ground of mercy alone that we seek help from God.

[2 : 30] We have no other grounds upon which to approach God for help. So that was the first thing we noticed, the grounds of David's cry for help.

But then also the favor that David craved, which was to be cleansed, to be forgiven. We thought a little bit about the nature of that forgiveness. And then finally we noticed the outcome that David anticipated, joy and gladness restored in his life and experience.

Well, this evening we move on to the third stage or movement, a commitment to renewal. So, biblical repentance is never only a turning from sin, but a turning to God, certainly for mercy, but also for renewed service.

A turning to God to be recommissioned, as it were, in God's service. When we sin, when we are living in unrepentance, and then our capacity to serve God is greatly diminished, not to use stronger language.

But then when we experience this repentance, then part of that is the desire and the opportunity for renewed service.

[3 : 46] And so we turn from sin to God for mercy and for commissioning. And we see this in Psalm 51, especially from verse 10 through to the end of the Psalm, which is the content of which we're trying to capture with this phrase, a commitment to renewal.

We might also call it a desire for a new beginning. Or we could pose the matter in the form of a question, what is it that David, a repentant David, what is it that David really wants?

What is it that he most desires in this new place that he is, receiving and enjoying God's forgiveness? What is it that you really want in your life, in your life of service, and your life as a believer?

Now, David's desire for a fresh start, a new beginning, can be described or traced in three directions. Or we'll do it in that way because maybe it's easier to kind of remember it in that way. And the three directions I think we can find or identify or trace in these verses in the second half of Psalm 51 are inward, upward, and outward. And let's think of each in turn.

[4 : 57] First of all, we can think of this commitment to renewal, this desire for a new beginning in that inward direction and his desire for a heart molded by God.

That's why I speak of the language of inward. David's concern for his own heart and that his heart be one molded by God. And we find that in what we read in verse 10, also in verse 12.

Notice what David says there in verse 10, Create in me a pure heart. David, having sought and received forgiveness, now expresses this great desire that he has.

Create in me a pure heart of God and renew a steadfast spirit within me. In verse 12, he picks up on this concern for his own heart. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit or heart to sustain me.

And notice that these are all actions of God on behalf of David. These are not things that David can do for himself. He's praying to God that God would do these things for him and in him.

[6 : 06] David can't mold his own heart. And in that regard, we can maybe especially notice the verb that he uses there at the beginning of verse 10 where he prays to God, Create in me a pure heart, O God.

The verb that he employs there for create is a verb in Hebrew that is only used with God as the object. It is only God who creates in this manner.

Indeed, it's the word that we find at the very beginning of the Bible. The first verse of Genesis chapter 1. God created the heavens and the earth. That's the word that is used here. And it's only God who is described as able to do this.

And so David is very clear that this desire that he has for his heart depends on God's creative activity. Only God can create in the manner that David desires and requires.

And what kind of heart does David desire? What kind of heart would he have God create in him?

Well, he tells us. We find it in the prayer he directs to God. Create in me a pure heart, O God.

[7 : 16] What a difficult thing to have a pure heart. At a push, we can maybe manage a pure tongue for a spell. Now, when others are listening in or when we're on our best behavior, we can maybe just about manage a pure tongue for a period.

But a pure heart, we know that that is a much more difficult matter, to have a pure heart. If we even just pause in the course of a day and consider the thoughts that have gone through our mind and heart, often at variance to what appears on the outside.

Others would have no notion of all that we have been thinking and the motivations that have been driving us. And sometimes we ourselves aren't aware of it. But when we just pause and think for a moment, we know how elusive it is for us to have a pure heart.

And it's certainly true that only God can create such a heart in his children. But he can, and he does. He is doing that. It doesn't happen overnight, but that's something he is doing in and for us.

A pure heart. Is that what you desire? A pure heart. But let's notice what else he asks for. Other descriptions that he gives of what he is seeking. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

[8 : 38] In other words, heart and spirit are used synonymously in this psalm. I'm not saying that the words are always to be understood as strictly synonymous, but certainly in this psalm they're used synonymously.

We see that very clearly, for example, in verse 17. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. And evidently there he's using the word spirit and heart as being pure synonyms.

And I think throughout the psalm that is the case. So when he speaks of a steadfast spirit, he's speaking about a steadfast heart. You can use either word interchangeably. It was the absence of steadfastness that led David into sin.

And that's why he sins so heinously, because he wasn't steadfast. He wasn't secure. He wasn't firm in his convictions. And we need steadfast hearts if we're going to render steadfast obedience.

The very thing that David proved incapable of doing on this occasion in his life. Is that what you desire? A steadfast heart. But he also speaks of a willing spirit.

[9 : 47] Verse 12, grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. It's one thing to obey out of a sense of duty. Duty is a worthy motivation.

It is good to want to do the right thing. Or it is good to have a sense that we ought to do the right thing. That more is the language of duty. That's a good thing. But it's quite another to have a genuine desire to do the right thing.

And we know that that genuine desire is much more powerful than a mere sense of duty. I think David realizes that. Hence the request of God, grant me a willing spirit.

Help me to want to obey. Help me to want to be holy. Help me to want to resist temptation. Not just that I know that I should, but that I want to. Grant me a willing spirit.

And the desire to obey and please God. Or the desire to live a holy life. This is the best antidote to temptation. The desire to do God's will.

[10 : 51] Where sinning is something we find repellent and repulsive. That is the best way of not falling into sin and temptation.

And so David asked for that. He asked for a willing spirit. A pure heart. A steadfast or faithful heart. And a willing heart. When we think of that description of a heart, we almost wonder, well, whose heart fits that description?

Well, certainly the heart of God and the heart of His Son, our Savior Jesus. And really that is what we're asking of God. So David was asking of God, even though he didn't perhaps have the context of the coming of Jesus, to put it with that vocabulary.

But what he's asking for is what we ask for. That God would create in us a heart like the heart of His Son, our Savior Jesus.

So that's this desire or this commitment to renewal in that inward direction concerning His heart. We can also think of it in an upward direction.

[11 : 51] And these are very much intertwined. And we're just using these words because they kind of are kind of a neat way of distinguishing between different elements. But the upward direction, let me suggest, is this.

David's desire for a deeper communion or friendship with God. So we're talking here not only about his heart, but about his relationship with God. And that upward, if you wish, relationship with God. And David clearly desires that that relationship deepen and be cultivated. In verse 11, notice what he says, Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Don't cast me from your presence. Come ever closer to me or in any case, help me to experience an ever greater sense of your closeness. There's, of course, a real sense in which God is always close to His people.

But there can be a very different experience in terms of our sense of His closeness. That can vary enormously. David wants to have a very clear sense of the immediacy, of the closeness of God, of the intimacy of His relationship with God.

[13 : 06] Do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Now, it would be unwise to try and construct a theology of the Holy Spirit from this verse. We know in the light of what we read and learn in the New Testament, that the Holy Spirit permanently indwells every believer.

But the reference here is most probably to the experience of Saul, of whom it is said that God withdrew His presence. And David is saying, Don't do that to me. Don't allow me to pass through that kind of experience.

This is David's desire, to know the near and felt presence and power of God in his life. And again, the question for us is a simple one. Is this our desire?

Is this your desire? Is this what you really want? That commitment to renewal expressed inwardly in a desire for a heart molded by God, expressed upwardly in a desire for deeper communion or friendship with God.

But then thirdly, a third direction, an outward direction. And here we're wanting to notice or just highlight or draw out, David's desire for a life lived to the glory of God as he relates to others.

[14 : 26] So David's concern isn't only for his own heart. David's concern is not only for his own personal relationship with God, important though that is. David's concern is for the life that he lives in the midst of others to the glory of God.

That outward demonstration of renewed commitment. And we can notice here the very significant use of the preposition then in verse 13.

You know, he's asked to God that he would create a pure heart and all the rest that we've noticed. And in verse 13 it begins, He's looking beyond God answering his prayer.

And he's saying there's a reason for all this. And the reason for all this is that it would allow me, it would equip me, it would enable me to serve others. To bring glory to your name by the service I render to others.

By the life that I live in the midst of others. And that is what David is concerned for. The pure heart created by God and the near and empowering presence of God will enable David to live his life to the glory of God.

[15 : 35] And what will life to the glory of God involve? Well, we can notice some of the elements in this psalm. And I don't think there's any suggestion that we have an exhaustive description of what life lived to the glory of God looks like.

But we can draw out some of the elements that David highlights in the psalm. The first thing that he mentions, we've already read it there in verse 13, is his desire to teach others about God.

In verse 13, Then I will teach transgressors your way. Having experienced your forgiveness, having experienced that work of renewal in my own heart, this is what I will do.

Equipped now to do so, I will teach transgressors your way. The ministry to others of a repentant and restored David reminds me of the words that Jesus directed to Peter that we read in Luke chapter 22.

When Jesus anticipated Peter's denial of Jesus, but then he also anticipated his restoration. And he not only anticipates his restoration, but he anticipates that having been restored, he will be equipped and able to serve others.

[16 : 46] Let's just remind ourselves of what Jesus says there in Luke chapter 22. And in verse 32, Luke chapter 22 and in verse 32, we read as follows.

Well, we'll read from verse 31. So Jesus doesn't only anticipate Peter turning back.

He does that. And that's a good thing that Peter turns back, that he repents of his sin. But then he anticipates that having turned back, he will strengthen his brothers. The suggestion is almost that the very experience of letting Jesus down, that of course he was responsible for, nonetheless, even that bad experience can be used by God to make Peter better able to strengthen his brothers.

Perhaps the very humility that would accompany one who knows that he has failed. The very experience of failure and the very joy of restoration, in a sense, better equipped Peter for the task of strengthening his brothers.

He wouldn't be doing so from a position of seeming superiority, but from the position of one who had also failed and who could relate to and help others from that position of greater humility.

[18 : 15] David's teaching also will no doubt be marked by humility and hope, this teaching that he anticipates, teaching transgressors your way.

The humility of one who has fallen and been restored and the hope of one who is convinced that God can and will turn sinners back to himself. And the case study that he has is his own life.

The reason he is persuaded that transgressors will turn to God's ways is because, well, I've done so. You enabled me to do so.

Why would you not also enable others to do so? And so he wishes to teach others about God. He also speaks about praising God in verse 14, in the second half of verse 14.

My tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. These are public expressions of praise to God.

[19 : 17] And David's praise seems to have two audiences in mind. Obviously, the principal audience is God himself. He directs his praise to God, but he's also mindful of others listening to his praise.

Especially in verse 15, when he says, Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. So, yes, it's directed to God, but the language does have the sense of it being directed to God in such a way that others are listening in.

Others are hearing him as he praises God. And their listening in to his praise is a learning experience for them as they listen to what David says and how David praises God.

And so, his desire is that his life would be lived to the glory of God marked by this teaching, transgressors, God's ways, praising God, but also building up God's church.

And that's implicit, of course, in what we've already said, especially the first of the three tasks that we identify. But at the end of the psalm, David expresses his concern, his burden for the church and it being built up.

[20 : 35] He doesn't use the language of church, of course, but he uses language that is appropriate to the Old Testament. We read there in the final two verses, May it please you to prosper Zion, prosper Jerusalem, prosper your people, prosper your city.

For us, we would say prosper your church. May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous and burnt offerings offered whole.

Then bulls will be offered on your altar. Those who have studied this psalm suggest, and there does seem to be, I suppose you could call it a tentative consensus, that these final verses of the psalm were added to the psalm at a later time, perhaps at the time of exile or return to exile.

Certainly the reference to the walls of Zion being built up would accord with a later date for that part of the psalm. And there's no difficulty in at least suggesting that possibility that the psalm has been pieced together.

Other psalms also were formed in that way, and it may be that that is what has happened here. But whether these verses were written by David or by a subsequent inspired author matters little to the truth that they speak of, namely the desire to see Zion built up and prosper, the desire to see the church of Jesus Christ grow and flourish, and those are the desires of one who is truly repentant.

[22 : 06] Those are the desires of one whose repentance includes this third movement of a commitment to renewal. So let's just remind ourselves of the three elements that we're suggesting we find here in the psalm of this third movement in repentance, a commitment to renewal, a desire for a new beginning.

First of all, that desire for a heart molded by God, then a desire for a deeper communion or fellowship with God, and then a desire for a life lived to the glory of God.

And the question that we've been posing and that we end with as well that we pose to ourselves is this, is that what you really want? Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for this psalm that we've been able to give some time to reflect on. And we pray that what we have discovered would be true of us, that there would be in us these godly desires.

We know that in so many ways we are what we want. We can have a pretty good diagnosis of who we are and where we are when we ponder and consider what it is that we want.

[23 : 24] And that can be a sobering exercise to just spend some time considering what it is that we really want. What are the deepest desires of our hearts?

We pray that they would be more and more after the heart of David as he expresses in here, that we would have that desire, that you would create in us a pure heart, a steadfast and willing spirit. We pray that it would be our deep desire to enjoy a closer walk and friendship with yourself and that it would also be our desire to serve others, to teach transgressors your way, to declare your praises publicly that others might hear and join with us.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.