

A prayer of personal confession

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[0:00] If you'll open your Bibles to the book of Psalms, we're in Psalm chapter 51 today. I'm now realizing as I stand in this pulpit that the microphone has been adjusted for people! who will be giving baptism testimonies soon.

So, I just hope my stomach doesn't growl while we preach, because just mute that one, Jesse. Well, I think that it's important when we look at Psalm 51 to say the obvious, and that is that this is a record of one man doing very serious business of repentance with God. You'll see there at the beginning of chapter 51, there's that little smaller print often in a person's Bible.

That's called a superscription. It was part of the original inspired document that we've received from the Lord, and you don't get these for every Psalm, but occasionally God will give you a little bit of a clue about the context in which this or that Psalm was written. And so, this is actually part of God's Word, and we want to treat it as such. So, let me start there. To the choir master, a Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him after he had gone into Bathsheba.

And just for those of you that don't know the Bible very well, Bathsheba ain't a town. All right. So, we're going to handle a really difficult moment in David's life. And like I said at the beginning, this is the record of a man doing very serious, the business of repentance very seriously with God. But I think what's less obvious is to note that everything that happens in this Psalm happens because God is conducting his business of redemption through the church. The church is the unsung hero of Psalm 51. And all the goodness that it produces has the church, God working through the church, to thank for it. It's kind of important, I think, for us to understand that every time you have business to do with God, you're doing that business as a one-on-one person. Nobody here can be saved because of who they're related to, or the church they attend, or the creed they sign.

Every one of you must be right with God on God's terms as disclosed in his word. So, we all have individual business to do with God. And yet, our individual business with God is always connected to what God is doing more largely in his people. I think the way that I would illustrate this is we had an infographic prepared for this. And it's just of the way that a river is wide for a while and then narrows and then widens again. And God's work through his people, this is sort of how it goes. He works collectively through his people up to a point. And then there's a one-on-one kind of conversation that needs to happen, a one-on-one season that needs to happen between you and the Lord. This prayer is that prayer, David is reckoning himself unto God in repentance. But then that river opens back up and flows back to the full people of God. That's the thing I don't want you to miss about Psalm 51. I don't hear people talk about enough. And that is, is that everything that's happening here is happening because God is conducting his redemptive business through his people. Look at verse 13. After dealing with God individually, David prays, if you will restore the joy of my salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit, then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you. The river opens back up again after he's had his individual encounter with God. It goes back to the people of

[3:48] God. Psalm continues, do good in Zion and your good pleasure, build up the walls of Jerusalem. So there is this hourglass shape to this Psalm. Things are happening amongst the people of God that leads David to this one conversation with God. And then at the end of this one conversation of God, it opens back up into the people of God again. And this is kind of just like what we are aiming for with our parenting. Parents, is we are trying to raise our kids in a godly household that loves Jesus and so forth. But we understand that all of that is still going to require a one time, like a one moment where they are reckoned unto God as righteous through the gospel of Jesus Christ. And then we hope that the fruit of that reckoning pours back out into the family. So this pattern is all over the Bible, and I don't want you to miss it when we are examining this particular Psalm. One thing just to note as an aside, there are times, like I'm sure that David felt this way in

this Psalm, there are times when things are hard and you feel really alone. You feel really alone, like you just don't feel like anybody else understands or could understand what you're going through or what you're feeling. And you're at that narrow point of the river. Friends, I just would tell you that's just a natural part of life. And we've all gone through that. And that's just going to happen from time to time. But the real trick is to see that that's just one season of our life. And that this one season where we feel alone is actually leading to a season where we use our distress to comfort others. We use our experiences to comfort others and so forth. And that's true, whether it's sin or whether it's just some kind of general suffering. You might feel narrow and alone right now with just you and God. But the truth is the Bible is clear that that will open back up into a season where you have a contribution to make to the church at large. Now, I want you to understand the corporate connection to this psalm. We'll explore this further in a minute because I think that God has been incredibly faithful to us as a local church. We are celebrating our 25th anniversary this year.

And I would imagine that any church that's been around for 25 years has had moments where you didn't know if you were going to be able to continue. Moments where you didn't know if you wanted to continue.

Really narrow moments where it felt like everything was especially hard. And I would say that we've had plenty of those and we've also had plenty of beautiful and triumphant moments. But recently, and pay attention because this is exciting, recently I personally received and I think we received one of the biggest ups, one of the biggest blessing moments that we could like receive as a church. And that is because not too long ago, God provided the means for us to pay off our building in full. Amen. So we no longer owe the bank anything for the building. We had about \$500,000 balance remaining and about \$130,000 worth of interest remaining. And we paid the building off 10 years beforehand. And that is all because of God's great blessing. So I just want to take a moment to, yeah, Daryl is crying tears of joy back there. I just want to take a minute to acknowledge the founding families and those who have been here for a really long time. And not by name, I just want you to understand, like, I am so happy for you.

You know, I am so happy for you. I know how it feels to hear this. And so I just praise God with you. Obviously, I'm excited that I don't have to wait till I'm 60 till the building's paid off.

[7:47] But I am just so, I'm with you. I'm grateful for you. One of the first things I thought about was you early families and the giving you have done over the years, the faithful stewardship still showing up for work days and so forth. And in many respects, this building has felt like a boat anchor to some degree. And that's just part of having a building. But I just want to take a moment and say, just praise God for his faithfulness to us. And we just can't say thank you enough to everyone who made this moment possible. We are just so profoundly grateful to God for this moment. So that's kind of the pretext or the question, I guess, that I wanted to lay up before you before we get into Psalm 51 more deliberately. And it's sort of like, well, now what? You know, what has God called us to?

How are we supposed to respond to this incredible gift? And I think the answer is, is that God has given us this tremendous gift so that we can continue to be a church that makes Psalm 51 moments possible in this city, in our families, in the nation, and even in the world. God has given us this great blessing to allow us to focus even more on giving people their Psalm 51 moment, where they do business with God and find not only forgiveness and grace, but purpose on the other side of one of the hardest moments of their life. That's what I think God's calling us to. So let's go back to the text. The big idea for this sermon is simply that God uses his church to show people their sin and their Savior, and then uses that repentance to build up the church and perpetuate its mission. Let's go back to the text, the superscription to the choir master. Again, you see, this is not a purely private Psalm.

This is being handed to the people to sing a Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him after he had gone into Bathsheba. That superscription is just kind of meant to be like a hyperlink that you can click on and understand. Like, there's a whole story behind this, so just let me quickly catch you up on the story. The Bible gives us all sorts of really interesting details about how this all played out, but essentially it was spring, and this is the season when kings would go out to war. And David was an elite human being in terms of his military prowess. Like, this man, if anyone should have been out on the battlefield, it was David. He was really just an elite human being when it came to making war. But David didn't go to war. He should have been in the field with his men, but he stayed in Jerusalem, and from his roof he saw Bathsheba, whose husband Uriah was also a pretty

elite guy. He was away fighting in David's army. And David had her brought to him, and he slept with her.

And sometime later, she sent word that she was pregnant. David tried his best to cover it up. He called Uriah home from the front, hoping that he would spend the night with his wife, and the child would pass as his.

[11:14] But Uriah was loyal to the men he'd left behind, and sort of just said, if they can't have this with their wives, I'm not going to have this with my wife. And so he slept at the door of the king's house with the rest of the king's servants. David got him drunk. That was try number two. Uriah still refused to go into his home. And so David sent Uriah back to the front, carrying a letter to the commanding officer. And in that letter was his own death warrant. David told the commanding officer to advance into a very difficult military situation and ensure that they were outnumbered.

And then when that was their pullback, leaving those men exposed to the enemy. And indeed, not only Uriah died that day, but other soldiers died with him in that sort of fake retreat. So time passed. Bathsheba became David's wife, and she gave birth to a son. And this is all taken about a year. For about a year in the life of David, he was, to his own conscience, an adulterer and a murderer.

And then the Lord acted through his people. That's the crucial piece I want you to see. The Lord acted through his people. The Lord went to Nathan the prophet and told Nathan, you need to go talk to David. Here's that story from 2 Samuel 12. And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, there were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. After he brought it up and it grew with him and with his children, it used to eat his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms. And it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him.

But he took the poor man's lamb and prepared for it, prepared it for the man who had come to him. David's anger was greatly kindled against the man and said to Nathan, as the Lord lives, the man who has done this, the man who has done this deserves to die. And he shall restore the lamb fourfold because he did this thing and because he had no pity. Nathan said to David, you are the man.

[14:01] That's where Psalm 51 picks up. Have mercy on me, O God. According, to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy. Point one is, is that David's repentance shows that he is clearly seeing his sin. We don't have to wonder about the veracity of David's repentance. Have mercy on me, verse one. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy. The call for mercy shows us that David understands that he deserves judgment. Continuing in verse one, blot out my transgressions. The call for his transgressions to be blotted out understands that he has a debt that he cannot pay. The only way that this debt gets settled is if the holder of the debt writes it off. David cannot write this debt off. It has to be blotted out. Verse two, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. He has a longing to be washed and cleansed. This shows that he feels dirty. Indeed, I would say he's using Levitical leper language to describe how he feels when he asks God to wash him and cleanse him.

Verse three, for I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. This shows us that this is not a momentary sensation of regret, but that in some sense this has become a display that is always on his eyelids as soon as he closes his eyes. His guilt is displayed continually before his conscience.

And he knows that he deserves great judgment. Verse four, against you and you only have I sinned. Hebrew poetry will use the word only in a way we don't. And it just means above or chief above.

Or above all. And so what David is not saying is that he did not sin against Bathsheba or Uriah or the other men who died. He's simply saying that his offense before God is far greater than anything else in view. And indeed, when we sin against others, we're ultimately sinning against the one who made them.

So in some sense, all of David's sin is ultimately unto the Lord. Continuing in verse four, he says, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. David is saying, whatever judgment you bring upon me, no matter what you could possibly do to me, God, it would be a righteous decree because I am that guilty. And he goes on in verses five through six. He says that this is not actually a one-time occurrence in discordance with his true nature, but he says, this is

actually who I am. This sin represents me. This is actually who I am. That's the meaning of verses five and six.

[16:59] He's not trying to make theological points about the moment sin arrives or anything like that. He's just using the language he can to describe total sin. He is a man of total sin. This is not a situation that simply reflects bad on him, but otherwise he's a good guy. And David will have reason to say that to some degree. But he is saying that this experience with Bathsheba and the way that he covered it up flows out of who he actually is. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth and the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. David acknowledges that he's been the beneficiary of massive biblical light. God had taught him things. God had put up stop signs. God had put up directional signs. And in his sin, he had ran through all of those. So we see very clearly that David sees his sin very clearly. But point two, David is clearly seeing his sin because of the church. David is sitting on his sin at this point for about a year.

He had been an adulterer for about a year, a murderer for about a year. And honestly, if more bodies could have covered up his guilt at this point of unrepentance, he likely would have offered more to cover up his sin. David would have continued in this sin until the very moment that God decided he must be confronted with his sin. And so how did God reach down and communicate this issue to a sinner?

He used a prophet, a prophet named Nathan, a church guy, a person functioning as an official within the household of God. And here's the reality. The spirit that worked in David worked first in Nathan to send Nathan to David. Before David could obey, Nathan had to obey. You see, all of these skinny moments where one individual is dealing with God is dealing with God themselves, they're all started by a group of people who are faithful. And you think, how did Nathan live? How did Nathan eat? How did Nathan have a house?

I'm sure his wife liked nice decorations too. How did Nathan live? And you realize, okay, there's this very unique thing happening where God holds a person up like Nathan by a lot of other people. And there's a community effect of moving Nathan into this moment. Nathan didn't get there on his own. The spirit was there, but also all the people who cared for and listened to and walk with Nathan. And so you have this moment of realization, whatever we see as an individual breakthrough that David's having here, it happened because God has been faithful through a great number of people in advance to this moment that gets Nathan to David's front door. And I think it's important to understand that because there is a whole portion of the culture that is eager to call all of this a great, terrible thing. There's plenty of people in the culture who would say that what Nathan did there was spiritual abuse. In 2011, psychologist Marlene Winell published a three-part series called Religious Trauma Syndrome in the Cognitive Behavior Therapy Today publication. It's a publication that the British Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapy produces in. And she writes this, The doctrines of original sin and eternal damnation cause the most psychological distress by creating the ultimate double bind. You are guilty and responsible and face eternal punishment, yet you have no ability to do anything about it. These are teachings of fundamentalist Christianity, Marlene reminds us. However, other authoritarian religions have equally toxic doctrines.

[21:19] You must conform to a mental test of believing in an external unseen source for salvation and maintain this state of belief until death. For the sincere believer, this results in an unending cycle of shame and relief. So I just want to say this, like one of the things, I try to be as frank as this is possible. One of the things that we're going to commit to again on this 25th anniversary is we're just not going to be a Marlene-driven church. Like, we're going to develop antibodies against Marlene's.

There is a group of people, and there's reasons for this, but we simply won't stop telling people that they are sinning and need to repent. We simply won't stop doing that. The Marlene's will write their blogs and people will whisper, but we are not going to be a Marlene-driven church.

It's just not going to happen, Lord willing. And I'm not the only one making that promise. A bunch of us in this room are locked together, heart and soul, have already done this enough to say, nope, nope, that's not the play we're going to run. And when we get slandered for being whatever Marlene thinks we are, we are going to press on in kindness and joy and say, you've just got it wrong. We'll just keep doing what the church has been doing for 2,000 years. A faithful church is going to have to do to David's what Nathan did to David. A faithful church has to be engaged in the prophetic witness of the word and the direct discussion of people's sin and the direct call for repentance. That

has to be part of what a faithful church is. I realize, like, we just need to ask ourselves, are you willing to be a Nathan?

Nathan? Are you willing to be a Nathan? Like, the world needs Nathans. There are men like David and women like David out in the world who, honestly, until someone speaks with them, they will just keep being what they are. Paul says that if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. I think that what we see Nathan doing there was a great example of careful, thoughtful presentation of, hey, this is you, bud.

This is you. So point one, this is, it's obvious that David's repentance is real. He's seeing his sin clearly, but the reason that he's seeing his sin clearly is because God was faithfully acting amongst his people and brought someone to tell him that he was sinning. Point three, David's repentance also shows that he is clearly seeing his savior. Go back to verse one. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy. It is clear when you read this song that David's sin looms large, but honestly, I've been dealing with my sin and other people's sin for a long time, and it's only somewhat impressive when a person sees their sin. But we're talking about here is gospel repentance, where in addition to seeing his sin, David sees his savior as much bigger than his sin.

[25 : 05] David has a sense that the mercy and the steadfast love of God is more than sufficient to handle his sins. He knows that God is the holy judge. Verse four, against you and you only have I sinned, you'd be entirely justified in doing whatever you want in response to this. But he also knows that God is a faithful redeemer and a spiritual healer. He goes to the God who can judge him, assuming it's also the God who can heal him. Look at verse seven. 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 of 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. Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you. Guys, did you just hear what a murdering adulterer asked God to do for him? Do you understand that this bold repentance is associated also with a bold faith? Like this is a man who on the heels of being confronted for some of the darkest things we can imagine doing makes the most blatant requests unto God for true healing, for true forgiveness. Because in addition to seeing his sins well, David sees God's saving, redeeming work well. God, David sees his sins well. He also sees the Savior well. Point four, David is seeing his Savior well because of the church.

Why is David seeing his sin well? Because of the church. Why is David seeing his Savior well? Because of the church. How does David know that God is like this? How does David know that God's the kind of God who is open to healing and cleansing and forgiving? Even someone like him who sat on it for a year and only confessed after he kind of got caught? How does David know that God is like this?

Because David grew up in a covenant community that was built by God to display both law and gospel to each individual so that they may be saved. That's the short end of it is, is that David grew up in a covenant community that communicated law and gospel and steadfast love and forgiveness. And so he knew what God was like because he was raised in an environment where this God kept showing up for other people over and over and over again. And that's our charter. That's what we want to be. That's what we should be in order to provide Psalm 51 moments, not only here, but around the nation and around the world.

We have to be people who are willing to say that is sin. That is wrong. This is a Savior and he's amazing. And we have to keep saying that over and over again. And the way that we say that most authentically is that we all live it. And so that the environment of our church is people who have been serious about their sin and found that where their sin abounded, grace abounded much more.

[28 : 45] If you understand, like, if you want to understand, like, how do I raise kids in the gospel? How do I lead people in this ethos of I'm taking sin seriously, I'm also taking grace seriously?

There's this great concept that John Piper talks about, the gravity and gladness of God, where you take in gravity the reality of your sin. But only because you're taking that real are you able to feel the great comfort and joy that comes from really receiving God's tremendous grace. David saw his sin well because the church, the people of God, showed it to him. And David saw the salvation of God well because the church, the people of God, showed it to him. It's easy, to be honest, to understand

why the Marlenes of the world struggle so much with a faithful church because the God of this world has blinded their eyes to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel, the glory of Jesus, the image of God. And when you only present sin as big, but don't have deeply in your heart the truth that this Savior is much bigger, what gets communicated all the time to a person who can't see the bigness of God's saving love is just a sin. It's just that you're stuck, it's over, you screwed up, and so forth. And so our great challenge, as is the challenge of every Christian and every church, is to be faithful to those two things. To be faithful to say, that's sin, and friend, I want you to see it, while also being faithful to say, and we have a great Savior whom we can fully, wholeheartedly trust. Well, in a moment, you're going to hear three testimonies that are sort of like that river. I thought that was a fitting illustration leading up to baptisms. You're going to hear three testimonies where God used his people, an individual had a response with God, and then on the other side, they take that response with God and walk that out amongst the people. But I thought I would give you my favorite river testimony, or one of my favorite, before I hand this over to our baptismal candidates. John Newton was a sailor, a sailor so profane that even other sailors complained about him, and he became the captain of the Atlantic slave trade, the captain of a ship in the Atlantic slave trade. In 1748, his ship nearly went down in the North Atlantic storm, and alone he cried out to God for mercy. You're like, that's the narrow moment. He's at sea. He's all alone. It's just him and God. Doesn't matter what kind of family he was raised in, or any kind of thing in that sense. But how does John know who to call out to?

How does John even know that there is a God who would offer salvation? Well, because John's mother filled his head with scriptures and Isaac Watts hymns prior to her death. And so this adult male who was the most profane of all profanes, grabbing hold for his dear life, had something in his head put there by a faithful covenant community that he could call out and say, Lord, save me. And the Lord did save him.

And after the storm, the river widened again. And he was ordained and pastored a little parish of Olney for 16 years. And the song Amazing Grace, he wrote it just for his little church to sing. And in London, he counseled a young man named William Wilberforce to stay in parliament and to fight the slave trade and to do so prayerfully. So the near end of his life, Newton's 82, he really couldn't talk anymore, not very much.

And he told a friend, my memory is nearly gone. He was having trouble just understanding where he was like it was. He was losing it. And he told a friend, my memory is nearly gone.

[33:19] But two things I do remember that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great savior. The people of God had done their job.

They had been there in advance well before he was ready to repent and told him that there is a fountain filled with blood.

Told him that there is a great God ready to redeem. Told him, John, you're a sinner. And then the people of God were there on the other side to benefit from yet another glorious example of Jesus seeking and saving the lost.

So that after that narrow moment on that ship where he did his business with God, he became a servant of God and served his people. And this is what the church has been doing for 2,000 years. Connecting wide river moments with narrow river moments. Wide river moments with narrow river moments. Over and over again, link by link, God is building his church.

[34:28] So I'm going to pray for us and then we're going to have I think Dara is our first testimony for baptism today. We're going to have three short testimonies. And you'll hear the river story in their testimonies as well. But let me pray.

Father God, we praise your holy name for all you've done for us. Thank you God for blessing us spiritually and physically and taking care of us as a church for so long. Lord, we are grateful that today we get to be reminded that it's our job to talk about sin and our great savior.

And Lord, we're really encouraged that we get to hear three examples of three people who have gone through this very thing. Lord, we pray that you bless them. Help them not be too nervous. We love them. Definitely are safe here.

We pray you bless them in their testimonies. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.