

Exegesis of Psalm 51

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Many valid and proper reasons could be given, in the writing of this paper, for choosing the 51st Psalm above the other great psalms of the Bible. But I believe that there are two particular reasons which make the exegesis of this psalm appropriate at a Pastoral Conference. First of all, this psalm contains God-given instruction in the chief parts of our Christian religion and our Lutheran faith. It speaks clearly and precisely about repentance, sin, grace and justification. It unfolds for us these doctrines, to know, to believe, to confess and to proclaim to the glory of God and the welfare of precious souls. Secondly, these doctrines form the sum and substance of our work as ministers of Christ. Not only we, but all people, can truly profit from what David lived through in his life. Our pastoral counseling of the sinner can be greatly enriched by understanding this psalm; our preaching can be truly relevant, and our work of the ministry can continually become more enjoyable and more effective.

Luther sets the tone for our consideration of this psalm when he writes, "Where is there a man who could speak about repentance and the forgiveness of sins the way the Holy Spirit speaks in this psalm?" The aforementioned doctrines are divine doctrines and unless the Holy Spirit teaches them, they can never enter the heart of man. Therefore, it is our prayer that He will direct us in this discussion.

This psalm has been called a "penitential psalm." It is the prayer of a sinner much like the publican in the temple who pleaded, "God be merciful to me a sinner." It can be divided up as follows: verses 1-4, the sinner's prayer for mercy and forgiveness; 5-12, the sinner's plea for restoration and renewal; 13-19, the sinner's changed heart and the fruits of faith; 18-19, the forgiven sinner's prayer for God's blessings on other people.

The psalm talks about the whole of sin, about the root of sin, about the fruit of sin and about the devastating effect of sin. But it also speaks clearly of the forgiveness of sin and the joy and peace received. It leads the listener to a recognition of sin and a recognition of grace, of the wrath of God and of the mercy of God. At the beginning of this psalm we see a sinner troubled by the knowledge of his sin and the burden of his conscience. At the end we see him comforted by the goodness of God and looking forward to instructing others in the ways of the just and loving God.

The heading found in verses 1 and 2 in the Hebrew is translated thus: "To the Choir Director, a psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba." This is given as public penance by David, but also as a warning and instruction to the people. One by one he had broken the whole Law of God; yet he did not acknowledge these sins. Nathan had come and met him face to face with the verdict, "Thou art the man." Before this David had tried to appear as a righteous and holy king, but he had fallen into a whole mass of sins. It is true as stated before that this psalm talks about the whole nature of sin and its source, yet we cannot exclude the history to which the title refers, that is, David's adultery with Bathsheba, and the murder of Uriah. In David we see a man of God and yet he sank so low into the deep mire of sin. It is truly a warning, "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." (I Cor. 10:12) Sin is the corrupter of all powers, inward and outward. No member performs its function now, as it did in Paradise before sin. But how beautiful and precious the grace of God in Christ changed that picture. This psalm lays before all this general instruction of sin and grace from the time it was composed to this present day, a day when sin for the most part is not

recognized for the damning thing it is and grace is not recognized for the saving power it is. Thus it is important that the Holy Spirit instruct us in the knowledge of God and ourselves in the main body of this psalm.

1. Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy steadfast love: according to Thy great mercy blot out my transgressions.
2. Wash me completely from my iniquity, and cleanse me from all sin.
3. For my rebellion I recognize and my sin is ever before me.
4. Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned and done that which is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou mightest be just when Thou speakest and pure when Thou judgest.

Verse 1

David humbly comes before God with a confession of his complete unworthiness and with a cry of faith looking solely to God as his only hope. Here we see a true and penitent heart which finds no hope or comfort in itself but sees only sin and misery and comes before the eternal God for help. The only plea of a repentant sinner is in the mercy of God. The person who finds any comfort or help in himself cannot sincerely speak these words. The only anchor to which the sinner clings is the unfailing love of God. "For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him." (Ps. 103:11) Here is that great mercy of God as expressed by His Son who remains "Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and forever." (Heb. 13:8) This God of salvation forgives sins not by the merit of the individual but by the merit of the Son of God who wiped out the sins of mankind, who removed them "as far as the east is from the west." David's sin, our sin, is great, but God's grace in Christ is greater. "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." (Rom. 5:20) From beginning to end this is the repentant sinner's comfort and assurance that God's mercy has blotted out the handwriting of sin, in this case adultery, murder, and a year of hard-hearted refusal to acknowledge the transgression committed.

Verse 2

Sin pollutes the heart, the conscience, and the entire life of a person. That which removes this pollution or in this case cleanses the heart, conscience and life is the grace of God. "Washed completely" is the cleansing by which God declares the sinner justified by the Gospel of Christ and His redemption. This was already signified in the declaration of the priest when he announced the unclean to be pure. Before God the sinner stands cleansed by the blood of Christ, the sin that was as scarlet became as white as snow. The Hebrew terms used for sin underscore what a wretched thing it is. As "transgressions" it is nothing less than rebellion against God, as "iniquity" it points out the perversion and twisting of moral standards and as "sin" it implies that the divinely appointed goal that has been set for man has been completely missed by man.

Verse 3

This penitence is no sham, it is real. It is the recognition and acknowledgement of the great sin committed. Of the three terms just mentioned for sin, the strongest is used and in the Hebrew is placed first for the sake of emphasis: "For my rebellion I recognize". Leupold says that this is another way of stating: "I know how grievously I have sinned and the thought clings to me night and day." This is not a beholding of the sins of others but instead seeing clearly one's own sin in all its horror, never able to run away from it. Even at night when the eyes are closed

the picture remains ugly, repulsive and damning. This condition drives the penitent sinner humbly to the throne of God.

Verse 4

The penitent sinner is also aware that every sin is a sin., first of all, against God. David brings this out in this verse. Certainly in David's case the sins of adultery and murder were directed against man also. But whether the sin be directed against the First Table of the Law or the Second, it is a missing of the mark of God's will and an insult to His holiness and glory. In all aspects of life, man is responsible first to God as Joseph also stated when tempted to commit adultery, "How, then, can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9)

The conclusion of the writer drawn from the fact that it is a sin against God, is in the form of a result clause, and the result is that since sin is direct, first of all, against God, any indictment of man that God presents, as Nathan did against David, makes it very plain that God's charges are entirely just, and His judgments are fair. The sinner is wrong, God is right. God is the God of justice, no one can rightfully charge Him with being unjust when He condemns man for his sin. Anything less than that would be injustice in its most blatant form. Everyone needs to realize and confess with David that he is a sinner for "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (I John 1:8) How hard that seems to be in our age, to admit our sin, but how important it is to men of all ages.

5. Behold, in iniquity was I brought forth and in sin did my mother conceive me.
 6. Behold, Thou desirest truth in the inmost parts. And in the hidden part Thou teachest me wisdom.
 7. Purge me with hysop and I shall be clean: Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
 8. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones which Thou hast crushed rejoice.
 9. Hide Thy face from my sins; and all my iniquities do Thou blot out.
 10. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
 11. Cast me not away from Thy presence and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.
- Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Verse 5

Why does man commit sins and rebel against God? The truth of the matter is explained by David - man is a sinner by nature. Man is "flesh born of flesh," he is sinful from his very beginning to say nothing about the thoughts, words and works that follow. "A corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit." (Matt. 7:17) Man's nature is sinful and, as long as that nature remains with us, we need to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses." It is not the writer's intention to state that the very act that led to his conception was a sin, as some claim. He is bewailing his own sinfulness, not that of his parents. This is no excuse but rather a statement of truth, he was born sinful; in fact, from the moment of conception he was sinful.

Verse 6

The psalmist has stated what is actually in the heart, and now reminds all what ought to be there. God wants men to be upright. "Ye shall be holy" (Lev. 19:2) is God's will. God loves the inner truth, not the outward piety which may really be a deception of what is in the heart of man. The desire of the psalmist is that he would also receive inner truth. Wisdom or the fear of God is what is humbly desired. This is not to be an outward change, but in the part of man that is

hidden, where no human eye can penetrate. There God can supply wisdom. This wisdom, Luther states, is “nothing else than knowing oneself thoroughly, and therefore hating oneself. It is seeking all righteousness not in self but in God. . humbly loving God and looking away from self.”

Verse 7

This psalm began with a sincere plea. This plea was interrupted by an attempt to find reasons for each plea that was offered. The idea is now renewed in great detail; it breaks forth with renewed intensity. The psalmist’s sin is “ever before him.” The first verb used has in it the root of the word for sin, the thought according to Leupold “being something like ‘de-sin’ me, a thought that is happily rendered by the German verb *entsuendigen*.” Then “purging with hyssop” refers to the Jewish ceremonial where hyssop was used in cleansing. According to the Levitical Law only hyssop could cleanse a person from contact with a corpse (Num. 19:18) or heal from leprosy (Lev. 14:4) David recognizes that his sin was of the worst kind and needed that which had the greatest cleansing power. This is equally true of all sinners who are in need of that great cleansing power of Christ’s bloods No other power will do, for that alone can thoroughly cleanse. “Wash” is a word which here includes vigorous pounding, stamping and rubbing in order to get all the dirt out and thus make white. By the blood of Christ a man stands before God truly and thoroughly cleansed.

Verse 8

Once the sinner has heard, “Your sins are forgiven”, deep joy follows. A joy which produces a calm and peace in the heart. Washed and cleansed by the hyssop of God’s grace, this sinner is raised from his knees to a height that only a repentant man can fully understand. “Bones” is a figure of speech which refers to the whole, in this case the entire man. Spiritually these bones had been broken. David had been totally crushed by Nathan’s conviction, “Thou art the man!” But even in that God’s good and gracious work was being carried out as here God recalls a man who had strayed away.

Verse 9

The first part of this verse is a prayer that God would totally disregard what the sinner is guilty of before Him. Turn away in order not to see them. But even more, the second part stresses that God would do away with these sins so that they are as completely disposed of as is the writing on a slate that has been gone over with a wet sponge. By grace, God does not impute the sins for Christ’s sake, but righteousness is imputed instead. Sin is not seen but only the righteousness won by Christ which covers all sins.

Verse 10

Thus a transplant must take place. And it is only God who can do this delicate operation. A clean heart, empty of all sin and love of sin is the work of the Creator and His divine power. So the psalmist asks for more than just purifying, or cleansing but by an act of creative power make a new clean heart. This is the new birth, the new life, the conversion which God the Holy Spirit works in man. The spirit of the flesh by nature is not right, but by this new heart, a renewal of that God-oriented spirit takes place. All this bringing man back into a close relationship with God, a relationship so close that He calls us His “children” and we can call Him “our Father.”

Verse 11

Again David's humility comes to the foreground as he prays what he could only pray with the power of the Holy Spirit. As one who already has the Holy Spirit he prays that he might not be rejected or "cast away from God's presence." Oh, that he might not fall into hard heartedness again and be removed from God's favor. God's Holy Spirit had been richly poured out upon David when he was first anointed by Samuel and, if that Spirit would be taken away, all would be lost. The Holy Spirit must remain and does remain.

Verse 12

For when the Lord turns to the sinner in grace, the happiness of the believer reaches new proportions. The state of grace is a state of joyfulness of heart and mind. What greater joy can there be than to know the love of this God of our salvation, who has made the greatest sacrifice possible. His own dear Son, thus securing man's salvation. And add to this a "willing spirit," not one enslaved by fear or a bad conscience or sin, but freed by God's grace to willingly serve God. In the Hebrew there is no "with thy" willing spirit. This is not a reference to God's Spirit as such but that David would receive a willing attitude to love and serve God above all.

In this section the psalmist expresses his clear awareness of the great loss that had been suffered when he plunged into sin. His prayer is that the grace of God will cover all this tragic loss.

13. Then will I teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will return to Thee.
14. Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation, my tongue shall declare Thy righteousness.
15. O Lord, open Thou my lips and my mouth shall declare Thy praise.
16. For Thou has no delight in sacrifice; else I would give it - Thou desirest not burnt offering.
17. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.

Verse 13

The heart that has felt the blow of God's Law and experienced the comfort and joy of the Gospel of forgiveness will never again be quite the same. The psalmist asks, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me?" (Ps. 116:12) Likewise in our verse, David shows forth the fruit that faith has produced. The truly grateful heart cannot be satisfied without making some return to God for his goodness. David's vow of faith to God is to "teach transgressors Thy ways." David is determined to "show forth the praises of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." (I Peter 2:9) David promises to promote not his own self glory but the glory of God by bringing others to God's salvation. His goal is to tell of God's way, God's mercy and thus turn them from their evil ways which lead only to destruction. Through the message of God's grace sinners will be converted to God, and restored in His image. What a great work David had to do! What a glorious privilege for each believer in Christ not to teach the ways of man but the way of God's grace.

Verse 14

David in no way regards his sins in a light manner. The repentant sinner does not try to find excuses or blame someone else. The thought again comes to David and he flees for

deliverance to God who is his “Refuge and Strength.” Blood-guiltiness means that one has deserved death and according to the Law is guilty of death before God on account of his sins. David has shed Uriah’s blood. Such guilt is not easily erased. But, remember, “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” (Rom. 5:30) And this truth immediately causes David’s thoughts to turn to praise for the pardon received. “My tongue shall declare Thy righteousness.” that is the glorious righteousness imputed to him by the grace of God, the God of his salvation in Jesus Christ. This news he promises to tell to others.

Verse 15

With the note of praise sounded that is due to God for His goodness, the psalmist asks for the ability to speak the praise of God. This is possible when the Lord opens the lips of the forgiven sinner. Then he has strength and courage to proclaim freely and courageously God’s glory even when it may be considered foolishness by the world. For even “the foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of men.” (I Cor. 1:25) It takes courage, courage which only God can give to admonish the sinner and announce that there is nothing good in him, that he deserves punishment, but honor and praise are God’s alone because He alone is man’s righteousness. All glory belongs to God alone.

Verse 16

It is this changed heart of which the psalmist has been speaking, the heart that breaks forth in praise and glory to God. This is the greatest thing we can do for God. This is what He desires above every thing else. He doesn’t desire sacrifice as a mere external, mechanical act of worship. Sacrifices that fulfill the letter of the law and express mere conformity to that letter, but are accompanied by no inner feeling, no changed heart, are futile. “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” (Heb. 11:6) Burnt offerings, such as oxen or sheep are undesirable if the spirit or heart is not in it. The outward acts must flow from faith, as Jesus states in the description of Himself as the Vine and His followers as the branches, “without Me ye can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Verse 17

The sacrifices that God really values and desires come from a heart that has been broken by the hammer of the Law and crushed by the knowledge of sin. Not seeing any good or any righteousness in himself, that person who has a “broken and a contrite heart” is now ready to receive from God the full restoration which only His grace can accomplish. The proper sacrifice of oneself to God is brought out again in the following verses.

18. Do good in Thy good pleasure unto Zion; build Thou the walls of Jerusalem.
19. Then wilt Thou delight in proper sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then shall they offer bulls on Thy altar.

Verse 18

There are some who reject these two closing verses and claim they are not authentic from David’s hand, but rather that they were added by someone later. But these claims are unworthy of spending much time to refute. For it seems most natural for David, who is king of a nation to speak of his concern regarding the effect his sin would have on the nation. Certainly David, a

God-fearing king, would pray to God to spare the people from the evil effects of his own bad example. That is exactly what he does in the two closing verses.

David's prayer is that the physical city of Jerusalem would continue to be a benefactor of God's goodness. But his prayer also includes the spiritual Jerusalem which might suffer ruin from his sinful deeds. God forbid that the faith of people might be harmed. But not only is it his prayer -that the people be spared loss of faith, it is also that the "walls be built" - that others be enlightened by God's grace, that faith in the God of salvation increase.

Verse 19

Then will they offer first of all themselves. These are the proper sacrifices which God desires. From such repentant and enlightened hearts will the outward sacrifices to God be offered. Thus the proper relationship is established between spiritual and formal worship. The psalmist's hope is that both will flourish. The latter as an act of thanksgiving for the mercy which has been received from the hands of God. It is the psalmist's prayer that the people will continue this proper worship of God, the God of mercy who has abundantly pardoned David.

We, too, have sinned. We like David have experienced the operation of God on our hearts through His Gospel. Oh, that God would open our lips in our Colorado Conference ever more to declare the praise of our loving God. What a great calling in a world of restlessness, hopelessness and despair, to proclaim the rest for God's people in Christ Jesus, the hope in Christ Jesus and the peace of God in Christ Jesus. As long as our lips move may they never fail to declare the glory of our God. And may God continue through His Word to build the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem. May His Kingdom truly come!