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David was both the best man and the worst man in the Old Testament. He brought peace to Israel through military power. He was called a man after the LORD's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14a), the model king of Israel. He was passionate in his love for God, and was known as the warrior-poet king, not just the political leader but the spiritual leader of his people.

But Psalm 51 opens with these words: “A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba,” or “committed adultery with Bathsheba.” He abused his power and betrayed those loyal to him, and his life gets entangled in sin.

2 Samuel 11 tells how it happened. David was walking on the rooftop terrace of his palace when he saw a beautiful woman taking a bath. He wanted her for himself, so he sent a messenger for her. Turns out she was married to a man named Uriah, who was away fighting in David's army, but he had her brought to him anyway, and he had sex with her.

Later, David discovered he had made Bathsheba pregnant, so he tried to cover his sin by ordering Uriah home from the war. But Uriah refused to sleep with his wife while the battle was still going on and stayed with the king's servants at the palace. David saw he would be found out, so he sent Uriah back to the battle, carrying sealed orders for the troops to pull back so Uriah would be killed. So the commander of the army put Uriah where the fighting was most intense, and then he pulled back the army so Uriah would be struck down. He was killed, and that meant in addition to his sexual sin David was guilty of murder.

David made a series of bad choices. He neglected his purpose by staying home when he should have been leading his army. He focused on his own desires, and when temptation came he turned toward it instead of turning away. He sinned deliberately, and then he tried to cover up his sin. When that didn't work, he committed murder to continue the deceit.

Even when we're not found out in our sin, we're never at peace. David also wrote psalm 32, and it describes the feeling of trying to cover up:

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. (Psalm 32:3)

That is, when he refused to confess his sin, he was weak and miserable, and felt God's hand of discipline heavy on him. David brought Bathsheba to the palace, and she became one of his wives.

But God was unhappy with what David had done. He sent Nathan the prophet to confront David with his sin. Nathan told a parable about injustice, and when David heard it he was outraged. He said, "That man deserves to die, and should repay four-fold for his crime. Nathan looked straight at David and said, "You are the man!"

Of course, David could have reacted differently than he did. He could have gotten angry, and said "Who are you to speak to me like that? I'm the king!" But David fell on his face in sorrow over his sin. And his reaction is a model for us of how to handle a guilty conscience. He prays for forgiveness.

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. (Psalm 51:1-2)

How is it he dares ask for God's help? On what basis can he do that? Simply "according to [God's] unfailing love." David knows he doesn't deserve anything from God, and has no room for bargaining. It's only because of God's love and mercy he can ask anything. That's our only reason for confidence, banking on the character of God. His mercy is abundant, like the prophet Jeremiah wrote,

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22)

David's prayer shows how we move toward forgiveness. He writes,

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 that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. (Psalm 51:3-4)

David recognizes the seriousness of his sin. He doesn't call it a mistake, but he faces it for what it is: sin, transgression, breaking God's law, offending his holiness. It means he owes a debt to God. It's a debt more than his ability to pay, and if it's going to be cleared, he needs God's mercy to do it. His heart is stained.

The starting point for us to find healing is to come clean. It's to agree with God about our wrongdoing. David's saying, my sins are always on my mind, my adultery and murder. It's not God's fault, it's mine. A lot of times we try to make ourselves look better, to make our sins look nicer. What would happen if we

were the kind of church we could dare come clean to others, without fear of condemnation, but also without someone saying “Oh that doesn’t matter.” Whatever it is—our anger, our betrayals, our lust, our addictions. Because when we don’t defend ourselves, we have an advocate before the Father who defends us, Jesus Christ, the one without sin.

So David says, “Against you, you only have I sinned.”

Really? Is David clueless about the human harm he’s done? Bathsheba’s reputation is wrecked by David’s lust. Her marriage is destroyed, and later her heart would be broken when the baby she had by David would die. Uriah, a loyal soldier betrayed and murdered. In a way, the consequences would unfold down the generations to others.

David’s knows the harm he’s done, but he realizes that in the end, sin injures God. It insults his holiness. David had sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah and even against the people trusted to his care, but he offended God. It’s true there are ultimately no victimless crimes. Sin hurts us and others, but ultimately sin is an offense against God by rebelling against his way of living.

David recognizes his wrongdoing. But seeing the wrong you’ve done is one thing, but how do you keep from falling into it again? We have to recognize our natural inclination is to please ourselves and not God. David followed that inclination to another man’s wife. We have to see like David did,

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
(Psalm 51:5)

When we think we’re above sin that other people struggle with, then we’re vulnerable ourselves. We’re part and parcel of a tainted race. We have to ask God to make us clean from the inside out and fill us with new thoughts and desires. Doing the right thing can only come from having a new heart.

William Golding wrote the book *The Lord of the Flies*. He wrote it to confront the idea that it’s society that corrupts, and if we returned to primitive nature we’d be fine. He tells a story of a plane full of boys that crashes on a desert island, the pilot killed. The boys learn to survive there, but they also come to worship the thing they fear, and they also end up killing one of the boys. The story shows we all carry around the capacity for evil. We don’t have to go to school to learn to lie or cheat, or learn to die. It comes with our very nature, and that nature becomes clear as soon as we’re able to express ourselves.

So the problem is profound, and we need specific help not to fall into patterns of sin that lead to death, not life. God provides that help—let’s look at the steps David outlines.

First, God has to teach us his truth.

David says, “Surely, you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place” (Psalm 51:6). He’s saying, show me reality. Help me to understand the truth about myself that I’m fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God to do his will, but I’m fallen, with a nature polluted and prone to evil. Like Genesis says, “people’s thoughts and actions are bent toward evil from childhood” (Genesis 8:21). It’s the basic fact about us.

Second, we need God himself to make us clean.

David writes,

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. (Psalm 51:7)

Hyssop was a plant that grows in Israel used for sprinkling the blood of sacrifice. David’s saying, “Give me the reality that the sacrifice symbolizes. Let the blood wash away my sins.” The blood of bulls has no ultimate capacity of taking away our sins, but it pointed to the sacrifice of Jesus that makes us clean (see verses 16, 19). If God’s going to deal with the evil in us, sin needs to be put to death. God did that when Jesus’ life was laid down to make us clean. That’s what the book of Hebrews is getting at when it tells us Jesus is our high priest,

...One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (Hebrews 7:26-27)

Third, we need to hear God’s word of salvation.

Verse 8 says,

“Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.”

For us to keep away from the things that drag us down, the sins that threaten to destroy us, we need to hear God’s word. God’s love is so great he doesn’t only save us, but he gives us his Spirit and he tells us in his word we belong to him as his sons and daughters. We need God to tell us what he requires, but even more to make us understand what it means. That’s the basis for our joy.

Four, we need a new heart.

Next, David says in verses 9 and 10,

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. (Psalm 51:9-10)

In verse 3 David said his sin was always before him, in his sight. Now he prays God would put it out of sight. Here's the great paradox: if we remember our sins and repent, turn away from them, then God puts them behind him. If we want to be free from falling into sin, God needs to make us free from our past. He does that by giving us a new heart when we turn to Jesus in faith.

Five, we need the assurance of salvation.

Verses 11 and 12 say,

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.

The Old Testament book of 1 Samuel tells the story of Saul, who scorned the LORD, so God left him. That's a sad picture of what happens when someone rejects God, and it's what Jesus called "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit," the one unforgivable sin. It really means if you reject God like the Pharaoh did, and harden your heart, then God will harden it to the point of no return. That's frightful.

David isn't saying here that you can lose your salvation. But it's normal that when we sin and do all we can to push away God's grace, we feel anxiety. It's a perfect way to make ourselves miserable. Our job is just to turn back to God, and hold onto his promise to never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). David's saying, as I hold onto your faithfulness, O God, bring back the joy of knowing you. Assure me that I belong to you, and now give me the will to do your will, even when I struggle to do it.

David didn't know how it was God provided all those benefits, but from this side of the cross we know it's what God has given us in Jesus Christ. God's already given us in Christ all we need to put sin behind us, to make progress in this life, and that's what David was asking for. Give the will to obey, to love what God loves.

God gives *us* the desire to please him, and when he does, we need to act on that desire, because God has given us the power to obey. When God forgives us and gives us a new desire to live for him, we naturally want to respond with lives and words that tell the story to others. So David says,

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you. (Psalm 51:13)

That's why sometimes we don't see results in our lives, because we're not living the experience ourselves, and we're not living in the power of forgiveness. If we've really experienced God's forgiveness, it follows that we want to reach out to others who need this forgiveness and reconciliation. Like the Samaritan woman who met Jesus and went back to her village to tell others about it. The Gospel of John says,

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." (John 4:39)

That's preaching the good news about Jesus, not by professionals or experts, but simply telling someone else what Jesus has done in your life. It's how God saves the world.

How does David conclude the psalm? He praises God for doing two great works. One, God has delivered David from the guilt of shedding blood, and two, God has broken David's arrogant spirit. Verse 17 says,

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

The movie, *Blood Diamond* is a very powerful portrayal of the human cost of bringing diamonds out of conflict areas of Africa. People in rich nations love diamonds so much we're willing to overlook the suffering it takes to produce them, and the hell that creates for many people. It's like David who loved pleasure so much he was willing to overlook the pain he caused to others and to himself.

We were made for heaven, and sometimes we love our sins, our addictions, and our brokenness more than God's glory. May God cultivate in us a hatred for our sin, and a love for Jesus, because that's the kind of heart he fills with rejoicing.