

Psalm 51

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[0 : 00] It's a really excruciating and embarrassing and deeply handling moment when a public figure takes to the stage and says the very difficult word, sorry.

! Do you remember Bill Clinton or Lance Armstrong or Tiger Woods apologising on CNN? Our heroes and our champions are exposed with public confessions and serious sins.

And that is a bit like Psalm 51, isn't it, in a way? The most well-known, most beloved figure of the Old Testament, one of the most, King David writes a public song about private sins.

We're pointing to the details in the intro, aren't we? A song about the time when David slept with Bathsheba. While her husband was in battle, Bathsheba gets pregnant and he tries to cover him all up so he gets Bathsheba's husband Uriah killed.

If you want the details, they're in 2 Samuel 11. So the hero, the champion, the king of God's people, sings of his deepest regrets and reveals all to God and all of us.

[1 : 20] But you know, this isn't a solo performance this morning. We're not here just as an audience, like in a press conference, to shake our heads in disappointment at David's.

Because look at how the psalm begins again. To the choir master. That's really key. The psalm of David. This isn't just him wanting to get things off his chest.

This song is for public worship, isn't it? For the choir master. The king confesses, the king sings of his sin to lead a choir of sinners.

A choir of people like you and me. We're not just here as the audience. The king sings about his very prominent sins.

That we might sing about our own sins. To help us to find the words. When our words just dry up. When we don't even want to speak to God.

[2 : 25] When there's a blockage between us and God. Let alone sing to him for anything. When shame has silenced our voice before God.

Well David comes, doesn't he, to lead us in those times. In a personal time of conviction and guilt. He invites us, sing this song with me.

And he gives us the tone, the words for our song. There are lots and lots of details in this song. And you'll be annoyed with me that I haven't dealt with every one. I'm sorry about that. I can't deal with all of it today.

But I just want to give you two themes in this song. First of all, David says, join with me in the melody of mercy. Join with me in the melody of mercy.

This is the very first thing that I want you to listen to, he says. And echo with me. That as I, David, felt ashamed of what I'd done. I thought about my good behaviour.

[3 : 26] This was the first tune that came into my mind. Verse 1. Have mercy on me, O God.

According to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy. He says, you know, I have lived long enough. I have sinned big enough.

To realise that this needs to be my opening tune. My opening song with God. I can't sing about my excuses to him. I can't soften or hide right there.

I can't concede it from him. I can't even shout about my rights and my entitlements before him. I can't do any of those things.

But I can sing of God's mercy. I've done a really, really stupid thing. And it's taken back for me to realise that I can ask this from God.

[4 : 27] I can ask, and I should ask for something that I don't deserve from God. So ask a thing that I'm not entitled to from God. You'll have heard this story hundreds of times, but I'll tell you it again.

The mother once made an appeal to Napoleon, seeking a pardon for her son. Napoleon at first denied the request though, because the son had committed two serious offences in the empire that

were punishable by death for justice to be fulfilled.

The mother said to him, but I'm not asking for justice, sir. I am asking and I am pleading for mercy. Napoleon said, but your son doesn't deserve mercy.

Sir, the woman cried, it wouldn't be mercy if he deserved it, would it? And mercy is what I'm asking for. Well, then the emperor said, I will have mercy.

And he spared the woman's son. David pleads for something that he doesn't deserve. And he asks for God to withhold what he does deserve.

[5 : 38] And it's really audacious, isn't it? Give me something I'm not allowed to have, or I shouldn't be allowed to have. Treat me, a sinner, as if I was a saint.

But what on earth can David base this request on? Why can he appeal to God for something that he shouldn't be allowed to have? What case has he got? Well, it's not according to anything in him, is it?

He doesn't say, you know, I know I've done this bad thing, but have mercy according to all the other good things I've done, Lord. If you wave them up, Lord, surely I'll come out good in the end.

Just give me mercy according to those things, please. But no, verse one, the appeal isn't according to anything in me, but according to something in you, Lord.

Did you see it? It's according to your steadfast love. According to the promise that you have made to love your people, have mercy according to the way that you have promised that no matter what, even when we walk away from you, you will not let more people down and walk away from them.

[6 : 53] That even when we have sinned against you, your love for your people will still be strong. According to your promise to steadfastly love us.

According to the promise that you've given over and over again, that you gave to Moses. Do you remember Moses, Exodus 34? He wanted God to reveal him to Moses. And God did do that in the words of a promise.

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Keeping steadfast love for thousands.

According to the promise that the prophet Jeremiah knew, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercy has never come to an end. According to the promise that Jesus gives, as he taught in the story of a tax collector, a sinner who cries to God, have mercy on me.

And he went home justified. He went home in the right with God. The word mercy, it speaks here of the warm and the tender compassion of God for his people.

[8 : 03] How he feels for us in our shame, actually, in a sense. How he is warm towards his people, even when they betray him.

But even when we don't deserve it, his love for his people is still strong. So I don't appeal by some sense that I am too good not to be forgiven.

Too good. Surely you're going to forgive me, God. That's your duty, isn't it? I'm too good not to be forgiven. He doesn't say that. I appeal to the promise of a God who is too good to walk away from his own evil.

And God has allowed David's sins to get this serious, haven't they? So that he realised what's always been true of him all along. That he can only ever ask from God this thing.

Mercy. Something that he doesn't deserve. To entrust himself and lean upon God's promise of steadfast love.

[9 : 04] Perhaps this is you, this morning. And you're trying to find the words. You're trying to master something that you can say to God.

You're in the choir of sinners. You're in the front row, maybe. Maybe you feel like you've wandered too far. Maybe you feel like you know you've done things.

You feel you can't come to him. In 2 Samuel 11 where we get the details of what David did. At the end of the narrative, after David's plotting and devising schemes.

The narrative simply ends with the line, And the thing that David did displeased the Lord. Is there a thing that is between you and God?

What on earth can you say? What can you sing to God with that thing? Well, David stands with you, doesn't he? And he nudges you.

[10 : 11] And he says, well, you can sing this with me. Together we will sing for mercy. And as you open up your mouth, I want you to go with me.

And so we lose all sense of entitlement as you sing with me. Not to ask for what you think you deserve. Not according to things in you. But according to something in him. According to the solid promise of God to us. Entrust yourself. Entrust yourself. Lead upon his steadfast love. There's nothing you can do apart from that actually, is there? Verse 16, excuse me, a little bit later. David says, you won't delight in sacrifice. For I would give it. You won't be pleased with a burnt offering. So before you start thinking, what I need to do is to do something to please God. To crowd my senses with busyness. And to offer sacrifice after sacrifice. [11:15] Even to give service to God. That is not what is required. First of all. It's not so much what we do that God seeks.

But it's the attitude in which we do it. And in which we come to him. It's not sacrifices of activity that I want from you. Verse 17. No, the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart. Oh God, you will not despise them. What he wants is for us to humbly ask for mercy.

That's what the word contrite means. To realise that we deserve nothing from him. And even the best things that we do, even the things that he calls us to do in the Christian life, are hateful to him. They are not the things that he wants from us, if we do not have a contrite heart. We're not just to say the words, are we? Not just to say the confession of sin.

[12:19] Not just to say sorry to God. But to feel this song in our hearts. To feel our need for mercy. See, I think apologies to doing non-apologies.

I do them all the time. We confess to things in a vague way, don't we? I apologise for what happened without any specifics.

Or we apologise in a way that implies blame somewhere else. I'm sorry that you misunderstood me. Or we apologise in a conditional way.

I'm sorry if you were offended. But they're not apologies really, aren't they? But David sets us an uncomfortable example to own our own.

He says, sing with me three times in the opening of the verses. And notice, it is my transgression, my iniquity, my sin.

[13:17] So I am calling you with me in the choir. To stop making excuses. To accept your own agency in what you do.

To own your own sins. And make your appeal according to God's unity. His mercy will never cease. Stay in every morning. And to expect something from him that you have got no right to expect. And to sing for it. In the melody of mercy. And secondly, David calls us to sing the chorus of cleansing. Melody of mercy.

Sing with me the chorus of cleansing, he says. And there is an overwhelming repeated request in the psalm. Isn't that? It's a bit like a chorus. See if you can spot the theme. So verse one.

Blot out my transgressions. Verse two. Wash me thoroughly. Cleanse me from my sin. Verse seven. Purge me. We'll kiss it.

[14:18] Wash me. And I shall be white in the snow. Verse nine. Blot out my transgressions. Verse ten. Create in me a clean heart.

When he's talking about it in this psalm, David doesn't use the most common words that are used in the Old Testament. The way that God deals with our wrongdoing. Words like to cover over. Or to bear with. Or to forgive. They're the most common words. Instead he uses the language of cleansing. Of washing away. And it might be that this sin, this particular sin, this particular sin, sexual sin.

There's maybe a particular feeling of shame and dirtiness involved in that. But I think as well in this song he's alluding to, he's echoing the cleansing laws of Israel.

Cleansing rituals. And Leviticus. It's full of them. It talks about being cleansed with a hyssop branch. And washing with water. And Leviticus is a good example of the way that God's word is full of lessons about how we need to be cleaned before God.

[15:30] The way our wrongdoing makes us dirty in God's sight. How it excludes us from his pure presence and from each other. And with the language of cleaning, he is getting to the intensity of what this mercy needs to look like in his life.

He's asked for mercy. He's appealed to the warm compassion of God. But he needs more than compassion. He needs more than bare emotion.

He needs more than sympathy from God. He needs action. Cleaning action. He doesn't just need a God who looks on and sympathizes with the misery of our lives when we do wrong.

But a God who acts to clean up our lives. To make our lives new. And notice how deep the cleaning must go. Wash me thoroughly.

Wash me thoroughly. Wash out all my transgressions. Make me whiter than snow. What David realizes is that the sins that he is conscious of at the moment aren't just one-off incidents.

[16:47] It's not just one uncharacteristic stain on an otherwise clean life. The issue isn't just cleansing from recent actions.

But where do those actions have come from? And how deep the dirt goes. Look at verse 5. I was brought forth in iniquity.

I had sinned in that my mother conceived me. It's not a comment on conception being a sinful thing in itself. But it's a comment that his sin is not just one isolated incident.

But it is a feature of my humanity. I sin. I transgress. I go across the border of God's law.

Because I am from faulty stock. I am born with a human condition that produces wrongdoing.

[17:47] Another non-apology is to say, that was so unlike me. This isn't me. I was tired.

I didn't recognize myself. But the real problem isn't that I'm a sinner because I've sinned in this one-off way. The truth actually is that I've sinned because I am a sinner.

And this is who I am. And so he's calling us in the chorus for a cleansing, not just of the things that we've done, but of the people that we are.

I find it really interesting how he doesn't ask for accountability. I don't think really in the song.

There's nothing wrong with accountability. It's a good thing, isn't it, that we share our struggles with each other.

And we have Christian friends who can ask us about our struggles. It's good that we put blockers on our laptops and phones and we get joint accounts so we can share how we're using our money.

[18:57] But it's interesting, David doesn't really ask for those things. But what he asks for is for something much deeper and much more profound, isn't it? For a cleaning of who he is, not just what he does.

Look at verse 10. Create in me a clean web searching history. Or a clean mouth.

No, he asks for more than that. He asks for a clean heart. Renew a right spirit within me. The word for creator, creating me a new heart.

It's the same word used for God when he created the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1. So it's a really strong word. It's a drastic word. Creating me something that just is not there.

Make me clean where there is only dirt. Because the stains go that deep that I can clean up my body and my act up for a little bit.

[20:04] But self-determination alone won't clean my heart. I can restrain my symptoms. I can sanitize my actions. But that won't clean the disease of my sin.

Whatever area you struggle with, maybe it's anger or pride or loving money or impatience, whatever the thing. We sing the chorus for cleansing, not just because we've sinned, but because we are sinners.

And we need the work of the Holy Spirit of God to sanctify, to clean, to change us from within. To clean who we are, as well as what we've done.

To give us a holy, inward disposition. I'm not saying that extension and external things aren't part of the Christian life.

Of course they are. Jesus says, doesn't he, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Cut those things out of your life that are causing temptation.

[21:04] But it's not just the external things. Jesus also says that what comes out of the heart defiles a person. You can't cut out your heart.

Let me give you an adapted version of a picture painted by Jeremiah Burroughs about 500 years ago. To be holy as a result of some external thing is like warming a man's clothes by the fire.

Can you imagine that? But to be holy through an inward disposition of the soul is like the warmth that a man's clothes have from the natural heat of his own body.

A man who is healthy puts clothes on. And perhaps at first he feels a bit cold. But after that his clothes become warm. And how do they become warm?

Not by the fire next to him, but from his own natural body inside of him. But when a man who is poorly or sickly puts on clothes, they don't get warm.

[22 : 11] At least not for a really long time. He has to warm them by the fire. And even when he's put them on, they get cold for a time.

See what he's saying. The problem of our lives, the problem of our sinning is that we are sickly people inside. We are poorly in our natural bodies.

The problem really is within. And even with external help, even with a warm fire, our hearts need to be cleansed and warmed from within.

To be made new by the Holy Spirit. Now just as the first creation was made new in seven days, this process is a sustained, ongoing thing, isn't it?

It didn't happen overnight then. And it won't happen overnight now. Our hearts won't be cleansed just like that overnight will happen. And certain struggles that we have with sins and temptations may continue until the day that we die.

[23 : 18] And our hearts will only be completely cleansed and washed thoroughly at the resurrection. But this is the chorus that we are being led to sing now. We are to grieve of sin that comes from our hearts.

And to cry out for a clean heart and want that. Not just that we'll be cleansed from sins or even that we won't sin anymore, but that we won't want to.

That will be the best thing. I think one of the best things about heaven is that, not that there won't be any sin anymore, but that no one will want to sin.

That we will have pure hearts. So wrapping things up, we are the son of mercy, we are the son of cleansing. To expect what we have no right to expect and to sing for something far, far deeper than we can manage ourselves.

So just as we close, how are we allowed to sing this song? What gives us the right to sing this? For the times that we feel we can't even speak to God, let alone sing to God.

[24 : 24] Well, we can because the king gives us permission to. It doesn't mean the king of God's people. The king of God's kingdom comes with us and leads us in this psalm.

You may have picked up on the corporate elements of the psalm, verse 13 and 15. I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you.

You know, we are not just the audience here. Because the leader of Israel, the king leads a choir of sinners and transgressors to come to God as well in the same hope of mercy and promise of plenty. So we are allowed to sing it because of what he sings. But who actually is this king who leads us? Why do his words hold so much value?

Why can we trust in him if he is a sinner just like any one of us here? At the top we are told it is the psalm of David. And he is like any other normal person, isn't he?

[25 : 32] He is a person who does wrong, who needs a clean heart. He needs to trust in Christ to forgive his sins. But on second thoughts, actually we realise that King David is the Christ himself, isn't he?

King David, he is God's chosen king. He is the Christ himself who points to the ultimate Christ. The king of kings, the Christ Jesus. And Jesus Christ, above all, qualifies as the lead singer of this psalm.

Not David. As the king who knows the burden of guilt that we feel. As the king who is publicly shamed for sin.

A king who repents, in a sense, and confesses for sin. Is that true? Can the perfect lips of Jesus really sing this song?

[26 : 40] Have mercy on me, O God. Can Jesus sing that? Create in me a clean heart? Well, yes. Because right from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry on the earth, he has come for this reason.

To lead us in this song. That is his purpose. He is born with and associates with the choir. With sin. He joins as leader of the choir. Right from the beginning of his public ministry, he receives a baptism for the repentance of sins.

This is Jesus Christ, isn't it? John the Baptist said, I can't do this. Get out of the water, Jesus. Jesus says, no. This is why I am here.

In order to fulfil all righteousness. So that I can come and bear all of your wrongdoing. And he sits and he eats with sinners.

[27 : 42] He bears their burdens. And he is given something that he doesn't deserve. Across the dialogue. And he dies like the worst human sinner in existence in all of history.

Paul explains it in 2 Corinthians 5. He says, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.

So that we might become the righteousness of God. He is the most beloved and delightful person that God ever saw walk on this earth.

The one who had no sin of his own is made to be sin. He is made to be the king of sinners. He is made to be the lead confessor.

As he takes on all the fullness of our glory. And he is treated as the dirtiest, most foul, awful sinner to ever walk on the face of the earth.

[28 : 46] The sinless Jesus became our sin. The Son was never so loved by the Father as when the Son was so under the wrath of the Son.

The Father was under the wrath of the Father. When he was dying under our sin, taking our reign. So is there a thing this morning?

Is there a thing between you and God? Well, if you're conscious of that, I pray that we might all be in some degree. There is none other than the King himself next to you.

And it's why you're allowed to sing this. Because King Jesus sings it for you and with you. And he faces the mortifying shame of a public exposure for your private sins.

So sing with David, but above all sing with Jesus. And sing for mercy and for cleansing. Let's pray together.

[29 : 56] Let's pray together. Yeah.