

Sermon Series “Praying the Psalms”: Psalm 51

(Regula Brandle, St. Paul's, Edmonton, Aug.2/09)

Today we are continuing in our sermon series “Praying the Psalms.”
And the psalm appointed for today is Psalm 51.

This Psalm is one of the most moving prayers in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Scriptures).

It is also one of the 7 so-called penitential psalms (psalm 6, 32,38, 51, 102, 130 and 143).

Many of you will be quite familiar with this psalm, because we not only use it every year in our Ash Wednesday liturgy, but parts of this psalm have been used for liturgy and worship songs for a long time.

Historically, this psalm has been attributed to King David.

And the understanding is that King David composed this prayer after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sin of adultery and murder (as it is recorded for us in 2 Samuel, chapter 11 & 12).

We heard the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Bathsheba's husband Uriah last Sunday.

It is for sure one of the juiciest stories in the Bible, one that would even make it into our trashy, contemporary magazines if it were not for the end of the story with the confrontation of David and the consequences he had to endure for his sin!

So, what are we going to do with this psalm today?

Well, I would like to use it exactly as it is intended for us, as a prayer of repentance and as a prayer for forgiveness and cleansing.

It is a wonderful opportunity for us to get right with God.

The way I'd like to go about it is this:

I first would like us to read the psalm together.

Then I will make some comments about some of the words or sentences in this psalm.

After that we will enter a time of quiet reflection with a few questions/thoughts for you to ponder that I have written down for you in the bulletin insert.

And at the end we will read psalm 51 together again, this time as a prayer of forgiveness and cleansing, before we enter a time of worship.

So, let's open our pew bible on page 405.

We will read verses 1 to 17 together.

➤ Psalm 51:1-17

A few comment on some words or phrases in this psalm:

v.1:

- "have mercy on me" is a cry and acknowledgement that I can't do it right.

- "blot out my offenses" is a word-picture for repentance and forgiveness.

In fact, David uses three different word-pictures to describe his separation from God and his desire for restoration in this psalm:

"blot out" in verse 1 suggest that sin is a deeply ingrained stain,

"wash away" in verse 2 suggests that sin cannot be removed by any ordinary washing (see also BAS p.770 "Wash me through and through")

and "cleanse me" in verse 2 suggest that sin is a defiling uncleanness.

v.4:

David does not mean to say that he didn't sin against Uriah when he says "against you (Lord) only have I sinned".

But this is a typically biblical way of going to the heart of the matter.

Sin is ultimately always against God.

Ultimately sin is always rebellion against God.

v.5:

Here we have the acknowledgement that sin was not just a freak event, but it was in character.

David confesses his involvement in sin from the beginning of his existence.

He affirms the universality of sin and that mercy can only be found in God alone, and not in humankind.

v.6:

If you remember Psalm 14 from last Sunday, here again wisdom is set as the opposite of foolishness.

Foolishness means moral deficiency.

Wisdom means moral integrity that comes from having God's law in your heart.

v.7:

- Hyssop was a small bushy plant, which was very suitable as a sprinkling device.

It was used for ritual cleansing in Old Testament times (see Ex. 12:22, Lev.14:4).

- "Whiter than snow" is another word-picture and it means that God doesn't do half-jobs!

With him forgiveness is complete and total!

v.10:

"a pure heart" means an undivided will which seeks to do only the will of God.

v.11:

David's understanding of the importance of the Holy Spirit in any attempt to live the God-pleasing life is inspiring!

v.12:

Forgiveness brings back joy and assurance, and the wall erected by sin between God and you is taken down.

A willing spirit is a heart and mind receptive to be directed and moulded by God.

v.16:

We cannot undo sin by doing good things!

Now I am inviting you to take this opportunity to get quiet before the Lord and reflect on where you need God's forgiveness and cleansing.

Nothing is too big or too small to bring to the Lord.

If it is helpful to you, please use the bulletin insert.

We are taking about 5-7 mins. to do so.

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I am sure some of you are now ready to pray the psalm again, but some of you probably feel like you want to spend much more time in reflection.

I encourage you to continue at home if you sense that's what you need to do.

But let's pray now again together Psalm 51; 1-17 as a prayer of confession, a prayer for asking the Lord for forgiveness and restoration.

➤ Psalm 51:1-17

Let me pray:

Our heavenly Father has promised forgiveness of our sins if we come to him with a repentant and contrite heart. Thank you, Father, for your cleansing, forgiveness and removal of those stains that we carried around until now.

And I ask you, Lord, to strengthen each one of us to walk faithfully to you and not stumble again.

Increase in us the hatred for sin and increase in us also the desire to please you in all aspects of life.

Thank you for your goodness and mercy.

We worship you and give you glory. Amen.

➤ Enter praise & worship time.