

# PSALMS: OBEDIENCE AND DESIRE

psalm 51: true repentance

## Questions for Personal Study

- Read through Psalm 51 a few times. What emotions does David express?
- What truths about himself does David express?
- What does David say is true about God in this Psalm?
- Is David confident in God's forgiveness? (see also 2 Sam 12.13)
- How does this Psalm make God's grace more amazing to you?

## Questions for Study in Community

- What sin(s) came to mind as you read Ps. 51 this week? Conviction?
- When God points out our sin, what does he want us to see?
- Why is it so hard to believe that God can "blot out" our sin forever?
- What difference would it make in your life to be rid of guilt & shame?

## Questions for Staying on Mission

- What does this Psalm say to people who are religious or self-righteous?
- What does this Psalm say to people who are non-religious or secular?
- How does forgiveness encourage us to be missionaries (Ps. 51.13)?
- What is David praying for in v.18-19? What is his hope for the city?

## On Seeing Jesus in the Psalms

Whenever we read the Psalms there is a subtle temptation to apply them directly to ourselves. We need to remember that these poems come from within the Story of God and his workings amongst this people called Israel. These people had a particular experience of God that shaped their picture of Him. They had no idea that God would fulfill his promises by stepping into this world as a man, living a perfect life, and dying a substitutionary death. But we do. We know where the Story is headed, and we must read the Psalms in that light.

As you read, think particularly about how the commands, experiences, and emotions of the psalmist are connected to Jesus. Filter the verses through the cross, reflecting on what they tell us about the need for a Savior in order to bring sinful people into the presence of a holy God. Never forget that though God's grace to you is free, you enjoy your fellowship with God at a great price - God crushed his own Son in order to bring *you* into his courts with joy!

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## A Study in the Psalms

The Old Testament book of Psalms is a collection of prayers, songs, and poems that Israel used in worship of One True God. The reformer John Calvin once called the Psalms an "anatomy of all the parts of the soul," because in them we see human emotions in all their perplexities colliding head-on with the commands and claims of God. The title of this series, "Obedience and Desire" comes from the central question posed to us by the language of the Psalms: "How is it possible to obey God in the midst of our inmost thoughts and emotions?" In this 4 week series in the book of Psalms our goal is to gain a deeper understanding of God, life, and ourselves. We approach this goal keeping these three things in mind:

First, the Psalms are instructive. They instruct us on who God is, who we are, and how we are to relate to God. The psalms are full of truth for the mind, directing us to a life of rightfully honoring and God. This is the *obedience* part of our series title.

Second, the Psalms are poems. They are meant to stir us deep within and help us to channel our affections for God. The psalmists are laying open their inmost thoughts, desires, and emotions before God, inviting us to examine the status of our own hearts. This is the *desire* part of our series title.

Finally, the Psalms lead us to Jesus. The Psalms point forward to the coming of a Savior, one who mediates between God and men, one who invites us into the joyful obedience the Psalms describe. In each Psalm, we'll keep our eyes open for how we are being pointed forward to the person and work of Jesus.

## Psalm 51

This week we'll be looking at Psalm 51, a moving prayer written by King David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12). David's army is off at war, but David, perhaps lulled into inactivity by his great wealth and accomplishment, is at home taking a leisurely walk on the roof of his palace when he spots a beautiful woman bathing down below. In that moment, David, the "man after God's own heart," becomes a dirty, leering old

man. Moved by his lust, he demands that Bathsheba come to his chambers (despite knowing that she is married to one of his greatest warriors, Uriah) where he has sex with her and sends her home... only to find out a little while later that she is pregnant. In an attempt to cover his sin, he calls Uriah home from the battle field hoping to have him sleep with Bathsheba so that David won't be found out. Uriah - in a great show of honor - refuses to go home to be with his wife while his brothers are risking their lives in battle. In desperation, David sends Uriah back to war with a letter to the commander of his army to put Uriah on the front lines so that he is killed in battle.

It's been pointed out that David broke all 10 commandments in his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband. Amazingly, God is gracious toward David, and sends to him Nathan the prophet who reveals David's sin and calls him to account. Nathan also speaks words of forgiveness and grace to him: "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die."

### **Repentance**

It is in this context, immediately after Nathan confronts him that David pens Psalm 51. It seems there are basically two types of people: those who think about their sin too much, constantly feeling overwhelmed with guilt and shame for every little thing, and those who rarely - if ever - think about their sin, either dealing with it only superficially or dismissing it altogether. The first leads to a life that is joyless - you always feel like you don't measure up - and the second leads to a life that is powerless - you aren't being deeply transformed. In Psalm 51, David gives us a third way to deal with our sin that leads to joy and change!

First, in v.3-6, David agrees with God about his sin. He sees his sin for what it is - a personal rejection of God that is rooted in the deep rebellion of his heart. He moves beyond simply the actions of sin ("I know my transgressions") and confesses the evil of his core ("I was brought forth in iniquity"). David recognizes that the problem is not simply his actions but his love of something other than God ("Against you, and you only, have I sinned"). At the root of all of his sinful actions was a love for something other than God, essentially a breaking of the first Commandment ("Have no other gods before me.") David's first action in this Psalm is to agree with God about his heart-level idolatry.

Second, in v.7-12, David throws himself on God's mercy as he pursues reconciliation with God. Once David has freely confessed his rebellion against God, he doesn't try to make things right through making promises of future

obedience, shedding great tears of remorse, or by self-inflicted punishment. Rather, David pleads for God to do what only He can do: give David a new heart, a new joy in restored fellowship, and a sustained spirit of obedience.

Third, in v. 13-17, David is moved into whole-hearted, humble worship of God. David doesn't stop with confession and a prayer for forgiveness; rather, he moves on into worship, rejoicing in God's promise of forgiveness to those who are broken and humbled by their sin. He actually begins to shift his heart away from its idolatry to a full worship of God Himself.

This 3-fold process helps us avoid the common traps of cheap grace ("Sorry God, but thanks for forgiving me!") and self-justification ("I messed up but I'll try harder next time!"), and moves us into a place to truly be changed by God, given a new heart to worship, and a new desire to walk in obedience to Him.

### **Power to Be Changed**

The final thing Nathan says to David after the confrontation is "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die." Why? Why does the child have to die if the Lord has fully and freely forgiven David? The Bible holds together 2 incredible tensions about God. On one hand, God is a all loving, full of grace, and mercifully forgiving. And yet, while the Bible consistently upholds this reality about God, it also uniformly says that God is just, a righteous judge, who always brings about justice. Indeed, in order for God to be perfect he must be both fully loving and fully just.

Forgiveness is always balanced by justice. The two are inseparable. If you forgive me for crashing your car, freeing me from the cost to fix it, the cost doesn't disappear. Your forgiveness of me means you pay for the car. Justice is served by you, not me. Either you pay, or I pay, but someone has to pay!

The story of David and Bathsheba reminds us that sin is costly. If God is going to forgive us, someone else must pay the price. Though God spares David's life, David's son pays the price for his father's sin. In this way, Psalm 51 points us forward to the full and final payment for sin: the death of God's own Son as the substitute for the sins of the world. Just as David's son - an innocent person - paid the price for his father's sin, Jesus - innocent, blameless, God in the flesh - pays the price for our sin. We can pray Psalm 51 in humble confidence knowing that God hides his face from our iniquities and blots out our transgressions because he punished our sin on his own son on the cross.