

Saturday Pre-Communion

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Preacher: Robin Gray

[0 : 0 0] Please take a seat and turn with me again to Psalm 51. And before we think about this Psalm and what God is saying in it, let's turn once more to him and ask him for his help. Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is true, but more than that, your word is alive. It is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword. It's able to read us in a way that no other book can. And Lord, we pray that you would search us and know us now through your word and speak to us, Lord, we do ask. Minister to us. And Father, we do ask that as we consider your word and what you are saying in it, Lord, that we would be led in the way that we should go, led ultimately to our Lord Jesus Christ and how he fulfills everything that is needed to restore us back into fellowship with yourself. And we ask all of this in his own precious name. Amen.

Amen. Well, it's a great pleasure to be here with you and I'm just so grateful to be here.

During this week in Gardenstown or Gamery, as you have to call it when you're in Gardenstown, Gillian will know this, who is a native of Gamery or former native of Gamery. Her father was my predecessor in the church there. In Gamery on Thursday night, there were a few geysers out and about for the 31st of October for Halloween. But for me, being a bit of a church history buff, don't fall asleep just yet. The 31st of October is far more exciting for the fact that it's Reformation Day because the 31st of October is marked as Reformation Day because it was the day that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. It was on the 31st of October, 1517. And you might remember there were great celebrations in certain parts of the world for that in 2017 for the 500th anniversary. There is a reason why I bring this up just now.

It's because this psalm is really, it's the absolute piece de resistance, if you like, the most amazing piece of Scripture about repentance, about repentance, about turning from sin to God, which is simply put what repentance is. And the big problem for Luther at the time was the church had got this horribly wrong and had kind of considered that the way you repent is really to do penance, that is, to do all these different works that would somehow satisfy for the sins that you'd done, that would somehow atone for it, obviously taking away from the atoning power of Jesus' own blood and what he did on the cross. But worse than that, they'd now brought in a way where if you didn't really fancy doing all these tiresome works of penance, you could just pay instead and get a kind of get out of purgatory free card. These were called indulgences. And so thesis number one out of these 95 theses, he had a lot he wanted to talk about, but thesis number one, which showed the importance to Luther of what repentance is to the gospel, says this, when our Lord and Master,

Jesus Christ, said repent, and he's referring there to Matthew chapter 4 and verse 17, repent and believe the gospel. He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. That is, it's not something that's done in these outward works of penance, but rather there's an ongoing work, a spirit-wrought work in the heart of all believers, whereby we're continually turning from sin. Now, in one sense, that might sound like we're not making much progress continually turning from sin, but we are. That is how progress is made. A continual turning away from what is wrong and from what is sinful and what is broken in our lives, and a turning to the one who has made provision to wash all that sin away, and a turning to him, forsaking our sin and turning to the God who is compassionate, who has unfailing love, and shows that desire to forgive us so clearly in Jesus, in the cross of Calvary, and in his glorious resurrection, and in his reign at God's right hand, the way he's drawing people to him. And the reason I chose this psalm tonight for this specific service tonight is because this is obviously part of a communion weekend, where many here will be looking forward to gathering around the Lord's table tomorrow.

[5 : 45] And as one great 19th century divine, a man called, who was nicknamed Rabbi Duncan because of his great knowledge of Hebrew and of the Old Testament scriptures, a very eccentric man as well, but Rabbi Duncan once noticed a lady that was hesitant to come to the table. She really felt she wasn't sure if she should, and he said, go, it's for sinners. It's for sinners, which is absolutely true. But I think to add to that, the posture though that we adopt when we come to the table and also when we come away from it is one of being a repentant sinner, of really turning from our sin when we come to the table, and as we come away, asking that the Spirit of God would grant us that newness of life and that desire to walk in the Lord's ways, to new obedience, to fresh obedience.

There was a wonderful writer from the 17th century called Thomas Watson. He's such a sweet writer. There's such a beautiful love for the Lord in his writing, but he also wrote in these very clear pictures and all in these sort of pithy little remarks. And he talks about how this repenting attitude should be in our hearts when we come to the table, saying a repenting frame, that is a repenting disposition or attitude, is a sacramental frame. A broken heart and a broken Christ do well agree. The more bitterness we taste in sin, the more sweetness we shall taste in Christ. The way to find Christ comfortably in the sacrament is to go weeping thither. Christ will say to a humble penitent, and that echoes the words of David saying, a contrite heart you will not despise. Christ will say to a humble penitent as to Thomas, reach hither thy hand and thrust it into my side and let those bleeding wounds of mine heal thee. And so as we turn to Psalm 51 and thinking about repentance, it shouldn't be something that we fear or shy away from. Repentance is such a sweet grace, a wonderful gift given to us, wrought in us by God, that we might turn to him and find fullness of pardon and an assurance of that pardon that we might go on in newness of God. And we might not go on in newness of life in seeking to follow him. It's a wonderful thing, and I hope we'll see some of the riches of it in this psalm as we consider it together tonight.

But the first thing to notice about the psalm, of course, is that prescript that's right there at the start. It gives us so much information, the context of how the psalm originally came about, because it says, for the director of music, a psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. And not to go over the whole story, but David, the Lord's anointed, the king of Israel, had committed this grievous, grievous sin. Not only had he taken another man's wife and committed adultery with her, but he'd plotted very ruthlessly the death of her husband, Uriah, who was one of his great mighty men of valor. And he arranged for him to die in battle such that he could cover up, if you like, his sin. And it was just awful. And then he seemed to go on in this with a totally quiet conscience. It didn't seem to bother him, despite the fact he'd so clearly broken God's law, until the prophet Nathan came to him and told him a parable about this wicked man who had taken this poor man's lamb in order to feed a guest of his. And that really brought David to his senses because he said, what do you think should be done to this man? Well, this man should die.

David says, well, that man is you. Nathan says that. David says, I have sinned. It all comes crashing down on him. He realizes what he's done. Parables have a way of getting in under the radar.

Because they're a story and you kind of get involved in them and maybe haven't seen yourself in a particular character yet. They can get in under the radar and then just explode as you realize you're the person that's being spoken about there. And that was the case with what Nathan told David.

[10:50] And so this just comes pouring out of him at that point as he realizes what he's done. And we see true repentance, or if you like, biblical repentance in this psalm.

And what constitutes that? Well, a lot of things. But we can look at two maybe broad things tonight as we consider the psalm. What constitutes biblical repentance? Well, a full confession.

A full unqualified confession of sin. And we'll look at what that includes. But also, it doesn't end there. It doesn't end there. It's not a miserable thing. It's a full confession seeking full restoration. Full restoration to that newness of life, to full communion and fellowship with God that has been ruptured by grievous sin. And the other thing to remember is that whilst this is David's psalm, and it's as a result of a particular historical event, so many of the psalms, if not all of them, invite us into them too. And there's no mention of Uriah here or of Bathsheba by name in the psalm itself, that we might appropriate it for ourselves. It might become a psalm of our repentance, a prayer we can pray as we turn from sin, something Luther was saying should be a daily thing. It doesn't just happen at our conversion. But as we turn from sin and as we turn to the Lord, particularly as we turn to Him in the table, and as we think about that fullness of restoration that is one for us in Christ Jesus. That was a very long introduction. So we, but don't feel that we'll dwell too much on each and every verse of the psalm, but the full confession is all the way through the psalm. He doesn't qualify his confession of sin in any way. And sometimes you'll say maybe even if it's a leader, a public leader, when they say they've done something wrong, they're just really gutted that they've been found out, and they'll do everything to kind of qualify how it was really their fault, maybe blaming others or circumstances or something like that. That is not the case here with

David. He doesn't shift the blame. He just says, I have sinned. It was all down to me. You might even see this in some fallen leaders in the church when they're caught out or found out for something.

The confession isn't unqualified. There's a desire maybe to get some sympathy or to get a break or largely motivated by a desire to get straight back into ministry as quickly as is humanly possible.

[13:58] Not thinking that what real repentance, a hallmark of real repentance, is an unqualified confession of sin.

And David says that in verse 3 to 6. I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.

One reason he can make this confession is because he can see his sin. He's been granted sight of his sin.

And sight of sin is something we should be praying for, that we would be given a knowledge of our sin, that we might be able to do something about it. The worst possible thing is to be oblivious to it and to go on in it continually. If we are engaged in any sort of sin, what we want is sight of it.

The worst thing we want is to be given over to it and to continue on obliviously in it. He has this sight of sin. It's always before me. It's like these terrible events that he was involved in are being replayed in his mind over and over again and just making him wince and groan as he thinks, oh, I cannot believe I did that. And maybe that's something you can sympathize with.

[15 : 22] The replaying of something and just wincing and cringing and saying, I cannot believe I sinned in that way. It's always before him.

And what might sound surprising in verse 4, against you, you only have I sinned. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

What about Bathsheba? What about Uriah? He's dead. Hasn't he sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah? Well, not in the senses in that it wasn't Uriah's law. It wasn't Bathsheba's law that David has broken.

It is God's law that he has broken. And therefore, he can say, in this sense, it is only against you that I've sinned because you're the one who gives the law. You're the law giver. Therefore, all sin is primarily and first and foremost against God, no matter what the other damage is done. And it was significant in this case, and it often is. It's against God. This knowledge of his sin, you can see coming through in three words being used for sin in verses 2 and 3, or indeed verses 1 and 2, transgression, iniquity, sin. Just about the three main words that you can use for having broken the law, for having rebelled against God, for having missed the mark, and for having a warped approach to his straight-line righteous decrees. He's guilty of it, and he admits it. So much so that he can even say in the second part of verse 4 there, you're right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

That's another key component, I would venture, of true biblical repentance, which is to agree with God that he would be right according to his law to punish you. Rather than going, isn't there some wiggle room here? And again, trying to minimize it or trying to get out on a technicality, but rather to say, you know, you're absolutely right in your judgment on this. It was a very interesting hallmark of some of the converts of the missionary, David Brainerd. I tell you, if you think you're doing great things in the kingdom, read Brainerd's journal, and it'll very quickly bring you back down to size.

[18 : 29] He was a missionary to Native Americans in colonial America. And this thing keeps coming up in some of the testimonies of his converts from these tribespeople, which was when they experienced conviction for sin during their conversion process, a number of them said, I realized God would be absolutely within his rights and justified to damn me, to send me to hell. I agreed with them. I agreed with them. Didn't like it, obviously, but I knew he was justified in doing so. But at that moment, at that self-same moment, really, the mercy of God was revealed in Jesus Christ that he could take that sin away, and that rather than damnation, there was salvation full and free on offer, and they cleaved to Christ with their whole being. And that really is something that strikes us throughout the whole psalm as well. David wouldn't be praying to God if he didn't think he was a merciful and compassionate

God. David knows God's character, and one of the key aspects, one of the key perfections of God is that he's merciful, he displays a steadfast love, and he has great compassion. All said there in verse one. He's praying according to the character of God, and that's so important. But of course, praying according to the character of God means here he gives a full confession.

He knows he won't be able to get out on a technicality. Rather, he simply lays himself bare before God and says, you're right as a judge. He then goes on to say that actually this is nothing new, but like every other fallen human being. Sin has been with him from the beginning. It's been there from even the womb, and along with it though, a requirement from God for truth, for wisdom, and a knowledge that's built in somehow of right and wrong that God gives us.

So we get a full confession before God. And I read this, and again, I'm made mindful of the fact of how often and how even at my conversion I was tempted to hold back certain sins from God in confessing sin to them. Because I thought, well, he might forgive these ones, but surely not these, surely not that, and kind of withholding something until I really couldn't hold on to them anymore and had to just confess everything and bring it all out before the Lord and being just so amazed that it could all be cleansed, all washed away. But it prompts us and reminds us not to hold anything back when we confess our sins to God. There's nothing that he doesn't know anyway, but also there's nothing that he can't cleanse. There's nothing that he can't wash away. There's nothing that he can't deal with.

Otherwise, we're saying that the blood of Christ isn't all-sufficient, isn't all-powerful, and it surely is. It surely is. And so David doesn't leave it there, even though he's sinned in this grievous way. He's praying according to the character of God, knowing that there's this possibility of a great, full restoration, and that's what he prays for now. In verse 7, we read these lines, cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than the snow. And we see then, as well in verse 9, very similar words to verse 2, this idea of being washed and all, in fact, the latter part of verse 1, of all sins being blotted out, just everything just being cancelled, erased, along with this desire to be internally washed. And that's a very profound sense that I think a lot of people have is of needing to be cleansed, needing to be cleansed to the very core, a knowledge of the fact that there is something sinful within. And there we see a desire from David for this full restoration, both in a kind of legal sense, an out-there sense. There's this record of his sin, and he wants it all to be wiped away, his transgressions to be blotted out. But there's also this desire to be washed inwardly, to be cleansed inwardly. The words are really, in some cases, laundry language.

[24 : 12] And this washing, and I'll be whiter than snow, is really referring to being laundered. And how you would do that then is, of course, to be pounded against a rock by a river, just to be so thoroughly washed. And that is surely a desire we often share with David when we become conscious of our sin. And it feels like it's clinging to us, and we want to be cleansed from it.

And the great thing is, is that he clearly realizes that God is able to do this, or he wouldn't ask for it, that he can be cleansed. This hyssop was something that was used, it was a kind of prickly or hairy plant that could be used for dipping in blood. It was used to apply the blood to the lintels and the doorposts at the Passover, and it was used in other purification ceremonies under the Levitical law, again, for making clean. It was a kind of spiritual demestros, this desire to be clean.

This is what David needs. He knows that sacrifices aren't going to cut it. And you see that there in verse 16, you don't delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it. You don't take pleasure in burnt offerings, because David has committed adultery and murder, and there are no sacrifices for that.

The law doesn't provide a sacrifice or a way to be cleansed from that under the sacrificial system. That's instant death. An adulterer has to die, a murderer has to die. He's facing a double death sentence, and a sacrifice under the sacrificial system isn't going to cut it. David clearly knows that there's a provision that God has retained to himself, whereby he still can forgive this sin, and how he can forgive it is a broken and contrite heart, genuine repentance. He says in verse 17, he knows God won't despise that.

So if you are clinging to something, even something that has ceased to happen, but you still haven't brought it to the Lord and experienced that restoration and that cleansing, know that you can. Please do it, because standing far off and holding on to it is so unnecessary, because you can come to him, come to him even now, confessing and turning from it, knowing that a broken and a contrite heart he will not despise. Again, there's a good distinction to be made, though, between sort of real and counterfeit repentance. It's not simply feeling sorry for yourself because you got caught or because the effects of your sin have made life miserable for you, and I've experienced that kind of sorrow loads.

[27 : 45] Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 7 and verse 10, godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation, and that's the godly sorrow we see here in Psalm 51. It leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. How does this full restoration realize itself, the full restoration that this broken-hearted sinner David desires? Well, it manifests itself in this desire for a new life, a new life that is characterized by spirit-led obedience to God. Verses 10 to 12, a desire not to walk in those ways again.

He doesn't just want to be forgiven so that he can go off and commit adultery with another woman and kill her husband. He wants a new life. He wants to be a new man. He wants a new heart. Create in me a pure heart, O God, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Give me this power to be able to walk in your ways and to obey me. Don't cast me from your presence. I want to walk in fellowship with you or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation. And again, this desire for a willing spirit to sustain me, this desire to walk in closer fellowship with God, which is the desire that we have when we come to the table. Let this be a way to inaugurate closer fellowship with you, Lord. And as I come away from the table, grant me a willing spirit to sustain me in this newness of life as we continue on together as a church. And not only that, this feeling of restoration, this knowledge of restoration with God, either be it from, as in David's case, the restoration of someone who was a believer already, or the initial repentance that comes when we turn to the Lord at first. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, when we put our faith in Him, there's an evangelistic impulse.

Verse 13, Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. If a sinner has received restoration and this amazing cleansing and a restoration of fellowship into God's own presence, they're going to tell other sinners that there's a way back as well. They're going to seek to restore other sinners into fellowship with God. I'll teach transgressors your ways. What are His ways? Mercy, unfailing love, great compassion, but also a law which does, is justified in saying you're guilty.

Therefore, the solution is to come back to God with a broken and contrite heart which He will not despise.

And this sense of desiring out of a full confession, a full restoration, we see in verse 12, restore to me the joy of your salvation. There's a joy to be had at the table as well, isn't there?

[31 : 22] There's a joy to be had because we're remembering a broken body and shed blood that wins for us full pardon, that breaks down that, for us, insurmountable barrier between us and God, that Christ breaks down for us. And that restoration into fellowship in a meal, this covenant meal, this sign and seal, that brings a deep and a rich and a profound and a, if I may say this, if it's not a contradiction, a solemn joy of what's been achieved for us through the broken body and the shed blood of Christ. Repentance, but it's also a restoration to joy.

We also see, just to close, that full restoration, the full restoration that genuine repentance seeks doesn't just impact the individual, and it certainly didn't impact the individual in David's case because he's God's representative over God's chosen people and in God's special nation.

So, when David sins, everyone is affected. There'd be a cloud over the whole nation and over Jerusalem in particular. If David is, if his relationship with God is all messed up, then it's going to have a knock-on effect. And our own sins have that effect too. They have an effect on our communities, that is, our families, our congregations, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, depending on the nature of what it is. But when those are dealt with, when those, when we are able to move on from these, the community is blessed as well. And so, strikingly, perhaps, in what is a very personal prayer, very personal. David then turns and says in verse 18, in your good pleasure, make Zion prosper. Build up the walls of Jerusalem, and then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you, then bulls will be offered on your altar. There are a number of occasions where God makes clear that the sins of his people mean that their sacrifices are of no interest to him. Because they're just going through the motions.

Therefore, that's not going to do anything. But when things are restored into a right order, God will delight in these sacrifices being offered again.

But this mention of sacrifices right at the end reminds us again that all of these offerings that were made in the tabernacle, first of all, and then in the temple, were merely types and shadows of a sacrifice that was to come. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that they didn't actually have the power to cleanse an evil conscience. And there's surely an evil conscience here, a conscience that's just convicted of the evil he's done. The only way God can forgive David, can restore David, can cleanse David, can wash away what we can't minimize our terrible wicked sins, is because of the son of David.

[35 : 25] It's because of the king from the line of David, who will sit on David's throne forever. The one who David calls, although he's a son of David calls, Lord, because in Christ's perfect sacrifice on the cross, which we or which you will remember tomorrow, that laundering was done. That hyssop was applied.

And that blotting out, the blotting out of transgression, which again, the covering of blood over the mercy seat in the most holy place in the temple was prefiguring, was actually done with full effect for all those who will believe in him. That's how David could be cleansed. That's how David could be restored. And that's how we are cleansed and how we are restored into that fullness of joy that is fellowship with the living God.

And as we dwell on that fellowship, it's worth asking, what do we need besides that? Someone once said to me, I think when I was being quite frustrated about something, things weren't turning out the way I'd wanted them to. Robin, if restored fellowship with the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the creator of the earth, the one who is in himself just perfect blessedness, and who is light and his life and his love, isn't enough for you, what will be enough?

If that restored fellowship with the living God isn't enough for us, an infinite eternal God who is himself just this boundless ocean of love, if I need something besides that, what is ever going to measure up? David sees satisfaction, full satisfaction in being returned to the Lord, and just misery in the thought of being separated from him. Just a horrible thought. He wants to be back with God. And because God is merciful, has this unfailing love and a great compassion displayed to us in Christ. He blots out all our transgressions, washes away all our iniquities, and cleanses us from all our sin. And perhaps we may adopt this prayer for ourselves tonight as we, as you prepare your hearts for at the table tomorrow, remembering that a repenting frame is a sacramental frame, but also knowing the joy of God's salvation as you partake of the Lord's Supper. Amen. Well, we're going to close now, and...