

Psalm 51

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[0 : 00] What kind of heart delights God? We can be sure that a thankful heart is pleasing to God, but also a repentant heart. In the words of David, God delights in a broken and a contrite heart.

Psalm 51, as we mentioned in introducing the reading of the psalm, is intimately personal, revealing as it does the broken heart of David following his grievous fall into sin in the rape of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

And you'll notice we didn't read, perhaps we should have read, the words of introduction to the psalm, where it is stated explicitly that that is the occasion from which we find this psalm, and that was the cause of, and the sin that resulted in David's repentance as recorded for us in the psalm. And though it's an intimately personal account of David's own experience, yet it is found in the Bible for a reason. And certainly one of the reasons is that it provides for us a model, or certainly an example, of biblical and God-pleasing repentance.

It's not that in every detail we need to find what is found in the psalm in our own experience, but there are core elements of God-pleasing repentance found in David's experience as he records it for us, that should be found and that ought to be found in ourselves as we repent of our own sin.

[1 : 52] I think there are three elements or movements or stages in the repentance of David that we can identify in the psalm. And really what I want to do is to consider each of them on subsequent Sunday evenings.

So the first one this evening, and then for the next two Sunday evenings, all being well. The first element is what we could call recognition of the problem. If we are to repent of our sin, it seems very logical and obvious, and yet it's worth stating, is first of all we need to acknowledge that there's a problem.

We need to recognize that there's a problem. Maybe the more theological language we use to speak of that is conviction of sin. But it's about recognizing that there is a problem.

That's the first thing, and we find that very eloquently in the psalm. There's also then an appeal for help. If we've acknowledged there's a problem, then what do we do?

Well, we try and find a solution. In repentance, we acknowledge that God is the one who can provide the solution to the problem that we have. And so there is this appeal for help, and the psalm, of course, includes that.

[2 : 59] Indeed, it begins with that. Then also in biblical repentance, in genuine, in deep repentance, in true repentance, there needs to be also a commitment to renewal.

It's not enough simply to have the sin that we are guilty of dealt with. That's very important. To be forgiven for that sin. Clearly that's important. But that needs to go hand in hand with a commitment to a new life.

To leaving behind that which we have been guilty of. To renewed commitment to service of God. So not simply saying, well, I'm not going to sin anymore, but I am now going to live a life of gratitude to God in the service of God.

So there's these three elements. Recognition of a problem, appeal for help, but then a commitment to renewal. So, as I say, we'll be thinking about the first one this evening.

Now, as we reflect on the psalm, I also want to just occasionally draw on or draw or bring to bear on what we're going to say, the teaching of the confession of faith on this subject.

[4 : 04] It's not something we often do. I would like to imagine, and I hope that it's the case, that the preaching in Bon Accord is always consistent with the doctrines as expressed or as systematized in our confession of faith.

But it's not often that we would make explicit reference to the confession. But I do want to do so on this occasion as we think about repentance. The confession dedicates a whole chapter to the

subject.

Chapter 15 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, of repentance unto life. The very fact that a whole chapter is dedicated to the subject gives us some idea of the importance that the authors of the confession gave rightly to this subject.

Indeed, the very first paragraph of that chapter stresses the importance of preaching on the subject of repentance. Let me just read how the very first paragraph of that chapter begins.

Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace. The doctrine we're of is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.

[5 : 13] The doctrine we're of is to be preached by every minister of the gospel. I was just reading over what I'd written on the computer screen this afternoon and noticed a kind of spelling mistake in that quote, which was kind of in a way quite sobering because it made me think a little bit.

Because what I'd originally written was repentance unto life is an evangelical grace. The doctrine we're of is to be breached by every minister of the gospel. And I read that. I thought, no, that doesn't sound right. But, you know, we kind of smiled.

But actually, it made me think a little bit. You know, what's the point of preaching about something if maybe at the same time we're also breaching that which we preach on or which we speak about or listen to. It's not enough to know about these things.

It's important to live them also. Now, it's not surprising that the confession would urge ministers to preach and to urge repentance, given that the call to repent and believe is at the heart of the gospel message.

It was at the heart of Jesus' preaching from the very beginning of his public ministry when he began to preach, the very heart of his message was repent and believe.

[6 : 23] Repent and believe. And so, that also ought to characterize preaching today as well. The call to all, including believers, to repent and believe.

I've noticed or I've suggested that in Psalm 51, there are three movements or three stages, three elements of repentance.

Recognition of a problem, appeal for help, and a commitment to renewal. Interestingly, in the second paragraph of the confession, where it goes on to deal a little bit with what repentance is, those three elements are also identified.

Let me just read what it says. It's just one relatively short paragraph, and I'll just read it. By it, that is, by repentance, a sinner out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also the filthiness and odiousness of his sins.

So, there you have this recognition of a problem. As contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ, to such as our penitent, so grieves and hates his sin, as to turn from them all unto God.

[7 : 39] This turning to God, this appeal for help as we recognize God's mercy. And then it ends, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him, that is with God, in all the ways of his commandments.

A commitment to renewal. So, these three elements that we find in David's experience, as recorded for us in the psalm, drawn together in this definition or description of repentance in our confession.

But back to this first element, recognition of the problem. Now, the psalm begins with David's appeal for help. Verse 1, So, it begins with the appeal for help, the appeal for mercy.

But there are, of course, prior steps that lead David to seek help and mercy from God. And that is David's recognition of his problem.

A man or woman who doesn't appreciate they have a problem will never seek a solution. Or appeal for help. I think we can identify five elements in David's recognition of his problem, of his conviction of sin, that I think will be present in greater or lesser measure in any genuine recognition of the problem of sin, conviction of sin.

[9 : 00] Let's just go through five of these elements that I think we can find in the psalm, particularly in verses 3 through to 7. I think the first thing we need to acknowledge as an element in recognizing a problem is to simply identify David's actual sin.

So, before we actually think about his attitude towards it, simply to acknowledge that there was a problem of actual sin in David's experience. The introduction to the psalm identified very explicitly the sin that David was guilty of.

We read there in that little introductory part at the beginning for the director of music, a psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

The ESV, the English Standard Version, opts for a more literal translation of the sentence there in the introduction to the psalm, where it simply states, when the prophet David came to him after David had gone into Bathsheba.

And so, it doesn't make a judgment on the nature of that relationship. The NIV speaks of it as adultery, where, you know, the implication would seem to be that this was a sin where there was mutual guilt.

[10:21] Both were guilty of this adulterous relationship. Now, you may recall maybe, well, I don't know, a year and a half ago or so, we had a series on the women in Matthew's genealogy.

And of course, Bathsheba is one of them. And in that sermon, we came to the conclusion in the light of the evidence that David raped Bathsheba, or that's the most reasonable conclusion I think we can come to in the light of the evidence.

And the rape was followed, as we know, by the murder of Bathsheba's husband, as David desperately tried to cover his tracks. This was the actual sin that David was guilty of.

And this is what he was repenting of. This is what produced in him all that he records in the psalm. Well, that was true of David. The question is, what about us? What about you? What are the actual sins that you are guilty of?

I don't imagine. I don't know, of course, but I don't imagine that we have many rapists or murderers in church this evening. But you are guilty, as we all are, guilty of actual sin.

[11:29] You have lied. You have coveted. You have failed to honor your parents. You have been selfish and proud in your manner of behaving and relating to others.

You are guilty of many sins of commission and innumerable sins of omission. What are they? Have you repented of these actual sins?

We'll come back a little bit in a moment to this idea of being very honest in identifying particular or actual sins. But for the moment, simply to note that as far as David's concerned, this whole matter responds to the actual sin that he was guilty of, as highlighted in the introduction to the psalm.

But a second element in this recognizing his problem is found in David's, what we could call David's, ownership of his sin. Notice in verse 3, he says, For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.

Now, it was not always so. That had not always been David's experience. Before David was challenged by God's Word, in the mouth of the prophet Nathan, and you recall the occasion, and we won't kind of repeat the occasion, but you recall there was that occasion when Nathan came and challenged David.

[12:50] And David, before that, was seemingly very content with his life. He didn't know his transgressions. His sin was not always before him. But as he was challenged by Nathan, the situation changes, and David takes ownership of his sin.

He acknowledges that he is indeed guilty of that which he is being accused of and challenged about. A genuine recognition of the problem involves taking ownership of your sin, taking responsibility for your sin, not always imagining that it's somebody else's fault, or it's not that serious, or it's not that big a deal.

We need to take ownership of our sin. We need to name and shame for ourselves, not as some public exercise, but for ourselves, name and shame that which we are guilty of.

You need to identify and acknowledge those actual sins that you have committed and are guilty of. You know, we know the children's chorus that perhaps in the past we'd have sung, count your blessings, count them one by one, and you'll be surprised by what the Lord has done.

But how about changing that? Count your sins, count them one by one. You'll be surprised by all that you have done or left undone. Indeed, back to the confession on this matter of identifying actual particular sins that we are guilty of and dealing with them.

[14:19] In the fourth paragraph of the chapter that deals with repentance unto life, we read, Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins particularly.

It may seem almost redundant to have the word particular and particularly in the same sentence, but it certainly stresses this element of identifying and recognizing actual sins that we are guilty of. It is every man and woman's duty to endeavor to repent of his or her particular sins particularly. That's what we need to do.

That's what you need to do. That's what I need to do. That's something we need to do really daily, certainly on a regular basis as part of our Christian walk and discipleship.

It's something that we can do this evening as we contemplate and consider what sins we have been guilty of. Not simply say, Oh, well, yeah, that's true actually. That's something I did that I ought not to have done. That's a sin that I've committed.

[15:27] That is something I ought to have done that left undone, and we know that that too is sinful in God's sight. I am going to repent particularly of that particular sin.

David's ownership of his sin also involves, and that's notwithstanding what we've just said, it also involves an appreciation of the myriad manners in which he is guilty of sin. There's no doubt that as he writes this psalm, the rape of Bathsheba, the murder of Uriah, stand uppermost in his mind, and he feels the great weight of his guilt for these named sins.

But the language that he uses recognizes that there are many sins that he is guilty of and stands in need of forgiveness. Oh, in the appeal for mercy, Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions, wash away all my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin.

And the psalm goes on, and while no doubt he has in particular in his mind those named sins, I think there's a recognition of David that in so many other ways, he's also fallen short, and he needs forgiveness for all of those sins.

Maybe it's the case that for us, we're not particularly weighed down by the guilt of one great sin. Now, it's always dangerous to kind of, you know, give weight to certain sins as being greater than others, but it may be the case that there isn't one particular sin that is weighing us down in the manner that was the experience of David, but I think we would all acknowledge that we're guilty of a myriad of diverse sins for which we also need to seek God's forgiveness.

[17:09] So, there's the actual sin, there's David's ownership of his sin, but then in the third place, we can identify it in this psalm, in this section of the psalm, David's grasp of the source of his sin.

Notice in verse 5, he says, Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. As David reflects not only on his actual sins, but on the very DNA of his heart and soul, and the bent of his life from his earliest memories, he comes to a startling, maybe even disturbing, but accurate conclusion as to his condition.

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. The impression seems to be that David has kind of discovered this. It's become clear to him, perhaps for the first time, or certainly in a vivid way for the first time.

He's saying, well, this is the problem. It's not just these actual sins where I fell short on that occasion, but there's something deeper that I need to recognize and acknowledge, the very source of my sin.

David, directed by the Spirit of God, eloquently expresses the reality of what is sometimes called, in theological jargon, original sin. We are not sinners because we sin.

[18:26] We sin because we are sinners. We have all inherited the guilt and corruption of our first fathers. You and I fell in and with Adam. Our very being is polluted by sin.

Now, this in no way excuses actual sin. We can't say, ah, well, it's not my fault. It's just the way I've been put together. It doesn't excuse actual sin, but it does explain our bent towards and seemingly insatiable appetite for sin.

Now, of all the elements present in recognizing the problem, this is the one that can, in the experience of some, be less pronounced or conscious, this recognition of the source of the problem.

I think it is perfectly possible for people to recognize that they have a real problem, experience genuine conviction of sin without appreciating or maybe even being familiar with this reality of our fallen condition.

This is something we discover, as David discovered, and some may discover it sooner than others. Now, so that's the third element of these five elements.

[19:39] David's actual sin. David's taking ownership of his sin. David's grasp of the source of his sin. But the fourth thing I want to notice is David's sense of the offense of his sin.

We go back to verse 4. And what does David say there? He says, Against you, you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight. All sin is ultimately and principally a sin against God.

God is the aggrieved party. God created us for Himself, and when we sin, we rebel against His love and purposes. God graciously gave us His law to guide us and protect us.

And when we sin, we transgress His law and offend His person. Again, the confession highlights this aspect of genuine conviction.

When in that second paragraph that we read a few moments ago, it acknowledges sin as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God. So when we sin, we are sinning against God.

[20 : 42] We are sinning against God's law. We are offending God first and foremost. Now when David acknowledges this, when David says there in verse 4, Against you, you only have I sinned.

Especially when we think of the sin that he was guilty of, that resulted in many victims. We read this and we think, Well, is this somehow belittling the experience and the suffering of his victims?

When he says, Well, it's only against you, God, that I have sinned. Are the victims, we think of Bathsheba, we think of Uriah, we think of loved ones who lost a loved one.

Are the victims being callously airbrushed out of the story? Do they not matter? Well, by no means.

In fact, the recognition of God as the one who is deeply aggrieved by David's sin magnifies the dignity and the worth of a victim like Bathsheba.

In what sense? Well, God is in intimate solidarity with Bathsheba as a, let's call him, a co-aggrieved party. And as such, God is committed to the pursuit and securing of justice and vindication.

[21 : 57] The very fact that God is aggrieved grants to the matter a seriousness that it perhaps otherwise would not have had. And the aggrieved party, in recognizing God as the aggrieved party, has the capacity to do something about it in a way that a victim, a powerless victim, often would not be in a position to do anything about it other than simply suffer the consequences of, in this case, David's sin.

One of the most painful realities for victims of sin, be that rape or assault or fraud or unfaithfulness, can be a sense that nobody understands and nobody cares.

David's recognition that his sin is against God assures us that God cares. He cares not only for the victim, but even as the victim, though we kind of, we perhaps are reluctant to use the language of victim and attribute it to God.

But certainly it is true that God is the aggrieved, the principal offended and aggrieved party. But then there's a final, there's a fifth element to David's recognition of his problem, and it's this.

We notice how David experiences the weight of his sin. And for that we turn to, or move ahead to verse 8. There he reads, let me hear joy and gladness. But then especially what follows, let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

[23 : 27] Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. But very especially that language, let the bones you have crushed rejoice. David uses very vivid language to describe his experience of conviction, the bones you have crushed.

Now David's bones had not been literally crushed, and yet the weight of his sin was so great in his experience that he can describe it in these terms.

He's been crushed by this recognition of his guilt. He uses similar language on other occasions. For example, in Psalm 32, in verses 3 and 4, we find a similar manner of expression.

There in Psalm 32, verse 3, when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night, your hand was heavy on me. My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

We can maybe notice how Martin Luther relates his experience of conviction of sin in language that echoes that of David. On one occasion, he expressed himself in this way, my sin plagues me, gives me no rest, no peace, whether I eat or drink, sleep or wake.

[24 : 45] I am always in terror of God's wrath and judgment. I'm not saying that that should be our permanent experience. The beauty of the gospel is that we can be relieved of that terror of God's wrath and judgment.

But nonetheless, the weight of sin, prior to it being forgiven, in the psalmist and in Luther, the experience seems to have been a similar one.

Again, in the language of the confession, we've noticed how repentance, genuine repentance, involves at least in some measure a recognition of the filthiness and odiousness of our sins.

Now, if this is your experience, that you experience the weight of your sin, unpleasant though it is, that is a much better place to be than the place of a contented, unrepentant sinner.

A contented, unrepentant sinner may be very happy with life, but it is a terrible place to be, to be content in sin. Again, in this matter of experiencing the weight of our sin, I think there needs to be a word of caution.

[25 : 55] You know, I suggested at the beginning that all of these elements should be present in our own recognition of the problem, our own conviction of sin, but that the measure in which they will be present will vary greatly from person to person and in different circumstances.

I think that is particularly true in this matter. There can be and there will be genuine, heartfelt repentance among those who don't necessarily feel the weight of that sin in the measure that David did.

And only we can prescribe and say, well, you must feel as miserable as David felt or as Luther felt or else it's not genuine repentance. Don't wait until your bones are crushed before you turn to God for forgiveness.

So, these five elements in David's recognition of his problem of sin, there's the actual sin that he was guilty of that we're told about in the introduction to the psalm. There's David taking ownership of his sins.

There's David beginning to grasp the source of his sin, how much of a core problem it is to his very identity. There's his sense of the offense of his sin principally towards God and also this experience of the weight of his sin upon him.

[27 : 26] What are we to do when we come to acknowledge that we have a problem? Well, first of all, unpleasant though the experience is, we thank God for the gift of recognition or conviction.

In Acts, on two occasions, repentance is spoken of as something that we are given. In fact, it probably would be helpful just to read those two verses and we are to be thankful for those things that God gives us.

Every good and perfect gift comes from above and conviction of sin, a sense of our need to repent is a good thing that we should be grateful for.

In Acts chapter 5 and in verse 31, we read, God exalted him. Here, Jesus has been spoken of. God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. Jesus brings us to repentance.

[28 : 27] It's an evangelical grace to use the language of the confession. It's a gift of God that he brings us to that place. In chapter 11 and in verse 18, we find a similar language.

When they'd heard this, they had no further objections. This is when Peter is explaining how he had been reaching out to the Gentiles and there were some who were concerned about this, but then he managed to persuade them that it was a good thing what he was doing.

And then we read that those who he is addressing conclude, so then, even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Again, the language of repentance being something that God gives us. God in his grace gives us a sense of our guilt and of our need and we thank him for granting that to us because in the absence of it, we would continue unconcerned as to our guilt and our need for forgiveness.

We give thanks to God for godly sorrow. Again, you maybe remember the language that Paul uses in his second letter to the Corinthians, how godly sorrow leads to repentance.

[29 : 39] Godly sorrow, God-given sorrow is a good thing. And then we look for help. We cry to God for mercy. Now, that's the matter that we want to think about a little bit more next Sunday evening, but you don't need to wait until next Sunday evening to seek and to secure God's help.

You can cry out for mercy now. You can take the words of the psalmist that begin the psalm and make them your own. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions, wash away all my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for all the many gifts that you give us. We thank you for granting us repentance, for leading us to that place where we acknowledge the gravity of our sin and the need to be forgiven, where you impress upon us the urgency of the matter and you drive us to your Son that we would find in him forgiveness and relief and cleansing.

We pray that we would be believers who are ever marked by repentance and faith, that we would be ever repenting and ever believing, ever trusting in Jesus.

We thank you for the honesty with which David shares with us his own experience and the manner in which we can draw from it for ourselves.

[31 : 06] Help us to do so and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.