

Week 6 – Psalm 51

A Psalm of Confession

Psalm 51:1-2 – A Cry for Mercy

- Psalm 51 is an example of an individual cry for help, but the nature of that help is specifically the forgiveness of the Psalmist's own sin.
- The request for mercy is based wholly upon the grace of God – his “unfailing love” and “great compassion.”
- David draws on God's self-description: “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6).
- Those who ask for mercy trust that God is capable of and often willing to forgive us of our offenses against him.

Psalm 51:3-6 – An Understanding of Sin

- The confession is one full of conviction and understanding.
- David is not ignorant of his sin or in denial about what he has done.
- David acknowledges that his sin is an offense against God.
 - o This is not a denial that the sin has hurt others, but rather an understanding that all sin is ultimately a sin against God.
 - o The problem is not ultimately one of education or circumstance, but rather, theological.
- David confesses that God is right in his judgment. Our salvation begins with judgment. Only by judging our sins as sinful can God then forgive.
- David isn't simply confessing one or two sins but rather his sinfulness. While bloodshed (v 14) may be the particular sin, the true problem goes deeper to the human condition.
- David's words about being sinful at birth anticipate those of the prophets (see Ezekiel 16; 20; 23; Isaiah 43:27, 48:8; 50:1). The prophets often spoke of the nation of Israel being born in sin implying that every last one of us is marred by sinfulness.
- Mays puts it well, “My problem is not just the need of pardon for a particular wrong but deliverance from the predicament of my self” (p. 201).

Psalm 51:7-12 – Cleanse and Restore

- The request for forgiveness is two-fold. He asks for both forgiveness and renewal.
- David asks God to hide his face from his sins and blot out his iniquity – a word about forgiveness (v 9).
- He also asks God to equip him to live rightly from here on out. To have a pure heart is to have a heart open and oriented toward God. To have a steadfast spirit is to be a person who consistently seeks God and obeys his commandments.
- David employs the language of the sacrificial system, “Cleanse, wash, purge,” but does so in a way that points to an act of God on the spirit of the person.

A Song for Every Season: A Study on the Psalms

- Clearly, sin has robbed David of his joy, and he longs to experience again the joy that comes from being in close relationship with the Lord (vv 8, 12).
- Verse 11 is only one of two places in the Old Testament that specifically mentions the “Holy Spirit” (see also Isaiah 63:10).
- This psalm acknowledges that only God can set us free from our sins.

Psalm 51:13-17 – A Humble Promise of Praise

- Like other Psalms, this psalm promises to honor God by teaching others and praising God’s name once deliverance is granted (vv 13-15, 18, 19).
- Whereas other psalms ask God to change the circumstances of the psalmists’ lives as a precursor to praise, this psalm asks for the psalmist to be changed.
- David’s words should not be read as some kind of cosmic quid pro quo.
 - o He has already acknowledged that God’s judgment is just.
 - o He understands that there is nothing he can do to save himself, not even sacrifices that would offset his offense (v 16). See Psalm 50:9-15 for God’s perspective on sacrifice.
 - o He understands that he is at the mercy of God, therefore, the only proper posture is one of humility (vv 16-17) .
- The promise of praise has more to do with the fruit of reinstatement.
 - o If God refuses to forgive him, his life (and or death) will stand as a warning against sin. David will not be able to praise God from the grave (see Psalm 6:5).
 - o If God forgives, his life will stand as a testament of God’s mercy and love.
 - o Either way, God is in the right.
- David shifts to a communal perspective in verses 18-19.
 - o He understands that his sin affects the community at large.
 - o He asks God to bless the people despite the king’s sin.
 - o He longs for the entire community to be in right relationship with God (v 19).

Other Psalms of Confession

- Psalm 6 – The Psalmist asks for God’s mercy and escape from God’s wrath, but no specific sin is confessed.
- Psalm 32 – The Psalmist recounts the damage unconfessed sin did to his own soul and praises God for forgiving his sins.
- Psalm 38 – This Psalm could describe the life of the Psalmist in Psalm 32 prior to experiencing God’s forgiving hand. The Psalmist confesses to “sinful folly” and seeks the mercy of God.
- Psalm 143 – The Psalmist prays for mercy and deliverance from enemies acknowledging that “no one living is righteous before you.”

Sources

- o Davidson, Robert, *The Vitality of Worship* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
- o Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 2: Psalms 42-89, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007).
- o May, James L., *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1994).