

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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16. Confrontation and Confession (Psalm 51)

I. Two Major Events in 2 Samuel

The book of II Samuel begins with the story of David hearing about King Saul's death and David is quickly anointed, this time publicly, as king, but only the king over the southern tribe of Judah and for the next seven and a half years, there's warring between the house of David and the house of Saul, specifically with Abner, Saul's commander. But finally all of the Israelites decide that David should be their king and they anoint him as king over all of Israel. David's a whopping thirty years old at this time. And David reigns for thirty-seven years over all of Israel. He conquers almost all of the Promised Land. He reduces the nations around him to vassal states so that they have to pay tribute. It certainly is Israel's golden era, at least, politically. We're somewhere around 1000 B.C. on the timeline. The first half of II Samuel is where we read about the stories that happened during this time. There are two events that we're told relative to David that are worthy of mention.

A. Covenant with David

One I can only mention briefly, but it's simply such a pivotal event that I cannot skip it. It's the story of David's covenant with God in II Samuel 7. God tells David that after David dies that God will raise up one of his physical descendants who will reign on his throne forever and will reign over an eternal kingdom. The fulfillment to that prophecy, of course, is Jesus. If you're unfamiliar with that prophecy in II Samuel 7, please read it this afternoon.

B. David and Bathsheba

But the second event in David's life during this time period is the story of David and Bathsheba. It's told in II Samuel Chapters 11 and 12, and again, if you're unfamiliar with this story, I know it's a difficult story. It's one of those stories, in a sense, that doesn't give me any pleasure to preach on. But it's simply too central of a story to skip. So please read Chapters 11 and 12 if you're unfamiliar with the story. The story begins with King David looking out of his palace and he sees Bathsheba taking a bath on the top of her house. He knows that she's married to Uriah, a Hittite who is one of his soldiers. And yet he calls for her and brings her into the palace and gets her pregnant. And then to compound his sin, he orchestrates the murder during war of Uriah, her husband. As you get through the end of Chapter 11, you're scratching your head and you're saying, "How on earth can this man be a "man after God's own heart"? We looked at that last week. How on earth can someone who sins like this possibly be characterized as the man after God's own heart? There are at least a couple answers to that question. One of them is that good people fail. Good people like Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Moses, and Gideon, and Saul, and King David. Good people fail. That's part of the answer. But at the deepest level the answer to the question of "How can people who are after God's own heart do such horrible things?" That answer is seen in how David responds. And as we look at II Samuel Chapter 12 and as we see how David responds to his sin, we understand what it means to be a man or a woman after

God's own heart. In II Samuel Chapter 12, the prophet Nathan comes and he confronts David with his sin in a very powerful way. And we know that David confesses his sin and it's one of those stories as you read it through and there are several of these in the Bible, I think, where when we read them we say, "Man I wish I could have been a fly on the wall. I wish I could have heard how King David, a man after God's own heart, confess this kind of sin. But fortunately this is one of those times in which we can be a fly on the wall, because David told us what he said. He told us in Psalm 51.

II. Cry for Forgiveness - Psalm 51

Please turn there this morning, to Psalm 51, because this is where we are going to spend the bulk of our time. Psalm 51's title begins, "To the Choirmaster, a Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him after he had gone into Bathsheba." Psalm 51 is David's confession of sin and cry to God for forgiveness because of what he has done to both Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. It is one of the most powerful expressions of sorrow anywhere in the Bible, is it not? One of the most powerful expressions of repentance and one of the most powerful expressions of faith in God's willingness and in God's ability to totally cleanse the sinner from sin. It's a powerful, powerful Psalm. And it starts in the first two verses with David's cry for forgiveness. We're going to spend most of the morning looking at these first two verses. I wanted to start this morning just by us reading it together out loud. Psalm 51, verse 1 and 2, read it with me, please. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." A cry for forgiveness; and there is so much that we can learn about confession, and so much that we can learn about forgiveness from these two verses, but let me highlight just a few.

A. True Confession is Complete

One: True confession holds nothing back. That's got to be the overwhelming thing you feel and that you hear when you read these first two verses, that true confession holds nothing back. But true confession is a complete, and a total admission of sin. It doesn't make any excuses. It doesn't point the finger at anyone else. There is no hint in these verses at all that David is saying, "Well, Bathsheba really shouldn't have taken her bath out there where I could see her." There is no sense of David saying, "Well her husband's a Hittite, he's a foreigner, it doesn't really matter." There is no idea of, "God, I'm a red-blooded man, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." There is no sense of, "I'm a victim." There is no sense of, "Well, it's really not my fault. Poor me. Life's not fair." There is no sharing of blame. None of this. But a true confession says, "I was completely and totally wrong." No excuses. Period. It is such an honest admission it reminds me of a hymn that's sung at the Billy Graham crusades, "Just as I am. Poor, wretched (that's a great word) and blind." It reminds me of Paul's discussion in Romans Chapter 7 where he says, "The things that I want to do, I am not doing them. The very things I don't want to do I end up doing." And in verse 24, it's like Paul grabs his head and he says, "Wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death.?" See, that's true confession. That's the kind of confession that moves God's heart. That's the kind of confession that doesn't hold anything back and says, "I am completely and totally wrong." Confession isn't for the other person, is it? Confession isn't a time to point and say, "Well, they're wrong, too!" That's not the point. You can't

do anything about them, that's God's job. And all that you or I can do is come before God and admit what he already knows is true, that I am wrong. We certainly see that in Psalm 51.

B. True Confession Agrees with God about Sin

Secondly, we also see that true confession agrees with God that sin is horrible. And I have been struggling this week with finding the right word and "horrible" is the best that I can come up with. There just isn't a word in the English language as far as I know. Maybe "wretched" is better. But true confession agrees with God that sin is absolutely wretched and horrific. David doesn't argue with Nathan when he comes. Nathan comes, confronts him with his sin, and David the King doesn't say anything like, "Aw, come on. It's not that big of a deal." There's no sense in David that he's going to paint sin in shades of gray. David views sin for what sin is, he sees it in black and white, and that sin is horrible. In fact, there are some interesting literary devices going on in these first two verses because David is using three different words for sin: transgression, iniquity, and sin. And the piling up of these words is meant to emphasize the totality of David's horrible sin. And then paralleling those three words for sin are three word pictures for how God will forgive his sin. The piling up of the three word pictures emphasizes the totality of God's merciful forgiveness. And David says, "Blot out my transgressions. Remove them from your book of records. Erase them. Wipe them out. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Sin is a stain that needs to be washed by God out of my life. Cleanse me from my sin." This is priestly language. If you were unclean, perhaps a leper, you would have been excluded from fellowship; you would have been excluded from the community of Israel. And if you would have been healed, you would have gone before a priest, a priest would have examined you, and if you were clean, he would have taken some hyssop, a small plant, and dipped it in water and sprinkled it on you, indicating that you were now clean. And what David is saying is, "Cleanse me from my sin, I want to return to fellowship. I want to return to the community, not only with my fellow Israelites, but mostly, I want to return to fellowship with my God. Blot out my transgressions, wash me from my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin." All ways that David has to indicate that not only is his sin absolutely horrific, but God is still capable and willing to forgive even the worst of sin.

I think it's probably a human tendency to look at something like Psalm 51 and say something to the effect of, "Well, yeah, if I had raped or murdered someone, I would confess like this." But then to think, "Well, what I have done isn't really that bad, and therefore, I don't really need to confess that way." In other words, I think it is part of the human situation, the human dilemma, sin, to paint sin in shades of gray instead of painting it in black and white. "Well, hey, I've not raped or killed anyone lately. Psalm 51 doesn't apply to me." REALLY? Is there a single man in this room who has never lusted? Jesus says that if you have looked at a woman with lustful intent, you've committed adultery with her in your heart. Anyone in this room not ever murdered anyone? REALLY? Whoever hates his brother is liable to the same judgment. That's what Jesus says in Matthew Chapter 5. I suspect that if we saw sin as God sees it, that we would look a lot more like David than perhaps we think we do. And we would on more than one occasion pull our Bibles open and go to Psalm 51 and say, "I am the man," the same response David gave to Nathan, "I am the woman and Psalm 51 applies

to me.” True confession agrees with God that sin is horrible. It doesn’t play comparing games, it doesn’t paint it as gray; it paints it as black and white.

C. True Confession Admits that We Don’t Deserve Forgiveness

Another thing, number three, that you can see about confession in verses one and two, is that true confession admits that you and I don’t deserve to be forgiven. When you read these first two verses and the rest of the Psalm, there’s no sense of David bargaining with God. There’s no sense of him saying, “Oh, yeah, but look at all that I’ve done for you. I’m your king after all, right? You pronounced me your son (Psalm 2). I mean, I killed Goliath, I fought the Philistines, I didn’t kill Saul when I could. I’m not that bad of a guy. I mean, come on, can’t you give me the benefit of the doubt and let this one slide by?” There’s nothing like that in Psalm 51. There’s no sense of “I deserve to be forgiven.” But rather what David does instead of arguing his case with God, he appeals to God’s basic character that he is a God of steadfast love, or “hesed”, and that he is a God of abundant mercy. You remember back in Exodus 34 when God put Moses in the cleft of the rock and his glory passed by and God declared who he was (Exodus 34 starting at verse 6). “Yahweh, Yahweh, (his personal name), a God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” This is who God is. “Keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin.” The same three words that David uses in Psalm 51. And so David knows he doesn’t deserve to be forgiven. He has not done anything to earn it, but rather, he appeals to God’s covenantal love. He appeals to God’s abundant mercy, his compassion on the needy and the undeserving. And he calls on God to forgive him. True confession holds nothing back. It admits that my sin is horrible and it admits that I don’t deserve to be forgiven. Powerful two verses are they not?

III. Psalm 51:3-17

A. David Wants to Be Forgiven

What happens then in the rest of Psalm 51 is that David starts to spell out the specifics that he’s already covered in these first two verses. “For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” He messed up Bathsheba and Uriah pretty badly, but he knows that ultimately all sin goes to the heart of God. “So that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.” In other words, “When you pronounce me guilty of my sin, you’re right. You are right in doing so.” “Behold I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.” Verse 5 and 6 provide an interesting contrast between what God desires and who David really is. In verse 6, God is most interested with our inward being. He wants us to have truth in our inward being. He wants us to have wisdom in our secret heart. In other words, God is first and foremost concerned with what’s inside, with who we are. And then secondly, with what we do. But God is concerned with what is inside and instead of truth being inside of David, David is consumed with his sin and so verse 8 provides the contrast between what God wants David to be and who he is. It’s a poetical statement that emphasizes the totality of David’s sin. “God, you want truth in my inward being, but I feel and I am filthy in my sin before you.” That is the contrast that David is setting up as he tries to admit fully that he is guilty of his sin. I don’t believe that verse 5 is a theological truth applicable to all

newborns and newly conceived embryos. That's not what is going on in this verse, I don't think. What's going on is this contrast between what God so deeply desires to exist in our hearts, and David's realization that he is wholly sinful before God. So after admitting his guilt, he goes on to plea for forgiveness in verses 7 through 12. "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit." David knows that God will forgive him. David knows that God's forgiveness will be complete and total. And yet David understands that sin leaves us with this deep sense of emptiness and loneliness. But with forgiveness comes restoration of fellowship with God. He knows that God's Spirit left Saul and he doesn't want that to happen to him. He knows that in forgiveness the restoration of the relationship comes and joy and gladness return. And that's all part of his plea for forgiveness.

B. David Wants to Be Different

But notice that David doesn't just want to be forgiven, it's important to see this. He doesn't just want to be forgiven, he wants to be different. He wants God to change him. He wants God to change him by making his heart clean and by God making his spirit willing to obey. There is no legalism in Psalm 51 at all. There's no sense of, "Well, I'm going to go through certain motions and I want to look good to the people around me and maybe do some kind of token repentance or something." There's none of that. There's nothing that's external in Psalm 51. What David is crying out to God to do is, "Change my motor. Change what drives me. Make my heart clean. Make my human spirit willing. I want to obey you; I want to do what is right. I want my faith to flow in joyful obedience." David's not content with just saying, "I'm sorry." He understands that real forgiveness means that we are changed and the change starts on the inside and then flows from our hearts and our spirit out into what we do.

C. David Takes Vow of a Penitent

Then finally, David goes and he takes the vow of a penitent. David says, "God, if you will give me the opportunity, in other words, if you will forgive me, then I will praise you to the people." Look at verse 13-17, please. "Then when you have forgiven me, I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. In fact, God, let me tell you right now what I'm going to say when you forgive me. For you will not delight, for God does not delight in sacrifice or I would give it, you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God, the sacrifices that God wants first and foremost, are a broken spirit. "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." David says, "This is what I'm going to tell people when you forgive me. 'Don't respond to sin with a defiant spirit, but respond to God with a broken heart. When you are confronted with your sin, don't argue that your sin isn't that bad. But rather, in response to facing your sin head on, your heart needs to be broken and your heart needs to be contrite. That's what God wants when He sends Nathans into our lives to confront us with our sin.'" It's a powerful picture, is it not? It's a powerful picture of confession and of repentance where there's a full admission of guilt, holding

nothing back, not making any excuses. “Yes, God, You are right. I am wrong.” It’s a picture of fully agreeing with God that my sin is horrible, and dark, and disgusting, and I am wretched. We don’t use that word enough anymore. My life is wretched when I am in sin. And I’m not going to paint sin in shades of gray; it’s black and white. And it’s a powerful picture and please don’t miss this for all the confession of sin stuff. It is a powerful picture that God forgives. He forgives completely and he forgives totally. Now sometimes there are going to be consequences. And as you read on in II Samuel 12, there were consequences that David had to pay. Among other things, his child died. Sometimes there are still consequences to our sin, but the sin itself is completely and totally forgiven and that’s because we don’t deserve it. If we had earned forgiveness, then the degree of our forgiveness would be dependent upon how well we earned it, right? But we can’t earn forgiveness because we don’t bring anything to God in exchange. All that we can do in confession is throw ourselves into his arms and say, “God, You are a God of love and you are a God, not of mercy, but of abundant mercy. And I throw myself into your arms and I thank you for the forgiveness.” We confess our sin and he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all, ALL unrighteousness (I John 1:9).

IV. Times of Confession are Defining Moments

Times of confession, times of confrontation with sin and the ensuing confession, I believe, are some of the central defining moments for who you and I are individually and who you and I are as a body of Christ. And how you and I respond to sin, how you and I respond to the message of Nathan when he points the finger at you and says, “You’re the man. You’re the woman.” How you and I individually and collectively respond become defining moments. And there are basically two positions we can take. When Nathan comes and points his finger at us, we can dig our heels in, we can refuse to confess, or we can confess a little, but refuse to really come clean. We can blame others. We can harden our hearts. We can say, “Oh, it’s really not that bad, God, come on.” We can paint sin in shades of gray. I’ve often thought how a modern person would have written the first two verses of Psalm 51. I think it would go something like this, “Be nice to me, God, buddy, old pal, old friend, according to your gushy, wimpy love and my goodness. Overlook my minor indiscretions. After all, this was an affair, we don’t call it adultery. Sprinkle me with a little water, whether it’s my fault or not.” I suspect that is how this world would write Psalm 51 if they had the opportunity. But you know, this kind of person knows very, very little of confession and therefore, knows very, very little of forgiveness. And you know what’s sad in this whole thing? We’re not following God when we refuse to confess. Have you ever thought about that? Nathan comes, he points his finger at us, and down deep we know he’s right, but we lock our jaw, we zip our lips. “Not gonna confess, nope, not gonna do it.” And it’s almost like we think confession is for God’s sake. That somehow if I don’t confess what I know I’m doing wrong, then somehow God really isn’t going to be quite sure. “You know, they didn’t confess their sin, maybe they aren’t really guilty of it.” It’s ludicrous, but somehow, sometimes I think that’s at least how my mind works. That if I don’t confess it, it’s not true. But confession isn’t for God’s sake, is it? Confession is for our sake because when we refuse to come clean, all we are doing is hurting ourselves, really, because God wants us to have joy and God wants us to have gladness. That’s what the life of the Christian, of the forgiven person is all about. That there is joy and there is gladness. And we dig our heels in and we refuse to come clean with God. And

what we are saying is, "I don't want your joy and gladness. I'm very happy with my bitterness and anger, thank you very much." Because that's what replaces God's joy and gladness.

That's one way to respond to Nathan when he comes and he points his finger at us. The other way, of course, is to respond as a man or a woman of God should respond. And a man of God asks God to make his sin clear to him. A man of God says, "Send me Nathan. Show me my hidden faults, convict me of my obvious faults." And many in life unfortunately, choose to go through life justifying everything that we say and do. And we go through life with arms folded and scowls etched in our foreheads, unhappy and sullen, full of bitterness and anger, because we refuse to admit that we did anything wrong. But the woman of God asks Nathan to come. And a man and a woman after God's own heart will respond with a full admission of guilt and holding nothing back, they will respond by agreeing that sin is horrible, that it separated us from God and it has filled us with anger. And we will call on God's mercy and love saying, "I don't deserve it, God, but thank you, thank you that in your love and mercy, you choose to forgive your children." That's the other way to handle Psalm 51.

Have you ever been so deeply aware of your sin that all that you can do is fall on your knees and cry out to God and words fail? The only thing you can do is look for your Bible and pull it open and read Psalm 51 amidst tears and cries of anguish. Have you ever been at that point? If you have and you have fully confessed and fully repented, then you have fully come to know what forgiveness is all about. And you will know that your heart was made clean and your spirit was made willing and you experience the deepest joy, the deepest gladness there is because the filth of your life was removed. And it was replaced with the joy and gladness that only comes from God to his children when they confess their sins. And it is because of his faithfulness and his justice that he will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Did any of you have a miserable day yesterday? Don't raise your hands. I sat here yesterday morning and my prayer for you every week is pretty much the same that in the words that I speak and the words that I read, that those of you who need to be encouraged are encouraged and those of you who need to be convicted will be convicted. My prayer was a little stronger yesterday morning. My prayer was that for any of you who are living with unconfessed sin, who think that you're following God by not admitting fully that you were wrong and pleading with him because of his love and his mercy to forgive you. I prayed that you were absolutely miserable yesterday so that you would come to church and hear the joyful and refreshing words of God that no matter what your sin is, no matter how many times you've done it, no matter how deep, and dirty, and ugly, and filthy, and wretched it is, God can wash you. He can erase your sin, to pronounce you clean, fully and completely. I pray that nobody leaves here this morning enslaved to unconfessed sin. There's no reason, no reason at all, to carry that load on your shoulders, none whatsoever.

Let's pray: Father, I pray for myself as for my dear brothers and sisters that, first of all, if there is sin in our lives, if there are ongoing things, and especially if we aren't aware of them, if we have denied them for so long or we just have never seen them, we pray, Father, that Nathan will come. We pray that the Holy Spirit will come and convict the world, and that includes me, of our sin. That you will send the spirit of people into our

lives saying, "Bill, it's not right for you to respond in anger like that. Steve it's not right for you to respond that way. It's not right for you to harbor things." And, Father, I pray that maybe even for the first time for many people here, through the power of your Spirit, you will enable them to confess what you already know, to not hold back in that confession and say, "Yes, God, whatever the circumstances may be, I am wrong and you are right. I appeal to your love and to your abundant mercies to wipe my heart clean. Give me a clean heart, O God, and make my spirit willing, joyfully and gladly, to obey you." In Jesus' name, Amen.