

Sunday, 11 February 2018. POEMS OF PASSION – PSALM 51.

I can still vaguely remember an experience I had in my earlier twenties. I was feeling out of sync with God and myself. I *knew* I was in the wrong place. It was a dark place, and I needed to find a way to reconnect with God. I must have been like it for a few months, but I remember eventually literally falling on my knees beside my bed and - not knowing quite how I should pray (being so out of touch for so long) started to pray what we traditionally call "the Lord's Prayer". And I do remember it was like a light had suddenly come on in my life. I had found a way back onto the right path.

David - King David of Israel that is - must have known he too was in the wrong place. You see - he'd committed adultery with a neighbour, made her pregnant, then had her husband killed to cover up his sin. And to all intents and purposes he'd got away with it. Although in the upstairs downstairs world of his palace I'm sure there was a few who knew what had gone on. And Joab, who was David's commander at the battle where the death of the husband had been arranged, certainly knew.

By now I'm guessing about a year has past (although the Bible's short on that detail). The neighbour's wife had apparently got over her husband's death - was now one of David's wives - and had had the baby. It was a boy. And *that* might have been the end of this unsavoury episode - swept under the palace carpet - except - that 2 Samuel Ch.11 closes with a very telling sentence. "*But the LORD was very displeased with what David had done.*"

I don't know if David had already written Psalm 139 at this time or whether it came later - but David seems to have forgotten the truth that God knew his sitting down and his getting up, and all his thoughts from afar. *Actively knew.*

So God sends a prophet to David to tell him a sob story of blatant injustice - one where a powerful man does the dirty in a pitiless fashion on a poor neighbour. David is *incandescent* with rage - and as top judge in the land he pronounces judgement. At which point Nathan, God's messenger to David, looks him in the eye and says,



"You are the man!"

The Bible tells us the good thing is David didn't hang around in accepting God's judgement of his actions and confessed his sin. Nathan also didn't hang about to tell him that God had forgiven his sin - but there would *also* be consequences to his actions - for both him and Bathsheba.

Again we're short on a time-line of events - but probably not long after, David the poet-songwriter put pen to parchment and recorded his contrition for the actions he'd taken. At least - that's what we're told in the Bible when we come to Psalm 51. While some commentators have said Psalm 51 was written much later because of the



last two verses, others say that only the last two verses were added centuries later. I go with those who say that.

Incidentally - there doesn't need to be a great sucking in of breath if we say this song was added to over time. After all, we do the same today. So if you were used to singing "Amazing Grace" a while back, you'll now find it's often sung with the addition of the chorus "My chains fell off" and a new last verse.

Back to Psalm 51 - and David's words became a very public admission of his guilty and repentance, and eventually got absorbed into the Hebrew scriptures, which in turn became the OT section of our Bible, and which we're now going to read.

And just to say if I read some words slightly different to those in front of you, that's because our church bibles are a 1984 imprint and mine is probably a later one with slightly revised translation.

A number of Psalms have headings. Usually they're just a musical instruction or a reference to the author. This is one of the few that also tells you the context for it being written: So - "For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba." In fact in the Hebrew text that heading was even numbered in as part of the psalm - which then continues to read like this:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.*

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter
than snow.*

*Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.*

*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain
me.*

*Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to
you.*

*Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed O God, You who are God my Saviour,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.*

*Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*

*My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God,
will not despise.*

Then the two verses thought to have been added during or after the exile:

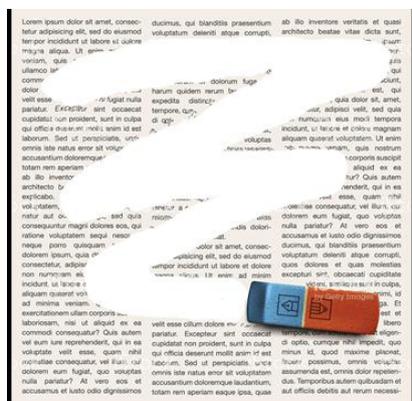
*May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings
offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

This psalm starts with a rush. It sounds like the firing off of a series of bullet points. And right from the off, David's aware he needs God's mercy.

John Newton wrote, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me", but David is, in one sense, even more accurate. Grace is getting what you don't deserve, but to receive mercy is *not getting* what you *do deserve*. And David knew what he deserved]. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, put it as bluntly as anyone – "The wages of sin is death". Sin is a serious matter. And at least once in the OT God had to tell his people off for "healing sins too lightly". And that's probably a message all of us could do with hearing again today. Sin is a *serious* matter - and there is no such thing as grading some sin as excusable. Sin is sin. And we don't set the benchmark - God does. You might have heard me say before that the word "sin" used when the Bible was translated into English was an archery term. Sin meant "missing the mark". You're off the target. And it didn't matter if you missed by a metre or a millimetre - you missed.

And David knew he'd missed the mark - but also - exactly what he wanted God to do for him - repeatedly - time after time throughout this intense prayer of contrition and repentance. He wants God to forgive him - to make him clean again - to restore him back into a good relationship with Himself - and for God not to withdraw from him. And I think the first of the pictures he uses tells us best what he's asking God to do.

When I was a boy at school we still used inkwells and nibbed pens. Yes - I'm that old! And there was an expression used for starting afresh used in those days which referred to "turning over a new leaf". That's what you did if you messed up a page in your book And David's asking God to do the same thing for him when he pleads twice, "blot out my transgressions". But in David's day writing was a process often done on expensive material such as skins or papyrus. So if you made a mistake you didn't just screw it up and throw it away. You took out your penknife and you scrapped away the offending markings until you got back to a pristine surface. And the Hebrew used for "blot out" in this text means exactly that. Totally removing all record of the error.



That's what David's asking God to do for him - totally erase the record of his offence for a fresh start. In fact some commentators who've done their own translations have put "un-sin me" or "de-sin me" instead of "blot out", emphasizing exactly what David is pleading.

But David then loads up his words with "wash away all my iniquity". Iniquity is an old-fashion word sometimes said to mean impurity. But some translate it as bent, twisted, crooked or perverse. And deliberately so. You get the picture. David's really coming clean about his actions as he asks God to clean him up. And if that's not enough - then - "cleans me from my sin" - which in verse seven he expands further when he asks God to wash him whiter than snow.

Some of you I know have heard me talk about an experience I had a few years ago when I was skiing in the Black Forest area of Germany. I was on top of a ski slope looking across to an unbroken covering of snow on the hill opposite, and with the sun shining onto it, it was brilliant white.



I'd stopped skiing for a moment because I felt I needed to pray, and then found myself praying through Isaiah 1:18 - "Though your sins are as scarlet, they can be as white as snow". Now I believe the context for calling the sins "scarlet" - rather than, say, "black" - was to do with dye used at that time that got ingrained into the pore of the skin of the people who did the dying and just couldn't be washed out in any way. And God said through Isaiah to the people he was talking to - even though *your sins* are deeply ingrained in the very pores of your inner nature - I can make them as white as snow.

So there I am standing praying with my eyes shut (as you do) on this slope. And then I open my eyes, and I'm immediately consumed - *hit* - by that view of brilliant white snow on the slope opposite. And at that point God said - and it's one of those very rare occasions when I can definitely say I heard God speak - "*That's what I mean. That's what I mean*". However deeply ingrained your sins are, I can make them as pure white as that brilliant snow.

David was living a few of centuries before Isaiah - but God doesn't change - and he was asking God to wash away his sin just as Isaiah was to state that He could do years later. And not only *could* do it - but *wanted* to do.

And that "God wanting to do it" comes into David's psalm to. But why would God *want* to clean up and put right with Himself this manipulative adulterous murderous man? David knew that the only grounds on which he could ask God for mercy was based on God's own character. Which is why up front David pleads - "because *Your* unfailing love and according to *Your* great compassion - blot out my transgressions".

Even though it was God Himself who had shone His spotlight onto David's life to bring his sin into the open - it was to eventually deal with it in mercy - not to rub his face in it. Which is why John Newton wrote, "T'was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved". And that's the same with us. Which is why Peter wrote in his second letter that God is not wanting anyone to perish but for everyone to know his saving grace.

And then there's that verse in Lamentations that says, "*Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope - because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed for his compassions never fail*". And David would have known that verse. It was in his "Bible" as well because it's in the writings of Moses.

But it's only when we come to the NT we can properly quantify what God's great love and compassion looks like. It looks like Jesus - and John in his gospel famously put it this way as he recorded Jesus words to Nicodemus. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*". And if you want to know the shocking depths of those words, you



might like to consider something I once hear someone say. If on 30 April 1945 Hitler had genuinely repented of his sin instead of committing suicide, he too would now have guilt free eternity life. *That* is what God's great mercy looks like.

But back to David and this Psalm - which is awesome both in its scope of asking and in its depth of confession. David knows just how far off God's track he is. He knows he's so infected with the sin disease he's now living under a death sentence - in spite of having known God's presence and blessing in the past.

Which is why one of the things he pleads is - "*Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.*" And you might recall David did know what that looks like - to have God's Spirit taken away. He'd lived through seeing God's presence taken away from his predecessor King Saul - and no way does he want that to happen to him.

And I wonder - do we fear *enough* God's presence being taken away from *us*? You may have heard someone say something like, "If the Holy Spirit left your church would you notice His departure?". Good question. But as individuals too, are we conscious enough of His presence with us to be that concerned of losing His closeness? And therefore should we be pursuing a more active consciousness of His presence - perhaps as a guy called Brother Lawrence did with "practising the presence of God" in all everyday activities? With regard to David lusting after Bathsheba - it's sometimes asked - had David not been strolling on his roof looking into his neighbour's garden but been out doing what king's should be doing with his army - would things have been different? So do we, each day, specifically ask Him to guide *us* in all of *our* activities? That's a serious question for us to consider.

And here's another thought about losing the presences of God that's worth considering - particularly in the light of the fact in a short while we'll be sharing bread and wine to remember the cost paid for us to be able to regain relationship with God. The one person that truly knew closeness with the Father was Jesus. So much so that He described it as Him and God the Father being "One" - the deepest closeness imaginable. But then we come to the cross - and that awful, heart-wrenching cry of abandonment sobbed out from His tortured body: "My God, my God, why have *You* forsaken *Me*?!" The answer of course was in those moments David's sin - and our sin - were all being seen as Jesus' sin - as He stepped in and took the punishment of that awful separation for us all. While Jesus knew this was going to happen - it's the root of his agonising prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane - it tells us again of the dreadful seriousness of sin on someone who know no sin in Himself and the consequence of our sin upon Him.

I did said this psalm's a bit like a series of bullet points - so let me mention just a few more before I close.

Verse 10 says, "*Create in me a pure (other versions say "clean") heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit in me.*" Some versions say, "a resolute spirit". This isn't now talking about God's Holy Spirit, but our inner spirit - which David recognises is defunct in him and in need of a total renew. And he recognises it has always been so from the moment he was born. Or rather - not even from *then* - but right back to when he was conceived. And commentator's agree that no way is David accusing his mother here of sexual immorality in his conception. He's basically saying - all humanity has the sin gene in its very makeup and we're all born with a bias to

failure.

One of the things I haven't done (yet) is play bowls, but every bowl (or wood) has a bias built in it to run away from a straight line. That's *us* in our humanity, when we're not "born again" by God's Spirit - as Jesus tells Nicodemus in John Ch.3. That confused Nicodemus - but David knew exactly what He meant a thousand years before. He saw the reality of it in his own life. And he knew only God was in a position to resolve his problem.



And something else he asks God for - again twice - is for God to restore to him the joy of his salvation. Which is why I started off my talk today the way I did, for I knew I was not in the right place with God and couldn't put myself back into a place of enjoying life by myself. I think I've heard or read somewhere something like "sin is a sad state". It certainly is for someone knowing they've fallen short with God and have not yet returned to God in repentance to get put right. But a restored relationship brings restored joy.

The known presence of God in our everyday situations is a real energy boost. It's a boost of joy to be experienced as part of our salvation. And it was God's boost of joy David was asking to have restored. And oh yes - don't confuse it with mere happiness that's manufactured by passing happenings.

There's just one more thing I want to say from this psalm before we turn to remembering how much it cost Jesus to restore the things this psalm covers for us. And we're down to verse thirteen and following. *"Then... I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you..."* etc.

David says, restore my relationship with you and I'll serve you like there's no tomorrow - or words to that effect. And I don't think if I'm reading this aright that's David trying to do a deal with God to get himself off the hook. He's just stating what the consequences of God's renewal in his life will look like. And you know what - the NT - the new covenant we live under - is happy with that idea. Go to Ephesians Ch.2 and you find Paul writing that we are saved by grace, not our own efforts - but immediately afterwards he says - *"we are created in (or we could say recreated in) Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* It's also covered at the beginning of Romans 12 with us now being transformed living sacrifices. And one of those "works" Paul mentions is what's become labelled the great commission - telling other people what he's done for us so they too can believe and be restored - just as David says here. Other practical consequences are listed in detail in places like the letter from James. Because what you believe will be shown by what you do.

Abraham Lincoln is attributed to have said, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." To which I like to add - and you can't fool God *any* of the time! David found that out the hard way - but he also found *"the way back to God from the dark paths of sin"*.

So I finish - sort of - where I started. If you recognise today that you have fallen short of God's good way and haven't yet been restored into a right relationship with



Him - you can be - right now. Or as that chorus I remember from way back in my youth and that I started to say just now says:

There's way back to God from the dark paths of sin,
A door that is open that you may go in,
At Calvary's cross is where you begin,
When you come as a sinner to Jesus.

And that is a good point to hand over to Oli to bring us to remembering the cost of that "way back to God".

Granville Richards