

Humility – Sin Confessed

This article is an excerpt from *Journey back to joy Rediscovering repentance*, the sixth in Union's series of short, friendly theological books in partnership with [10ofThose](#). You can buy it online today [here](#).

Following his illicit affair with Uriah's wife, the murder of her husband and the consequent confrontation with Nathan the prophet, King David went on to compose a song that stands apart as the ultimate masterpiece on handling shame and regret. It is raw, vulnerable, beautiful and hopeful:

Psalm 51

For the director of music [\[1\]](#). A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret
place.*

*Cleanse 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 you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.*

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.

Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Saviour,

*and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would
bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.*

*May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

In our previous chapter Nathan had to tell David, 'You are the man!' (2 Sam. 12:7). Psalm 51 is David's way of openly acknowledging 'I am that man!'. The intro alone is mind-blowing: David puts his name to the piece, cites his crime and marks it for the attention of the director of music.⁸ In other words the king wanted the full, unedited story of his sinfulness to be expertly recorded and publicly broadcast for all to hear and sing along with it. Imagine a track about your most sordid secrets being recorded by a chart-topping artist and then posted on YouTube!

Such transparency is in itself staggering, but what really sets this song apart is that David's stunning honesty is coupled with steely resolve. He is not content to remain wallowing in self-pity and disgraced despair; rather this song is written with irrepressible faith which in turn gives birth to irresistible hope. David has screwed up big time, but there is a way back to God – and he wants to show us the way. Each step of this journey is painful, but if we're willing to rise to the challenge and follow his lead, strong grace will sustain us and epic joy awaits.

Don't miss the direction of David's first step: he moves towards God, not away from Him. This is a perfect picture of what true repentance looks like, yet it flies in the face of our most primal human instinct when we feel shame: to run away and hide, just as Adam and Eve did.^[2] David, though, responds to his grievous offences by throwing himself onto God for mercy because of His 'unfailing love' and 'great compassion' (v. 1). David humbly acknowledges God's good character and, by way of shameful comparison, his own fallen nature. He is a man marked by iniquity and transgression (vv. 1–2), sinful from conception (v. 5), evil in God's sight (v. 4) and persistently corrupt (v. 3).

However, perhaps the most striking lyric is David's confession, 'Against you, you only, have I sinned' (v. 4). Pause for a moment and let that sink in. David had slept with Uriah's wife and put her husband to death, yet he considers his sin to be primarily against God. Is that not outrageous?! Yes it is, but herein lies the key to truly grasping the glorious scandal of God's grace. So often we view our sin in purely horizontal terms – how it affects ourselves and those around us – but this means that our forgiveness must also be found horizontally, and that poses a problem.

Consider David's dilemma here: if his sin was primarily against Bathsheba and Uriah, then he would have had to turn to them for mercy. We are not told whether Bathsheba ever forgave David, but even if she did, what about Uriah? Could he forgive from beyond the grave? Of course not! David could never hear the words 'I forgive you' from the mouth of the man he had murdered. Therefore, if he was ever going to be free of the guilt of betrayal and bloodshed, David would need to find forgiveness from elsewhere. But where?

The beauty of David's confession is that he shifts the focus away from himself and the horizontal consequences of his sin and lifts his eyes to the Merciful One. Does this mean that David had not sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah? Of course not. David, however, rightly acknowledges that his sin was first and foremost an act of violent insurgency against the holiness of God, breaking both His law and His heart. David was guilty of cosmic treason, therefore pardon could only be obtained vertically from the Most High God.

We can learn so much from David here about how to deal with sin – he doesn't sugarcoat it, deny it or try to justify it, rather he simply steps up and owns it. Is that what you do with your sin? David knew that coming clean was the only way of becoming clean, therefore his humble confession is followed accordingly by bold petition.

As a father of four, it never ceases to amaze me how often my kids get themselves into all kinds of mess. It's as if they are magically, magnetically drawn towards anything and everything that could get them caked in crud: mud, blood, ketchup, cowpats ... you name it! However, what they are not so good at is cleaning themselves up afterwards – that joyous duty normally falls to me or their mum. In a similar way, while David recognises that he is solely responsible for the sin that had soiled his soul, he also readily acknowledges that he cannot clean himself up. Therefore, like a child, he comes to his Father and effectively asks for a bath. Note the phrases that David uses in the opening verses: 'blot out my transgressions' (v. 1); 'Wash away all my iniquity' (v. 2); 'cleanse me from my sin' (v. 2). David is filthy and he knows that only God can make him clean. But how could this happen? David tells us in verse 7: 'Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.'

The Hebrew word here for 'cleanse' is stronger than that used in verse 2 – it speaks of being deeply, thoroughly purged. David fully believes that his dirty heart can be washed as white as snow, the key to his confidence being found in his reference to hyssop. This common herb is mentioned only a handful of times in the Bible. In Exodus 12 God's people were instructed to use hyssop to smear the blood of a sacrificed lamb onto the doorposts of their homes, thus causing the angel of death to pass over them.^[3] In other words hyssop was synonymous with salvation. It was also used by priests in various cleansing rituals^[4], so hyssop was synonymous with purity too.

The king's plea to be cleansed with hyssop is therefore loaded with meaning, but it is also pregnant with promise. One thousand years later David's great descendent, the man Jesus Christ, would enter the scene. As the merciful Son of God was mercilessly nailed to a Roman cross, he was offered wine vinegar to drink, held up to him on a hyssop branch by soldiers. Here we see the fulfilment of what David had seen through the eyes of faith: Jesus, the Lamb of God was slaughtered so that rebels could be purified from the stain of sin^[5] and delivered from the penalty of death. Jesus was punished for David's crimes so that David could be washed clean. The cross literally was a bloodbath, as William Cowper so graphically put it:

There is a fountain filled with blood, Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood Lose all their guilty stains.^[6]

What are the guilty stains polluting your life right now? Whatever they are, the only agent potent enough to permanently remove them is the blood of Jesus because 'the blood of Jesus ... purifies us from all sin' (1 John 1:7). If you want to get rid of the toxic residue of sin in your life, you need to follow David's example. Turn to Jesus and confess your mess, for: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9).

David begins his petition with a plea for cleansing, but as he progresses down the path of repentance, he recognises that it isn't only forgiveness he needs; he requires a complete overhaul: 'Create in me a pure heart, O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me', (v. 10) he cries. Sin has literally wrecked David's life and so he turns to the only One who can put it back together again.

However, his petition doesn't end there. David continues: 'Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me' (v. 11). The presence of God, once so precious to David, had been the furthest thing from his mind as he defiled Bathsheba and devoured her husband. But now, as he turns back to God and confesses his sin, he isn't content to merely receive God's mercy; he wants to revel in His presence again. Do not miss either the connection between this verse and the line that follows: 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation' (v. 12). As we saw in the opening chapter, God's presence and God's joy are inextricably linked.

I love this lyric so much because David absolutely understands the fact that true salvation is experiential. Frankly, he wants his joy back! As the psalm passes its halfway mark, David begins to thrill at the memory of what his life used to be like before Bathsheba, before bloodshed, before disgrace. He casts his mind back to the glory days when the joy of God's presence incited him to dance deliriously through the streets of his city with nothing but an ephod and the grace of God to cover his shame. He would worship with such infectious ferocity that the multitudes were swept up in ecstasy with him. And then the penny drops: his best days do not have to be behind him; it can be like that again!

Maybe this resonates with you because, like David, you really blew it at some point and have endured a joyless Christian existence ever since. If that is the case, then with all the love in my heart I want to hold out to you this beautiful truth: God's grace is bigger than your sin. When you view your transgression through the lens of the cross, faith will rise and joy will feel attainable again.

David's journey back to joy is now gathering pace. As his stride lengthens, he starts to see beyond the prison bars of his own selfish desires and subsequent self-loathing. Indeed as he dares to dream of a fresh start marked by a pure heart, a willing and steadfast spirit and unbridled joy, things begin to look different. People are no longer viewed as objects to be used and abused, but rather as precious souls to be served, saved and lovingly led: 'Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you' (v. 13).

Note that David has now moved on from petitioning God and has started making big promises. Rather than lustful kisses and devious lies, David will once again use his mouth to teach, sing and declare God's praise (vv. 14–15). Like a beggar who has just been given the keys to the royal parlour, David is now devoted to calling other beggars to join him at the banquet. He has received lavish grace and wants to lavishly distribute it to others. Similarly, rather than burnt offerings, David now places himself on the altar, giving all that he has left: a broken spirit and contrite heart (vv. 16–17). It begs the question what would ... could ... should your life look like after an encounter with the transforming grace of God?

As we reach the end of the psalm, there is no doubt that David is a changed man. Every step of his journey has been gruelling, but the bones that God, in his gracious purposes, crushed are now ready to rejoice. The king who once danced so passionately before the ark is about to make a comeback. His guilty feet might have lost their rhythm, but now – having walked the road of repentance – they're itching to hit the dance floor once more, and David knows exactly what track he wants the DJ to play ...

Endnotes

[1] The ESV and other versions of the Bible translate this title as 'the choirmaster'.

[2] Gen. 3:8

[3] Ex. 12:22–23.

[4] Lev. 14 and Num. 19.

[5] John 1:29.

[6] William Cowper, 'There is a Fountain' (1772).



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Repentance, Humility

Psalms