

I HAVE SINNED

Psalms 32, 51 & 130

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“Father, forgive me, for I have sinned.” So begins the common confessional to the priest—at least according to the TV shows and movies I have seen. Someone has jokingly said that there is now an “express confession line” for those with three sins or less. Although “confession is good for the soul,” I tend to agree with the quip that states: “To err is understandable; to admit it is unlikely.” On a more serious note, “there’s more hope for a confessed sinner than a conceited saint.” Speaking of confession, C. S. Lewis observed, “We must lay before Him [God] what is in us, not what ought to be in us.”

“Father, forgive me, for I have sinned.” Let’s be honest. That’s not a statement we find easy to make. Confessing our sins to God, no matter how healthy it may be, is a hard thing for us to do. According to a tradition that reaches back into the Middle Ages, there are seven psalms in the Book of Psalms that are categorized as “penitential psalms.”¹ In this long-established tradition, these psalms were originally recited at the deathbed or sickbed of a person as prayers for recovery of health or forgiveness in death. Later, these psalms were associated with the life of David. The seven psalms appeared together as a collection in prayer books, and they were recited during Lent. In the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance period, some commentators tied the seven psalms to the Seven Deadly Sins, with each psalm serving as a deterrent to one of the deadly sins. During the early Renaissance period, the seven penitential psalms evolved from public use in worship to private use in meditation.

In these psalms, the “enemy” is not external, but internal; it is not an enemy “out there”—outside of us—but an enemy “in here”—within us. “Sin,” an unpopular word in our postmodern world, is seen as rebellion against God: sin is the will to live on one’s own as though God does not matter.

Today, we will look at three of “the seven psalms.” And we begin with Psalm 32.

¹Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

Blessed are those
whose sin the LORD does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD."

And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.

You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.

Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the LORD's unfailing love
surrounds those who trust in him.

Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!
(TNIV).

According to this psalm, confession is not merely good for the soul, it is absolutely indispensable for the well-being of the soul. Confession is the knocking to which the door opens, it is the seeking that finds, it is the asking that receives. Confession of sin to God is confession of faith in God, for confession is an act of faith that realizes we are

sinners and God is gracious.² Righteousness is not a matter of being sinless but a matter of being forgiven, of being open to God's teaching, and of trusting God rather than oneself. The conclusion of Psalm 32 is that for the living of a blessed life, there is nothing like being forgiven.

We come now to Psalm 130.

Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

If you, LORD, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

One of the things I find intriguing about this psalm is the statement, "But with you [God] there is forgiveness, / so that we can, with reverence [fear], serve you." I venture to say that most of us would have expected the reverse of this statement. We would have expected something like, "Fear God in order to be forgiven." But what Psalm 130 asserts is, "You have been forgiven, so then fear God." The gift of God goes *before* the obedience commanded. We fear God—we trust and obey Him—not that He may forgive us, but because He has forgiven us.

This brings us to the pearl of the penitential psalms, and perhaps my favorite of all the psalms—Psalm 51.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion

²See James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1994), 147.

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.
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will 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,
and sinners will turn back to you.
Deliver me from bloodguilt, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
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.

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
(TNIV).

According to A. Whitney Brown, “Any good history book is mainly just a long list of

mistakes, complete with names and dates. It's very embarrassing.”³ According to Psalm 51, we human beings have been sinners since our beginning. Just read the first three chapters of the Bible—since the very beginning we humans have been sinners.

A hotly debated statement of Psalm 51 is verse 5: “Surely I was sinful at birth, / sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Contrary to what many have said, this is *not* a philosophical or theological assertion about sex or original sin; it is a confession. It is a confession that human life is conditioned by sin from its beginning; it is a way of saying not just that I have sinned, but that I am a sinner. My problem is not just the need of forgiveness for a particular wrongdoing; my problem is I need salvation from my self. Whereas many of the psalms pray, “Change my situation so that I may praise you [God],” Psalm 51 prays, “Change me for I am the problem.”

Psalm 51 also has something to say about worship. Notice that *before* verse 17 sacrifices are not acceptable but *after* verse 17 sacrifices are acceptable. Why is that? Verse 17 is the key: “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; / a broken and contrite heart / you, God, will not despise.” The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart. God wants not sacrifice but surrender. And when we surrender to Him, our sacrifices will be acceptable to Him.

In the New Testament, in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells a Samaritan woman, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”⁴ In the Churches of Christ, this verse—John 4:24—is *the* verse when it comes to discussions about worship. We have taken this text to mean that we are to worship God with the right attitude and in the right way. The emphasis has been placed upon worshipping the right way. John 4:24 has become our standard authority for arguing that in our worship to God we must worship Him exactly as He has directed—the practice of worship must be performed as prescribed by God. The overriding concern for worship is getting it right. This is not necessarily a bad concern, but it does miss the point of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

In the story, when Jesus confronts the woman with her immoral life, she seeks to redirect the conversation. And what better way to do that than to bring up the issue of

³A. Whitney Brown, *The Big Picture: An American Commentary* (Harper Perennial, 1991), 12.

⁴John 4:24.

worship! We pick up the story at verse 16 of John chapter 4.

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:16-24, NRSV).

Seeing that Jesus must be a prophet, the Samaritan woman asks Jesus to settle the current worship wars. “Jesus, we Jews and Samaritans are embroiled in worship wars. We want to get it right. Give us the answer.” In the context of fusing and feuding over the mechanics and over the specific “how tos” of worship, Jesus tells the woman, “You’re missing the point. It’s not about getting it right; it’s about getting it real.”

In the context of this story, worshipping “in truth” is not about getting it right—at least not in the way we have understood it. In verse 18, when the woman openly and honestly confesses, “I have no husband,” Jesus replies, “What you have said *is true!*” Worshipping “in spirit and in truth” is coming before God and openly and honestly baring our souls to Him. Worshipping “in spirit and in truth” is humbling confessing that we are sinners and that God is gracious. As we saw in Psalm 51, until we bring God our broken and contrite hearts, all other sacrifices will be rejected. Worshipping “in spirit and in truth” is not about getting it right; it’s about getting it real. The Samaritan woman had a worship experience, for she had a transforming encounter with Jesus Christ.

My challenge to all of us, including myself, is to begin thinking of worship in terms of getting it real—thinking of worship as an engaging, expressive experience of God and encounter with God. After all, according to Psalm 51, if we get it right but we don’t get it real, then we got it wrong.

Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed are those
whose sin the LORD does not count against them

and in whose spirit is no deceit (Ps 32:1-2, TNIV).

Please turn your songbooks to number 490, “It Is Well with My Soul,” and be ready to sing in a few moments. I want to tell you the story of this song.⁵ Yes, many of you have heard the story before, but I doubt that many of you have heard all the story, or at least the part that explains verse 2:

My sin, Oh the bliss of this glorious thought—
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Oh my soul!

How does this verse fit?

Horatio G. Spafford, a lawyer and business man, and his wife Anna were fairly well-known in Chicago in the 1860s. Horatio had invested heavily in real estate on the shores of Lake Michigan. In 1871, his holdings were wiped out by the great Chicago Fire. Shortly thereafter, on the advice of the family doctor, Horatio sent his wife and his four daughters to Europe on a French steamer. He had planned to go along but was delayed by a last-minute business matter. At two o’clock in the morning of November 22, 1873, the French steamer collided with a British ship in mid-Atlantic and sank in twelve minutes. Two hundred and twenty-six lives were lost, including the Spaffords’ four daughters. Anna was picked up by a rescue boat, unconscious. Days later, upon reaching the European mainland, she cabled Horatio with the sad message, “Saved alone.”

But there was more tragedy to come. In 1879, the Spaffords’ baby boy—Horatio—caught scarlet fever and died. A year after that the Spaffords broke away from their church in a bitter public quarrel.

The Spaffords were staunch Presbyterians who had suffered much. They simply could not accept the idea that their children could not have gone to Heaven, as their church dogma suggested, and they refused to believe that their suffering was in retribution for their sins, as some of the church elders hinted. Like the biblical Job, the Spaffords were being told that their suffering was punishment for their sins. Horatio did not agree and said so openly. As a result, he was expelled from the church. When some of his friends backed him, they were expelled too. Soon the press took up the issue and

⁵See Elias Antar, “The Story of Bertha Vester” (July/August 1967), internet:

subjected the Spaffords to a campaign of ridicule.

My sin, Oh the bliss of this glorious thought—
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Oh my soul!

This is the joy of forgiveness! This is the motive for worship! This is why, in spite of his suffering, Horatio G. Spafford could write, “It is well with my soul.” And this is why the people of God are able to sing in unison “It is well with my soul.” Let us sing!

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
What ever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”

My sin, Oh the bliss of this glorious thought—
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Oh my soul!

And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend,
“Even so” it is well with my soul.

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