

Psalm 51

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[0 : 0 0] Houston, we have a problem. It seems fitting to begin with a space reference on this historic anniversary weekend of the first moon landing. Now, that quote is perhaps most known because of the film that it's from Apollo 13. And that film relates the true story of an ill-fated mission to the moon in 1970. So, after the first moon landing that we're remembering this weekend, the actual words of the astronaut Jack Swigert, I'm not sure if that's how the name is pronounced, were not as they've been famously repeated, but rather, Houston, we've had a problem here. But for the movie, the more catchy and memorable phrase was employed. Houston, we have a problem. And it's interesting how it's become so much part of our cultural vocabulary and is often used in many different contexts when a problem arises and somebody wants to just recognize and acknowledge that there is a problem. Now, last week we began looking at Psalm 51, and we indicated that the Psalm records three movements in genuine biblical repentance. And the first one is just that recognition of the problem.

In the absence of the recognition of the problem, then you can't even move on to the movements that follow. Recognition of the problem, an appeal for help, and then we also find in the Psalm a commitment, and the part of the Psalm is the one who is repenting, a commitment to renewal. And as I say, last Sunday evening, we considered David's recognition of his problem. David's I have a problem moment, if you wish. And maybe we could just quickly remind ourselves of the elements in that recognition that we found recorded in the Psalm. There is, of course, David's actual sin. I read the introduction to the Psalm where that's identified. We don't need to dwell on that. But of course, there was that actual sin that he was guilty of. But then in the Psalm, we noticed last Sunday evening how we find David's ownership of his sins. There in verse 3, for I know my transgressions.

My sin is always before me. We moved on to notice how David shows a grasp of the source of his sin. In verse 5, surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. But also David's sense of the offense of his sin. At the beginning of verse 4, we read against you, you only have I sinned. Not that there were not other victims. There were, of course, other victims of his sin. But David recognizes that at heart, the offended one, the one against whom he has sinned is God himself. And his acknowledgement of his problem includes that element or that insight. And also David's experience of the weight of his sin. You know, in verse 8, he speaks of the bones that have been crushed. And he's not speaking about some literal calamity, but rather the weight of his sin weighing him down in his life. And in all of these different ways, we notice David's recognition of his problem, or to use the more theological language or expression, the conviction of sin that he was increasingly under. Well, that's simply to remind us of that first movement in repentance, a recognition of a problem. But it leads us on to the second movement, which is a cry for help, and in particular David's cry for help. And I want to think just a little bit about what we find in the psalm in that regard.

And the psalm actually begins with David's cry for help. Have mercy on me, O God. And so in verses 1 and 2, we have recorded his cry for help. But then also from verses 7 through to 9, not only that doesn't exhaustively cover what we find in the psalm, but certainly in those two parts, particularly verses 1 and 2 and 7 to 9, we find David's cry for help. And on this matter of his cry for help, I want to highlight three key elements. First of all, I want us to notice the grounds upon which David cries for help to God. So he cries for help, but on what grounds? On what grounds does he feel able to do so? So that's the first thing we're going to notice. Then secondly, we're going to notice the favor that he craves from God. What is it that he's looking for from God? We're saying it's a cry for help, certainly, but that's a very generic kind of word. And we want to just dig a little deeper and consider that the favor that he seeks or craves from God. And then thirdly, and much more briefly, just notice the outcome that he anticipates, or one particular aspect of the outcome that he anticipates as he cries out to God for help. So there's the three things we want to notice. The grounds upon which he cries for help, the favor that he craves, and the outcome that he anticipates.

First of all, then, the grounds upon which David cries for help. What grounds or reasons might David have brought to God? So he knows there's a problem. He acknowledges that he has sinned. He has a sense of the gravity and the seriousness of his sin. He senses the weight of his sin, and he requires an answer to this problem, a solution to this problem, and he approaches God. But on what grounds?

[5 : 45] We might just think a little bit about what grounds he might have brought to God, or what reasons he might have brought to God in order to secure God's favor or a favorable response. How might he have approached God? It's not the way he did it, but how might he have done so? And of course, as we think about that, we can think about how we might sometimes imagine that this is a route that we could take. Could David, for example, have approached God on the grounds of previous good behavior?

Could he have approached God and said, yes, I've messed up. You know, I acknowledge that the sin, it was really bad. I'm guilty. Guilty as charged. But hey, you know, look at my life. It's not been that bad.

Look at all the ways I've served you. Look at how faithful I've been to you in so many ways. And yes, I've messed up here, but, you know, given all that I've done for you and in your name, surely I can expect forgiveness from you. Might that have been a way in which David could have approached God, his previous good behavior? Well, had he been so foolish to try and do so? Of course, the biggest problem he would have confronted is that in his previous life there were multiple sins. He doesn't have or didn't have some kind of good conduct record that he could bring and show to God as grounds for God's mercy. Or maybe he could have approached God in a different way. Maybe not quite so crass or proud to imagine that his life thus far would have merited God's favor. But maybe he could have come to God and said, look, God, I'm really, really sorry. You know, I'm really sorry.

I really feel bad about this. You know, I know how much harm I've caused, the pain that I've produced, and I'm really sorry. I really feel very guilty. You know, I'm not taking this lightly. I'm really sorry. Might that have been sufficient? His own sense of guilt, the genuineness of his contrition.

Would that have been grounds for God forgiving him? I remember in our house when the boys were younger, I can't remember if this was all of them or one of them. I won't embarrass anybody by, identify anybody by name. I can't actually remember which of the three it was, but I remember one of them either said this or we would say it to him. I can't really remember, but I do remember the expression. The expression was, sorry's not good enough. So, you know, something would happen, and one of my lovely sons would say sorry. But you kind of wonder just how genuine it was. And sometimes, I don't know if this was the right way to respond, but sometimes in frustration, you would respond to them, well, sorry's not good enough. You know, it's not enough just to think that you can say sorry and everything's going to be okay again. You know, there are consequences.

[8 : 42] There's more to it than just saying the word sorry. Well, if David had been of a mind to approach God imagining that the depth of his contrition, the genuineness of his regret would have been sufficient, well, he would have been disappointed. That wasn't grounds for receiving God's favor.

Or maybe David could have promised not to do the same again. He could say to God, look, God, you know, I'm really going to make a big effort. This will not happen again. And again, that's sometimes maybe the way we approach circumstances like this in our own interpersonal relationships.

You know, we'll have let somebody down. We'll have harmed somebody in some way or offended somebody, and we might go and say, look, it's not going to happen again. You know, trust me, it won't happen again. I've learned my lesson. It's not going to happen again. Well, even if we were true to that, even if David had been true to that in his own life, of course, that doesn't remove the guilt of the sin that he had already committed. However, commendable it might be his commitment to not fall into that same sin again. Maybe an offer to make retribution. We know that in the case of David's sin, there were folk who were very, very severely and gravely damaged. Of course, that in itself shows the problem with that as a ground for approaching God and offer to make retribution, because what possible retribution could David have given that would have undone what he had done?

There was nothing he could have done, even if he had been willing to do anything. There was nothing he could have done that would have undone the harm and the pain of his sin against those he had sinned against. See, none of these would cut the mustard. So, having set aside all those possible grounds, let's turn to the actual grounds that were the right ones on which to approach God. On what grounds then could and did David cry for mercy? Well, the key words are found in verse 1. In verse 1, we read, Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. The key word there really is, or the expression, according to. So, the cry for mercy, the cry for help is grounded on what follows, according to.

David himself is saying, these are the grounds on which I approach you and ask you for help. I am seeking your mercy. I am crying out for help. And the grounds on which I do so are these, according to. According to your unfailing love and your great compassion. We have two there identified.

[11 : 24] They're connected, but they're distinct. According to your great compassion. Now, the word there is a word that we come across frequently in the Old Testament, indeed, in the New as well, in its Greek equivalent. In the Old Testament, in Hebrew, it's the word hesed, as I say, a very common word that speaks of God's covenant love for His people. Here it translated, your unfailing love, your faithful love, your love that never lets go of your people. It's the language that God used as He described Himself in Exodus chapter 34, and in the language that we find in that passage. The God who shows unfailing faithful love to His people. And David says, it's on those grounds that I come and seek mercy. On the grounds of your covenant love, on the grounds of your covenant promises to your covenant people. So, that's on the one hand, that's one ground on which he seeks God's help. But then he continues, and also according to your great compassion. The word translated compassion here is a word that captures the idea of God's tender love, and in this case, great in its magnitude, your great compassion. These are the grounds on which David cries for mercy. We could possibly express it in this way. God is committed to mercy, and that captures the idea of His unfailing love, and God delights in mercy because of His great compassion. God is committed to mercy, and God delights in mercy.

And perhaps we could think of no better double-lock guarantee that God will be merciful, because He is, on the one hand, committed to mercy, and He is, on the other hand, a God who delights in mercy. And David knows this, and it is on these grounds that he seeks help. He doesn't seek it on the grounds of any merit of His own, of any contrition of His own, of any promises of future good behavior, but only and exclusively on the grounds of God's mercy. You know, David would have gladly echoed the sentiments of the hymn that we sung just before the sermon, *Our Sins, They Are Many, His Mercy Is More*.

Last week, as we were thinking about the first movement in repentance, this acknowledgement or recognition of a problem, we brought to bear in the matter the teaching of our confession in the chapter on repentance unto life. And in that chapter, this aspect of God's mercy in Christ is also highlighted, and we can maybe remind ourselves of what it says in the second paragraph of that chapter concerning repentance. The expression expresses it in this way, by it, that is by repentance, a sinner out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God. These are all things we were thinking about last week. And upon the apprehension of His mercy, of God's mercy in Christ, to such as are penitent, so grieves for and hates his sin, as to turn from them. Especially that expression, upon the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ. That is what drives the sinner to God, to cry out for mercy. That is the hope that the sinner has. That is the ground on which we stand and cry to God for mercy. Of course, God's unfailing love that David grounds his appeal upon, his great compassion that he grounds his appeal on. Find most eloquent and powerful expression in the person of Jesus, in the sending of Jesus. It is in Jesus that we discover how it is that God is able to marry his holiness and justice with his love and compassion and secure forgiveness for sinners. So, that's the first thing, the grounds upon which David cries for mercy. The second thing I want to just notice briefly is the favor that

David craves. What is it that David is looking for? We're saying that he's looking for help, he's got a problem, he's looking for a solution to his problem, but explicitly, what is it that David craves and what is it that David needs? Well, he craves what he needs, and what he needs is cleansing. We read in verse 1, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion.

Blot out my transgressions." Blot out my transgressions is the language of cleansing, of purging. But then we have very explicitly the language of cleansing in the following verse, "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." This is what David craves. He craves what he needs, that his sins be blotted out, that his iniquity be washed away, and that he be cleansed from all his sin. And that is what he experiences, that is what he receives. And we just can notice three aspects of God's forgiveness that are celebrated in the psalm. I think one thing that we can say about the forgiveness that he craves and that he receives is that this forgiveness, God's forgiveness is deep in its reach. In verse 6, we hear the psalmist recognizing what it is that God looks for and desires in his people. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb or in the inner part, in our inner being. You taught me wisdom in that secret place. And it speaks of a God who is concerned with deep cleansing. God is not concerned with simply a superficial tidying up of our lives, that it might appear to others that we've been cleansed or spruced up somewhat. The cleansing of

[17:30] God is deep in its reach, but it's also broad in its scope. Again, if we return to verse 2, where we have the cry for this cleansing, wash away all my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin, all my iniquity, those sins that I am conscious of, that I'm aware of, that I'm burdened by, but all the others as well.

Every stain of sin, be it great or small, or at least small in our estimation, every stain, every stain, every sin, every shortcoming, every failure on our part, that it would be blotted out and washed away. And that is what we do experience as we experience God's forgiveness that is deep in its reach, but also broad in its scope. But also, and maybe this is what David particularly focuses on in verse 7, the forgiveness of God is perfect in its effectiveness.

Notice in verse 7 what he says, cleanse me with hyssop, so he picks up again the request, the cry for help, cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

You know, we often sing the psalm, so we often pronounce that word hyssop on our lips as we sing the psalm. And this plant was a plant that was gathered in bunches, the branches of the plant were gathered in bunches and used for sprinkling and ceremonial cleansing. It's made reference to on different occasions in the Old Testament. Perhaps the most significant one is during the Passover, what it is spoken of as the implement that was used for brushing the doorposts with the blood of the Passover lamb. You remember the occasion when the Israelites were told that the manner in which they would be protected from the death of the firstborn was if they painted the doorposts of their homes with the blood of the Passover lamb. And the implement that was used was this hyssop brush to do so. And so it was associated with cleansing, with God's spiritual cleansing of his people. And so

David picks up on that picture, that image, cleanse me with hyssop and I shall be clean. And really the key point isn't so much the implement that he makes reference to, but the confidence that he expresses.

[20 : 04] Do this, cleanse me, forgive me, and I shall be clean. There is no doubt in David's mind as to the effectiveness of God's forgiveness, of the capacity of God to forgive. Not just that he aspires to be forgiven and hopes that God might be able to forgive. No, there is, even in his cry for help, that confidence and assurance that he will be cleansed. Cleanse me with hyssop and I shall be clean.

And that same confidence is repeated in the second half of the verse. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. The picture of being washed whiter than snow is one that was taken up by Isaiah. We're familiar with the language of God through the prophet Isaiah in the very first chapter of Isaiah in verse 18, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. God speaking to his rebellious people through the prophet, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. The same picture being used that the psalmist employs here as he expresses his confidence in the effectiveness of God's forgiveness, perfect in its effectiveness. Of course, in the New Testament, we also find that picture being employed. Even in Revelation, we were noticing that this morning, and we noticed it last Sunday morning, and we reminded ourselves of it this morning in Revelation chapter 7, when the question is posed about those who are standing before the throne, those who are able to stand before the throne. And the question is asked, who are these people? And of course, the answer that is given is these are those who have come out of the great tribulation and who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. And so there, the picture of washing, of being forgiven, is married to the person of Jesus,

Jesus' work on Calvary, the shedding of his blood, the death that he died in our place, providing and securing cleansing that is complete and effective for us. So the favor that David craves is cleansing, it's forgiveness. And what we discover is that that forgiveness is deep in its reach, broad in its scope, and perfect in its effectiveness. But then finally, let's just notice, very much in passing, the outcome that David anticipates, or one of the outcomes, obviously, perhaps the principal outcome is that he will be forgiven, and we take that as a given. But there's another outcome that he highlights in verse 8.

He expresses himself in this way. He's looking ahead to that moment when he enjoys and experiences the forgiveness of God, and he says this, let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

Let me hear joy and gladness. This is the outcome that he looks forward to and anticipates, joy and gladness. You know, when we're thinking about the subject of repentance, and you know, if we just have that word thrown out, you know, we're going to be thinking about repentance. It might, or it could come across as maybe a somewhat gloomy subject to dwell on the subject of repentance. You know, it could be caricatured as perhaps an unhealthy obsession with our own sinfulness and unworthiness and always going on about sin and repentance. But repentance, healthy biblical repentance, is the road that we must travel to dispel the gloom, to experience the deep and lasting joy that the psalmist is anticipating and looking forward to. Let me hear joy and gladness. Seemingly, the root meaning of the word joy there is to circle round. That may seem a rather strange kind of origin to that word or linguistic origin to the word.

[24 : 04] But seemingly, the idea or the connection is that it's the picture of a joyful dance, circling around. And so, joy expressed in that particular way of joyful dancing.

And this is the dance of the forgiven sinner. This joy and gladness that David anticipates. You see, God has not called us, he's not called you, he's not called any of his people to to fester in our sin, to simply remain deep in our guilt, but rather to delight in the dance of his loving and full forgiveness.

There is a problem. We do have a problem. But that problem has an answer. There is a solution. The problem or sin that is a grave problem is answered by God in the forgiveness that he offers and is able to grant to all who cry to him and cry to him as we have discovered only on the grounds of his mercy, of his unfailing love and his great compassion. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the psalm that we've spent a little time thinking about this evening.

We thank you for the honesty of the psalmist in sharing with us his own journey of repentance, these different aspects or movements as he returned to you. We pray that we, too, though our circumstances may be different, though the details for each of us will be different, no doubt. But we pray that our lives would be marked by biblical, sincere, heartfelt repentance, that we would be conscious of the seriousness and the gravity of our sin, but also, perhaps in equal or greater measure, that we would recognize that your mercy is more and that when we come to you seeking your help, we do so solely on the grounds of your unfailing love and of your great compassion.

And as we do so, may we receive and be conscious of receiving that forgiveness that is full and free and effective for us. And that we would, with the psalmist, know what it is to rejoice in the enjoyment of that forgiveness that we receive from you. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.