PSALM 51: “Have Mercy on Me, O God!”

READ Title to Psalm 51. You all know the story. Second Samuel Chapter 11 gives us the familiar account of King David’s sin, which is the backdrop for Psalm 51. “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab…” David, the mighty warrior king of Israel at the height of his popularity, decides not to go out to battle against the Ammonites. And that’s where the problem begins. David isn’t where he’s supposed to be. Instead of leading the army like he usually does he stays back in Jerusalem in his palace and he sends Joab his commander out to lead the troops. Late one afternoon David is walking on the roof of his house and he notices a beautiful woman bathing down in her courtyard. Hey, it happens sometimes. You’re walking along and you see something you shouldn’t and you turn and go the other way. Well, that’s what we should do and that’s what David should have done. But he didn’t. He lusts after this woman. He obsesses about her. He wants her for himself. So using his available resources he inquires who she is, discovers that her name is Bathsheba and that she’s the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Of course Urriah is no stranger to David. If you read 2 Samuel Chapter 23, Urriah is one of David’s 37 mighty men. He’s listed by name. So he’s not just any old soldier. He’s one of David’s best soldiers. But David wants Bathsheba and he knows Urriah is away at war. So, being the sovereign ruler of the land, David exercises his authority, arranges to have Bathsheba brought to him, he has sexual relations with her (after all he’s the king and the king gets whatever he wants). He then sends her back to her house. And wouldn’t you know it. Bathsheba gets pregnant and she informs David of that fact. Well, David comes up with a plan to cover his sin of adultery. He arranges for Urriah to get some R&R, take a break from the war, and come back home and spend some “quality” time with his wife. But the plan backfires. When Urriah arrives in Jerusalem he refuses to go home. He’s a loyal and dedicated soldier and he can’t bring himself to go enjoy himself while the rest of his comrades are out on the battlefield. That’s where he needs to be – out there with them! So when David can’t convince Urriah to go home to be with his wife, David comes up with Plan B. He sends Urriah back to the war and gives Joab the commander orders to place Urriah on the front lines of the battle where he know the fighting will be the fiercest. His plan works! Urriah is killed in battle. After a period of mourning her husband’s death, Bathsheba becomes King David’s wife and she bears David a son. Chapter 11 closes with these words: “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.” Chapter 12 – enter Nathan the prophet. God reveals to Nathan what David has done. He sends Nathan to confront David about it. Nathan uses a parable to make a point and to convict David of his sin. There are two men – a rich man and a poor man. The rich man has many flocks and herds but the poor man has only one lamb. The lamb he had bought with his own money and had raised it as a household pet with his children. And as often is the case with our pets the poor man grew very attached to the lamb. The Bible says that the lamb became “like a daughter to him.” Well on one occasion the rich man has a guest come and visit, but instead of preparing a meal from his own flock, the rich man takes the poor man’s only lamb, his beloved pet, kills it and serves it to the guest. When David hears this he’s enraged. He says, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold…” Nathan looks at David and utters those famous words: “You are the man! You are that rich man, David. Because of what you did to Urriah, God is going to punish you.” And Nathan tells David several things that are going to happen, but the last thing he says to David is that the child born to you is going to die. David pleads with the Lord to spare the child. Despite all of David’s cries for mercy, the child dies. At some point during this period of spiritual upheaval in David’s life he pens the words to Psalm 51, a psalm about confession of his sins.

“Confession” is the key word here. We know what 1 John 1:9 says: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” What does it mean, biblically, to confess our sins to God? It is agreeing with God about our sin. We see it the same way He does. And real confession involves a component of repentance, turning away from that sin. What good does it do to say, “Lord, I agree with you about my sin and that it is an awful thing but I’m going to keep doing it.” If that’s your attitude you are not seeing it the way God sees it. The whole idea is that I realize it offends God and that I don’t want to do it anymore. We had a preacher one time who defined confession this way: “Admit it and quit it.” Second Corinthians 7:9 says that a godly sorrow for our sin will grieve us into repenting. John MacArthur says, “True confession can only occur when you see God truly (for who He is), when you sin for what it is and you see yourself for who you are.” This provides us with a good summary of Psalm 51.

READ Psalm 51:1-5

In these verses David expresses, first of all, a right view of sin. He doesn’t make any excuses for his sin. He owns up to it. He doesn’t cast blame on anyone else. Notice his choice of words in these verses: “My transgressions,” “my iniquity,” “my sin,” again “my transgressions,” again “my sin,” “I sinned,” “I did what was evil in Your sight.” David knows he’s guilty before God. And in v 1 he appeals to God’s mercy. Notice David doesn’t appeal to God’s justice. He knows full well that he deserves judgment. It’s a funny thing isn’t it? We appeal to God’s justice when it comes to our enemies (David does in some of his other psalms). But when it comes to us, we want mercy. My favorite psalm is Psalm 103 and one of my favorite verses in that psalm is verse 10: “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” Aren’t you glad? Aren’t you glad that God shows us mercy rather than justice?

In v 2 David says, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” He knows that God cannot look on iniquity. If he is going to have any fellowship at all with God, if he is going to have that sweet fellowship with God restored, he must be cleansed. David has a right view of sin. He accepts responsibility, he deserves God’s judgment, he appeals to God’s mercy, he asks for cleansing and finally in v 5 David recognizes what we call “The Total Depravity of Man.” Sin is a part of our nature and has been ever since Adam and Eve sinned in Genesis Chapter 3. Psalm 58:3 says, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.” You didn’t have to teach your children to sin, did you? It was part of their nature from birth. No, you had to teach them to act right, not to sin.

So in verses 1-5 David’s confession begins with a right view of sin.

But confession requires that we also have a right view of God. Look at verses 6 to 12… READ Psalm 51:6-12

David knows the character of God. God is holy and He demands holiness of us. V 6, “You delight in truth in the inward being.” God isn’t just concerned with our outward religious activity. That may be important, yes, but God is more concerned with what is going on inside. Samuel made this statement to Saul: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.” (1 Sam 15:22) “What does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deut 10:12) God desires that we live holy lives and that begins with what is inside our heart, our mind, our will, our emotions – what is on the inside. Jesus said, “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.” (Matt 15:18)

David recognized not only is God holy and demands holiness, but he also recognized that only God has the power to cleanse us thoroughly, to purge us of our sin. V 7, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean *[hyssop is a small plant, common in Egypt and Israel, spongy leaves, used in ceremonial cleansing]*; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” Only God can cleanse like that, Only He can change a heart. Only He can transform a life. V 10 says “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” David recognizes that it’s not just a matter of personal resolve to do better, but it takes the supernatural working of God in his life if he’s really going to be changed.

But then David also recognized there are physical and emotional consequences for sin. Often God deals with our sin thru His chastisement of us. Just like a parent with a child. Nathan the prophet has already told David that God is going to punish him for what he did – the death of the child in the short term, Absalom’s rebellion against David his father would happen later. These were God’s judgment against David’s sin. David’s life from this point forward would be filled with a great deal of personal pain and heartache, especially within his own family. This painful judgment of God upon David is what I believe David is referring to in v 8: “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.” David accepts the painful consequences for what he has done and expresses his desire to have the fellowship with God restored. “Let me hear joy and gladness,” v 8, “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me, v 11, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation,” v 12. David basically says, “I’ve learned my lesson, I accept my responsibility, I accept the punishment, but I want my joy back.”

David knows that only God can change his heart. He understands that there are consequences for his sin, but one last thing he knows about God, that God is not only a God who forgives, but He forgets our sin. Look at v 9 – “Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.” Do you want to hear a great verse? Isaiah 43:25: God says, “I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” The whole idea of blotting out your sins is that they’re forgotten, they’re expunged. Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.” The prophet Micah asks, “Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of His inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because He delights in steadfast love.”

David understood this essential character of God. He had the right view of God. He understood that all the elements that would eventually lead him to a complete restoration of fellowship with God were in fact the very work of God Himself. And so David appeals to God’s loving nature for restored fellowship and forgiveness.

Finally David has a right view of himself and of his life. Look at the remaining verses… READ Psalm 51:13-19

So what’s he saying here? David’s reason for having a right spirit within him, a clean heart, the joy of his salvation and a willing spirit is not his own happiness or any selfish ambition. It is to be useful to God, to bring people to Him. V 13, “I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.” “God, I want You to still be able to use me!” V 14, “I will sing aloud Your righteousness.” V 15, “My mouth will declare Your praise!” David says, “God, I can still sing about You! I can still write psalms about you!” It is interesting to note that indeed God did continue to use David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, even after his terrible sin with Bathsheba. There are 73 psalms attributed specifically to David (many others we think he wrote). Chronologically, 36 psalms written after, 36 psalms written before with Psalm 51 being #37.

In verse 16-19 David is saying, “God I understand that what You want from me is not religious activity, but You want Me. You want my broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart.”

“You want me to be completely 100% yielded to You. Like the potter forming the clay into the vessel he desires, Lord, make me into what You want me to be.” Is that your prayer?

What David did was terrible. His sins were inexcusable. We would have expected more from David than that. But the way in which David dealt with his own personal failure shows us that he indeed was “a man after God’s own heart.” No, he wasn’t perfect, not by a long shot, but he was a man that God used in a mighty way throughout his entire life. When David sinned, he confessed his sin. He repented of it. He turned back to God. He had the right view of sin, a right view of God and a right view of himself.

I contemplated what song we should sing for a lesson like this and I decided on a hymn we used to sing all the time in Baptist churches while I was growing up. But for some reason we don’t sing it any more. So we will this morning – “Have Thine Own Way, Lord.”