

Psalm 51

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[0 : 00] How can we end the year well? I think gathering to worship God is a good start.

But we know that God does not look only at the outward appearance, the mere physical reality of our presence in this building.

But God looks at the heart. He looks at your heart. He looks at my heart. And even now, He sees your heart.

It's probably good to just pause there at such a sobering reality. The creator of the universe, even now, sees your heart.

What kind of heart does God long to see? Well, certainly a thankful heart. At the close of a year, it's fitting that we should give thanks and that that thanksgiving should flow from a thankful heart.

[1 : 10] But God also would see in us a repentant heart. God delights in, to use the language of Psalm 51, He delights in a broken and a contrite heart.

And it is to this psalm, to Psalm 51, that we're going to turn today to reflect on, and I trust, practice repentance. Humbly repenting before God for the many ways in which we have sinned against Him. Gratefully receiving His forgiveness and decidedly resolving that in 2018, we will, with God's help, live lives that are pleasing to Him as we reflect something of the loveliness of Jesus.

Now, this psalm, Psalm 51, is intimately personal. We've already made reference to the circumstances in which the psalm was composed. And it's intimately personal in that it reveals the broken, contrite heart of David following his precipitous fall into grave sin in the rape of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

And yet, this psalm, though intimately personal, is found in the Bible for a reason. It is there to serve as a model of biblical and God-pleasing repentance.

[2 : 51] This is how we are to repent. Now, I think as we look through the psalm, and what we want to do today, actually, in the morning and the evening, is to have a sweeping look through the psalm and this theme of repentance.

And as we do so, I think there are three elements or movements or stages in the repentance of David that we can highlight and give thought to. Let me just mention what the three are.

First of all, I think what we find very vividly in this psalm is what we can call, or what is sometimes called, conviction of sin. David, in very eloquent language, very powerful language, expresses for us what that is, conviction of sin.

But there is also, of course, in the psalm, and indeed the psalm begins with this, a cry for mercy from David directed towards God. A cry for mercy.

But then the psalm also has within it, especially towards the end of the psalm, having experienced this deep conviction, having cried to God for mercy, there is also in the psalm a commitment on the part of David to renewal, a desire for a new beginning.

[4 : 12] So there's conviction of sin, there's a cry for mercy, and there is a commitment to renewal. We're going to consider the first of these two elements in light of verses 1 to 9 this morning.

And then this evening we'll look at the third of these three elements, this commitment to renewal.

Now, there is a sense in which to get the full picture, or at least in some measure the full picture, we would need to hear both of the sermons on the psalm.

That said, each of the psalms will be a stand-alone sermon and doesn't depend on the other psalm. But they are, of course, and will be, of course, very connected. So this morning our concern is to think of these first two elements that we find here in the psalm in this matter of repentance, a biblical model for repentance.

We have conviction of sin, but then we have also a cry for mercy. And we'll begin by giving thought to this first matter, conviction of sin.

[5 : 23] As I mentioned, if we look at the psalm in the order in which we find what David says, it begins with David's cry for mercy. But, of course, in David's own life experience, there are prior steps that lead David to cry for mercy to God.

And it is these prior steps that we're calling or describing under this umbrella term of conviction of sin. Because it is, of course, the convicted man or woman who cries out for mercy.

In the absence of conviction, there is no cry. There is no sense of need. And so, no cry for mercy. It is only when we experience, in some measure, conviction of sin that we then cry for mercy.

So in terms of the order of events, we begin by thinking of conviction. And let me suggest five aspects to David's conviction of sin that I think will be present in greater or lesser measure in any genuine experience of conviction of sin.

Five things that we find here in the first few verses of the psalm. The first thing is, in a sense, a very obvious thing. But it is this. David's actual sin.

[6 : 41] Now, the introduction to the psalm explicitly identifies the actual sin committed by David that in time results in his experience of conviction.

We read there in the introduction, The ESV translation opts for a more literal translation of that expression, and it renders it in this way, after he, that is David, had gone into Bathsheba.

Now, as we considered a couple of weeks ago, the most reasonable conclusion in the light of the evidence is that David raped Bathsheba. And that 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 resulted in, in time, David's deep conviction that finds expression in the psalm.

Well, that's David. But what about you? What are the actual sins that you are guilty of? Now, I don't know you. I don't know your life.

[7 : 59] I don't know what you do day by day. Even those of you I know, I don't know everything about you. Now, I don't imagine, in the measure that I have knowledge, I don't imagine that we have many rapists or murderers in church this morning, but who knows?

But you are guilty. We are all guilty of actual, specific sin. You have lied. You have coveted. You have failed to honor your parents.

You are selfish and proud. And you give evidence of that in many ways, sometimes gross ways, sometimes in very subtle ways. You are guilty of many sins, of commission and of innumerable sins of omission.

What are they? What are these sins that you are guilty of? As you come to the end of this year, as you look into your heart, and as you consider the life that you have lived, the manner in which you have conducted yourself, what are your sins?

Have you repented of your sins? Will you cross the threshold of the new year still unrepentant? That would be a very sorry way to enter into 2018.

[9 : 22] So, you have this first element, David's actual sin. But the next element that I want to highlight is what I'm calling David's ownership of his sin.

Look with me at what David says there in verse 3 of the psalm. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

I know my transgressions. Now, the interesting thing, of course, is that it was not always so. Despite the language that David uses, my sin is always before me, in the midst of this deep conviction, this is his sins.

But we know, of course, that that wasn't the case. When he committed the sin, he was oblivious to it, at least in a measure. And it took the intervention of the prophet Nathan to bring him to the place of acknowledging his sin, of acknowledging the weight of it and the gravity of it.

Before David was challenged by God's Word in the mouth of the prophet Nathan, David did not know his transgression in the sense of taking ownership of his sin, of taking responsibility for his sin.

[10 : 37] And conviction of sin involves taking ownership of your sin, of naming and shaming in your own heart, not in a public way, in some display of contrition, of identifying and acknowledging those actual sins that you have committed and are guilty of.

You know, I was saying to the children, how we sometimes sing the chorus, count your blessings, count them one by one, you'll be surprised by what the Lord has done. But how about count your sins? Count them one by one.

You'll be surprised by all that you have done. So take ownership of your sin and do it now.

And you might say, well, now? I've just come to listen to a sermon. I'm not going to do it now. Why not? Why not right now take ownership, take responsibility for your sin?

This morning I am in the place of Nathan. I am bringing you God's call to repentance. Conviction of sin involves this necessary element.

[11:49] The sinner, you and me, taking ownership, taking responsibility, acknowledging that we are guilty of sin. But I think we find another element here in conviction of sin in David's experience that I think does serve and is intended to serve as a kind of model for us.

And the third element is this. We have David's grasp of the source of his sin. Notice what he says in verse 5. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

As David reflects on his actual sins, he is brought to the realization that the very DNA of his heart and soul, the very bent of his life from his earliest memories is towards sin.

He comes to this startling and yet accurate conclusion as to his own spiritual condition that goes beyond any particular sin that he is guilty of.

And of course he is guilty of this gross and heinous sin. But beyond that, he sees that there's something more fundamental wrong with him. And that's what he describes and expresses in the verse that we have read.

[13:17] Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. David, directed by the Spirit of God, eloquently expresses the reality of what is sometimes called in theological language, original sin.

We are not sinners because we sin. 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. And so our very being and to the very core of our being, we are polluted by sin.

We are sinners. That is our status. Now this reality in no way excuses actual sin. It's not that we can say, oh, well, it's not my fault. That's just the way I'm made.

That's my DNA. Of course I sin. That's all I can do. It doesn't excuse actual sin, but it does explain that predisposition that we have, that seemingly insatiable appetite for sin.

[14:24] Perhaps of the different elements present in what we're calling conviction of sin, this one, this grasp of the source of our sin, is one that in the experience of some can be a lot less pronounced or conscious, and yet there still be genuine conviction.

And subsequent to that, a genuine cry for mercy. It is possible for many to maybe not be aware, not to have come to this clarity of understanding of our spiritual condition, and yet still sense that conviction for actual sin.

But it is important to see the bigger picture of who we are and of our condition as sinners. Before we move on to the fourth aspect of this conviction of sin that we're describing, let me just mention this, and it's not our subject this morning, but having read verse 5 and having given thought to, I think, the main aspect of it or what it's getting across.

I don't want to fail to comment on how the words of David there in that verse take as a given the personhood and moral identity of human beings from conception.

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Now, David's concern is not to, you know, give a lecture on personhood when we become human beings, but in the passing he does make clear that our identity, our personhood, can be traced back to our conception.

[16:17] And of course there are some very significant implications of that that we're not going to develop this morning, but I didn't want to pass by without commenting on. The fourth element, the fourth aspect of conviction of sin that we find here in the experience of David is what we could call David's sense of the offense of his sin.

Notice what he says in verse 4, 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 his purposes for us.

God graciously gave us his law to guide and protect us, and when we sin, we transgress his law and offend his person as the author of that law, a law that reflects who he is and his character.

Now when David acknowledges that his sin, and we know the sin that he's talking about, his rape of Bathsheba, his murder of Uriah, when David says, I've only sinned against God, does that mean, as

it might appear to mean?

[17 : 44] Does it mean that David, and by extension God, is minimizing the offense and pain of the victims of David's sin? Are Bathsheba and Uriah being callously airbrushed out of the story?

Oh, they don't matter. I didn't sin against them. I only sinned against God. Is that what David is saying? By no means. In fact, when we give this some more thought, I think we can conclude that the recognition of God as the one who is deeply aggrieved by David's sin magnifies the dignity and worth of a victim like Bathsheba.

In what sense? Well, God is in intimate solidarity with Bathsheba as a co-aggrieved party of David's sin.

And as such, God is committed to the pursuit of and securing justice and vindication for Bathsheba, for Uriah, and for so many other nameless individuals that were victims of David's sin in this time in his life.

One of the painful realities for victims of sin, be that rape or assault or fraud or unfaithfulness or whatever it happens to be, one of the painful realities for many victims can be a sense that nobody understands and nobody cares.

[19 : 21] David's recognition that his sin is against God assures us that God cares. God is not indifferent to the sin of David, to the sin of any perpetrator, and as he is not indifferent, nor is he indifferent to the pain of the victim.

There is a sense, and we say this carefully and cautiously, there is a sense in that God not only cares for the victim, but cares as the victim.

Not a powerless victim, but a victim nonetheless. And a grieved party in the matter of our sin. Of course, another implication of David's recognition that he expresses there in this language against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Another necessary and logical implication is that God is the only one who ultimately can pardon David. If he is the one against whom the sin has been committed, then he is the only one who can reasonably and legitimately grant the pardon that David requires.

There is one final element in this conviction of sin that we are describing, and that is what we could call David's experience of the weight of his sin. Notice what he says in verse 8, Let me hear joy and gladness.

[20 : 44] Let the bones you have crushed rejoice. The bones you have crushed rejoice. David employs. David employs very vivid language to describe his experience of conviction.

And as we think of the language that David uses, it's maybe fitting as we come to the close of 2017, a year in which we've marked the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and Martin Luther's pivotal role within that, to maybe listen to what Martin Luther says as he relates his experience of conviction of sin in language that echoes that of David.

Luther writes in this way, My sin plagues me, gives me no rest, no peace, whether I eat or drink, sleep or wake, I am always in terror of God's wrath and judgment.

Of course, this is the language of an unforgiven sinner, plagued by, weighed down by the weight of his sin. If this is your experience, a very unpleasant experience, but thank God if this is your experience, the worst place you can be is as a contented, unrepentant sinner.

It's the worst place you can be at the end of a year, the worst place you can be at the beginning of a year, content in your sin, content in your unrepentant, unforgiven state.

[22 : 11] There is no worse place to be. Maybe just a word of caution as we think about David's experience of the weight of his sin.

I suggested a few moments ago that genuine conviction of sin will be marked by each of these aspects, but that does not mean that all will experience each of these features in equal measure. I think this is particularly so in the matter of the psychological or even the physical weight of sin in the experience of a sinner. It is possible for some to come to a genuine acknowledgement of guilt that leads to a sincere confession of sin that is accompanied only by a slight sense or experience of the weight or gravity of sin.

Sin is equally grievous, but the experience in the individual of how grievous and of how weighty can vary greatly. And what I would say to you is this, don't wait until you feel your bones are crushed before you repent.

Don't say, oh, well, I don't feel that bad yet, so I won't repent yet. But if you are weighed down by sin, well, you know who to turn to and you know what to do.

[23 : 28] Conviction of sin. Let's move on to the second and more briefly, let's think about David's cry for mercy. This is the next stage or the outcome of genuine conviction.

A cry for mercy directed to God. And on this mantra of David's cry for mercy, I want to highlight two key elements. First of all, the grounds upon which David cries for mercy.

But then secondly, the favor that he craves from God. But we will begin with the grounds upon which David cries for mercy. And the key words are found in verse 1 where we have the cry, have mercy on me, O God.

And then the following word introduces the grounds upon which David cries for mercy. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love.

According to your great compassion. These are the two parallel grounds upon which David feels able to cry to God for mercy.

[24 : 33] First of all, according to your unfailing love. Now the words unfailing love look to capture the sense of the Hebrew word *chesed*. It's often translated grace or steadfast love.

And it's used to speak of God's covenant love, of that committed love that God bears towards His people. The love that He has committed Himself to show to His own people, even perhaps especially in the depth of our unworthiness.

This love will remain steadfast towards us. And so for all His unworthiness, for all the weight of the sin that is bearing down on David, He knows that He still belongs.

And so on the grounds of God's unfailing love, He is able to cry out for mercy to God.

But there's a second ground, if you wish, and they're very much linked and intertwined. But He also speaks of according to your great compassion. And we shouldn't see this simply as a synonym.

[25 : 42] It's not simply that David is saying the same thing in two different ways, though there's an element of that. But the word that is translated here, great compassion, introduces another element. because this is a word that points to God's tender, even passionate love for His own.

We could maybe express it in this way as we think of these two parallel grounds upon which David cries for mercy. We could express it this way, that God is committed to mercy and God delights in mercy.

He's committed to mercy as our covenant God. He's made promises that He will be merciful. So He's committed to mercy. But He also delights in mercy.

It's not simply the reluctant fulfilling of a commitment. There is a commitment. There's steadfast love. But there's also tender, compassionate love.

And it is on these grounds that David cries out to God for mercy. How does David know this? How does David know of God's unfailing love?

[26 : 50] How does David know of God's great compassion? Well, he knows because God has told him as He has told all of His people. God has revealed what He is like.

And the language that David uses here is language that he takes from that echoes the language of God Himself as we read what God says about Himself. In Exodus chapter 34 and verses 6 to 7, and He passed in front of Moses proclaiming, the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and yet forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.

And he goes on. God is describing Himself. David knows these words and He takes these words and these truths and they serve as the grounds for His crying for mercy.

And of course, we also need to say and we're not going to develop that this morning is that God's unfailing love, His covenant love, His great compassion, His tender care for His own find ultimate expression and concrete expression in the sending of Jesus to be our Savior.

That is where God's *hesed*, His steadfast love finds its ultimate expression. But then, secondly, as we think about this cry for mercy, having noticed the grounds upon which David cries, let's notice finally the favor that David craves.

[28 : 24] Well, David craves what David needs. He needs to be cleansed. In verse 1, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgression, wash away all my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin.

He craves cleansing. He craves the forgiveness that cleanses. Let me just notice three aspects of God's forgiveness that are celebrated in this psalm.

First of all, David celebrates that God's forgiveness is deep in its reach. In verse 6, we read, Surely you desire truth in the inner parts.

In verse 10, David cries out to God, Create in me a pure heart. And in using this language, David is acknowledging that the reach of God's forgiveness is to the very depth of our sinful heart.

The darkest recesses of your sinful heart experience the deep cleansing of God. And that is something only God can do. Nobody else can cleanse that deep.

[29 : 33] The forgiveness of God is deep in its reach, but it is also broad in its scope. Wash away all my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin, cries out the psalmist.

David is weighed down by actual and specific sins, but he is conscious that he is guilty of all manner of sin, that he's not even aware of. All of which require forgiveness and cleansing.

And God can do. You see, God's forgiveness is deep in its reach, but it's broad in its scope, and it is, thirdly, perfect in its effectiveness. In verse 7, we read, The plea of David, Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. This is a picture, this picture of David cleansed as being whiter than snow. It's a picture seemingly original to David, though later employed by the prophet Isaiah to speak of this same matter.

And it speaks of, it describes very vividly, perfect cleansing. Every mark, every imperfection, the smallest mark of sin, cleansed.

[30 : 46] You see, the forgiveness of God, deep, broad, perfect. And what is the outcome that David anticipates? Well, he anticipates God's favor, given the grounds upon which he cries, but he also anticipates and looks forwards to his own resulting joy.

In verse 8, Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones you have crushed rejoice. I wonder if any of you, perhaps when I was introducing the reading and the subject matter of the sermon this morning, I wonder if any of you were thinking, it's a perfectly reasonable thought, I'm not criticizing you if you did think this, but I wonder if any of you were thinking, well, that's a little bit gloomy for the last Sunday of the year.

Can we not have something a bit more upbeat, a bit more joyful? But can't you see that repentance is the road we must travel in order to dispel the gloom and to experience deep and lasting joy?

There is no other road, no other formula, no other plan that results in joy and gladness, that which the psalmist so craves. The only way he will know joy, the only way he will experience gladness is by this road of repentance.

It's an intriguing thing to note that the root meaning of the word there, rejoice, that is used in verse 8, let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

[32 : 25] The root meaning of the verb is to circle around. And the picture that's been painted there, you might say, well, what's that got to do with rejoicing? Well, the picture that's been painted is of a joyful dance.

We are to dance in celebration of God's forgiveness, a forgiveness that is deep and broad and perfect, that is full and free and that is offered to you, sinner, today.

This is the last day of the year. Now, I don't know if you're one of those people who love a big clear-out at the end of the year. There is something liberating about getting rid of all the junk that clutters our lives and our homes.

What better way to end 2017 and begin 2018 than by getting rid of the sin that clutters and condemns?

And so, I would urge you to cry for mercy, to receive mercy, to rejoice in mercy. Dance the dance of a forgiven sinner.

[33 : 34] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We thank you for the brutal honesty of your Word as it presents to us your people in all their weakness, in all their frailty, in all their sinfulness.

We thank you for what we learn of repentance from the experience of David. We pray that we would know what it is to be convicted of our sin, that we would know what it is that having experienced that conviction to cry out to you for mercy and to discover that you are the God who is willing and able to forgive, to discover that your love is indeed unfailing, that your compassion is great and deep.

We thank you for the quality of your forgiveness, for the depth that it reaches, for the breadth of sin that it covers, for its perfection in bringing to us complete a cleansing.

And we pray that we would know as we close the year and as we begin a new year, that we would know that we would dance the dance of forgiveness, that we would know the joy and gladness that is the blessing of those who cry to you for mercy.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.