

Sing Your Confession

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[0 : 00] It would be really helpful if you could have a Bible open at Psalm 51 and at the beginning of Psalm 51. I'd love to reflect with you this evening a little on the connection of the Bible with the Bible.

I'd love to reflect with you on the connection that there is between confessing our sins to the Lord and entering into a kind of worship that is full of joy and full of a sense of the nearness and the blessing of God.

It may almost seem as if the opposite ought to be the case that if we could put on our best face and if we could never have to think about any failure or any wrong thought or any wrong action in our lives, if we could convince other people and convince ourselves that all is good with us, we'll feel like worshipping, we'll feel close to a holy God who hates sin.

But actually, that's not how it works and that's not the experience of God's people and scriptures and through history. It is a broken and a contrite heart that God will not despise.

We do need to take a look at the scripture in a way as if it was a mirror to show us ourselves. And as we look at the scripture, we do learn about God and His Christ, we do learn about what God is like but we also learn about ourselves.

[2 : 06] I hope you value worship, I hope you value being able to come along, signed the God of Heaven and to speak with that Lord and God and to hear from that Lord and God both in private worship in your own home and in family worship and in the gathered worship of God's people and sometimes when you have the opportunity to gather maybe with large crowds of people what a joy and hot a blessing worship is.

But if we experience worship, we will experience not only being filled with joy and not only being filled with songs and with excitement and with feelings of great praise, we will experience humbling as well and honest dealings with God.

The spiritual writer A.W. Tozer is well known and maybe you have some books by Tozer that you've read or benefited from or that you're waiting to get round to reading.

When Tozer said this once there is more healing joy in five minutes of worship than there is in five nights of revelry.

While Tozer is no longer with us but I'd like to ask him if he ever did spend five nights at a party, I kind of doubt it and I doubt if many of us ever have I certainly wouldn't have the stamina for five nights of revelry.

[3 : 45] It's all I can do to face having a family wedding next year and think about one night of having to smile for photographs and all the rest of it. One night of a party is my ultimate nightmare.

That's not a huge party animal. But Tozer says there will be more good and more joy in you if you have five minutes of real worship than if you have five nights of the most wonderful party you could ever attend.

I don't think he's wrong. I think there's a degree of spiritual insight there that real worship connects us to the source to the spring of joy.

God wants worship to have many facets to it. If you have an engagement ring on or something like that, if you look at a diamond it has many angles cut into it so that it will glitter in the light.

As you turn a diamond ring you will see light going in different directions and it's these different facets that bring out the beauty of the stone and the beauty of the light that is shining on it too.

[5 : 11] And worship will have shafts of light that come from joyful notes and excited notes and thankful notes.

But there will also be shafts of light and they're necessary that come from more solemn and serious notes dealing with our heart in its idols, dealing with our heart in its sin form.

Over the last year my wife and I for various reasons have been in different cities and different parts of the world and sometimes we've been able to visit very solid Biblical churches and we've entered into a spirit of worship there and there have been times we've been in churches that would not be so comfortable to call our spiritual home.

Some of those churches with very upbeat, very up-tempo music and worship chasing an emotion, chasing a feeling of worship, they have been among the least enjoyable and least satisfying of experiences of worship because in truth the diamond needs to point to our sin and to these things that we need to confess and let go of.

We need light on our sin as well as notes of victory or of celebration or whatever. Worship will include tears and laughter, worship will include the things that tear away layers and layers of sin and there will sometimes be scar tissue exposed when the word is being read and when we come say to communion and we enjoy communion and we enjoy the reminder of Christ's sacrifice and yet it also exposes the scar tissue that we are not yet what we should be and we have to face what put our saviour on the cross as well.

[7 : 24] When we worship we are responding to God, we are responding to the way God has revealed himself to us, that calls for repentance, for admitting our sins and our faults and it calls for declarations of our trust and our faith in God's good character that he will forgive sinners who come to him under the blood of Jesus Christ, putting their trust in the sacrifice of Jesus.

The better we know the way of the cross, the better we know the way of saying sorry to God, the better we know the way of repentance, the more we will worship and the more we will be thankful and the more we will have joy.

There is a depth of joy that I pray you will know and that you will have that comes through repenting as David did here, have mercy on me O God, according to your steadfast love, his promised covenant love, according to your abundant mercy, brought out my transgressions, washed me thoroughly from my iniquity, cleansed me from my sin, for I know my transgressions, I know I have strayed, I know I have offended, I know I have wandered, my sin is ever before me, my sin though it hurt your eye, though it hurt Bathsheba, though it hurt the nation of Israel, I against you I can say, against you you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

I want us to maybe notice a couple of things tonight. The first is the story of David, the setting of this great Psalm and the setting really is the sad story of guilt exposed and of guilt confessed.

So we have that background that we read from 2 Samuel, we read from chapter 12 that the story is told in 2 chapters, chapter 11 of 2 Samuel is the story of a king who wanted somebody else's wife, of a woman, someone's husband, someone's wife who made herself available to lie with the king and then when she conceived the king's child she said word to the king that she was pregnant and I'm sure Bathsheba was as guilty as David in the whole matter and that she knew that she was probably bringing disaster on her husband, she did not behave well but David was in a more responsible position, in a more powerful position and his guilt is far greater than the guilt of Bathsheba, his guilt as the Lord's anointed representative, the one who should be leading a nation closer to God, he's not out fighting battles with his army and with Uriah, he's in his palace and he has time to look from his palace down onto a woman bathing herself and to have a heart full of lust as he looks upon.

[10 : 58] You know the story so well and it is a story of shame that ends with confrontation when God's prophet, the prophet Nathan, comes to David to expose him.

David tried many things to get out of the mess that he had created himself, he tried to recall Uriah from the fighting and to trick him into thinking that he was the father if Uriah went home and if he was to sleep with his wife he would naturally assume that any child that was born in the next few months was his but no, Uriah was such a devoted, honourable, fighting man, he would sooner sleep outside the king's palace maybe in a corridor than go home to the comforts of his wife and of his own home.

He was committed, he was called to be a soldier, he was an active manoeuvre, he wanted to be in the field of battle.

The king then tried to get Uriah drunk in the hope that he would forget himself and be confused, Uriah was a better man than that and the lowest thing that David does is to give orders to his commanders in the field of battle, that orders that would almost certainly lead to the death of Uriah, to seal those orders and give those written orders to Uriah himself to carry to Joab and to others in the battle.

That man carried his own death warrant and he did it obediently and loyally to David, he never let David down and he ended up fighting and the armies of Israel withdrew from around and deliberately to expose him to maximum danger so that the enemies of the Lord, the enemies of Israel, the enemies of David would strike down Uriah in the field of battle.

[13:14] David did not wield the sword himself but he was morally guilty of the murder of a man who became inconvenient to him because he had sinned.

He had taken another man's wife and he wanted to get rid of that awkward husband, he wanted to cover up his adultery and in a matter of days after Uriah was killed, David took steps to install the widow Bathsheba in the palace as yet another of David's wives.

And in 2 Samuel chapter 11 verse 27 with magnificent understatement the Bible says the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.

Yes, this was God's anointed, this was a man who's supposed to be a model of the Messiah, a signpost to the Christ and he's behaving selfishly and cruelly and as a hypocrite.

It was a dreadful, dreadful incident. That's the story and the confrontation is Nathan telling his little parable, we read it in 2 Samuel 12, King I want to tell you about a rich man who had many flocks and yet he was so mean that when he had a visitor and he wished to feed his visitor with a feast and honor him with a banquet, he didn't take one of his own flock but he took the only you, beloved precious lamb, the only lamb that belonged to his poor neighbor and he took that poor man's only animal and he stole it and he killed it and he presented it to his guest.

[15:12] David is furious. He thinks this is the most awful greed and the most awful wickedness that he's ever heard of, he's outraged and David says that man is going to have to be punished, that man is going to have to bear the shame and the guilt and that man is going to have to restore many times what he took and then God's prophet, probably at great risk to his own life says to David, you are the man, you're the kind of man who would take a poor man's little lamb, you're the kind of man who would behave in that kind of disgraceful and cruel way.

It's not easy to be a spokesman of the living God and deliver a message like that to a powerful and an arrogant ruler as David had become.

Now I don't know how we feel necessarily as we hear this story being told tonight, it would be very human of us actually to be thinking about other people that we know and thinking.

I hope they're convicted. I hope so and so is in church because they really need to think about their sin. Maybe it's just me but I think it's very human when we hear of something shameful or something sad like this to have a long list of other people who need to hear this and what we are very slow to do is apply it to ourselves.

I don't like to be convicted. It's not my purpose to manipulate your emotions or to push your buttons or to say things that will stir up guilt or anger or shame in you tonight because if I do that it will make not one bit of difference to you, it will not do you or me any good.

[17:16] What I long for is that the Holy Spirit of God who speaks through the scripture will convict me and you, all of us, that His Word is true, that His Word is a living, sharp sword that gets right in to deal with our attitudes that are wrong and our past that's wrong and our thoughts that are wrong and our words that are wrong, not because God delights in making us feel bad but because God sent a Savior into the world for us.

God sent Jesus to carry your sin and mine. How are you reacting if someone tells you or in some way helps you to see an uncomfortable truth about yourself or about your denomination or about our land?

We can react in lots of ways. We can pull back and say, I don't want to have anything to do with this. I don't want to hear about this. We can react in anger.

How dare you? We've got quite a lot actually in our culture today. People who talk about anything being right or wrong is labeled as some kind of bigot or you hate women or you hate Muslims or you hate homosexuals or whatever.

You can't talk about any kind of lifestyle in any kind of negative way without being branded as an extremist in our culture. Well, David could have reacted like that.

[18:58] How dare you? I'm the king. Who do you think you are, Nathan? Nothing into me like that, but no. God touched the king's heart.

God spoke to the king and instead of being defensive or putting up a barrier or saying, well, there are worse than me out there. There are worse rulers.

There are worse kings and emperors than me. He didn't try to say to Nathan, well, you haven't heard my side of the story, Nathan. He didn't try to blame the woman or say, well, there it takes two. He didn't try to cover it up. He'd already tried covering things up, but he couldn't hide it from God. Instead of pushing Nathan away or trying to brush him off or expelling him from the kingdom or imprisoning him or putting him to death, the kind of thing you could imagine a Henry the Eighth doing.

David is convicted of his sin. He knows that the anger that was flaring up on him against the man in Nathan's reparable, he has to turn that shame and that sense of right and wrong towards himself because God by his grace broke David's heart.

[20 : 27] David doesn't try to protect himself or his reputation. He doesn't try to maintain his reputation and imagine what would happen if a church leader, a minister in Scotland in 2018 wrote a hymn like Psalm 51 and spoke about their personal struggles with sin.

If a minister wrote a hymn and said, I confess to the Lord lust or I confess to the Lord an addiction or I confess to the Lord heavy use of gross pornography, number one, will we sing the song? No. And number two, would we have that fellow to our communion? No. He'd be drummed out of the ministry. And yet here in the Bible is Psalm 51 where the Lord's anointed king saying, I know my transgressions, my sin is ever before me against you, you only.

And I said, that's an evil. You would be right, God. You would be in the right to condemn me. You would be blameless in your judgment because from the day I was conceived in my mother's womb I've been a sinner.

I'm a part of a sinful race. My only hope is in you. And that leads to the next in this song because we've got the guilt and the sadness and the shame of the story and we've got the confrontation with Nathan saying, you are the man.

[22 : 14] But where does this Psalm want us to go next? Not wallowing in guilt, not wallowing in grief, but this Psalm wants to show us how God takes shame away, how God takes guilt away, how God takes fear away.

And so what we have here is a song, a prayer, which is also a confession of sin.

Part of Christian worship is confession of sin. Now, something has happened to the way we do public worship in our Presbyterian tradition that is not totally helpful.

If you have ever worshipped in an Anglican church, Church of England, almost certainly as part of every Sunday service, the person meeting the service would say, right, let's all stand there and we're going to confess our sins to God.

And people will do that. If you visited a Presbyterian church in Brazil or in North America, in Canada, in the United States, if you were to go in a time machine and go back to the Presbyterianism of John Knox and Andrew Melville in the Reformation Days in Scotland, you would confess you were sinning on the way to the Lord's table.

[23 : 47] You would confess your sins on the way to baptising yourself for an infant. You would confess your sins in regular public worship for whatever reason.

At some stage in our Presbyterian history in Scotland, we stopped doing that as a separate part of worship. That, I think, was a mistake.

I'm sure that pastors and ministers and elders and others leading services down through the years have confessed sin on behalf of the people.

And I'm sure a pastoral prayer will normally include confession of sin. But it seems to me wise to do what most global churches do, who have any kind of structure or order to their worship, wise to do what the North American Presbyterians do, wise to do what the Anglicans around the globe do, and say, well, in our worship, there comes a point when we turn to God and we say to God, I'm the man. I'm the woman who has sinned against you. And I need to turn from my sins to the mercy of God, and I need to turn from my guilt to the grace of God.

[25 : 11] We need to think, Psalms like Psalm 32, as our confessional sin, Psalms like Psalm 69, Psalms like Psalm 51.

We need to be helped in the language of Scripture to turn from the burden of guilt and to be released from it.

And this worship song, Psalm 51, is powerful. And I'm so glad it's in the Bible, because here is a man writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit teaching us how to repay.

I don't know what sin causes you trouble, but there will be a sin that causes you trouble. I don't know what memory causes you trouble, but there will be something. Maybe it's something totally respectable or pretty private. I just like to get the last word that we like to win every argument.

[26 : 25] It might be that we have more than a fair share of pride, but does the Bible not say that God resists the proud?

How can I serve God as a proud man? How can I serve God as a proud minister? I need to go down on my knees and say, God, I'm a proud man.

And it's hindering usefulness. Have mercy upon me, oh God. Cleanse me from the guilt.

Different things at different seasons in our lives may trip us up. Before the Prophet Nathan came to David, he was feeling fine.

Before the Prophet Nathan confronted David, I don't think David was giving any thought to what he had done to sin against Bathsheba and Uriah the Hitlite.

[27 : 31] I don't think it really seemed to bother him. Not a merciful God we have, but he catches us and shows us a picture of ourselves sometimes that we do not like.

And so we have this song in the scripture which is so brutally honest in its confession of guilt and of sin. But remember this, friends.

It is written to be shared with me and with you in the congregational worship of the people of God. It's part of the liturgy of the Bible.

To the choir master says verse one, As Sam of David, and just in case you're in any doubt when Nathan the Prophet went to him after he had gone into Bathsheba, why would the choir master need to know?

You better pick a tune, choir master, to help the people of Israel sing this in such a way that it sinks in and the people of Israel can enter into the worship of the living God saying to God, Have mercy on me.

[28 : 46] Because I need mercy. Have mercy on my home and my family. Have mercy on my wife. Have mercy on my children.

Have mercy on the people who depend on me because I have sinned. Brought out my transgressions.

We need individual and corporate confession of sin. Calvin said about the sacraments something which is, I think, true of all prayer and confession and worship.

Calvin said this about the sacraments, They profit not a whit without the power of the Holy Spirit. Just going to the Lord's table won't do you any good, but going to the Lord's table in faith and in repentance will do you good.

Going to baptism without faith will not do you good. Going to baptism, putting your claim on the one who washes away guilt and sin, will bring a blessing to those who have been baptized themselves or who are baptizing their children.

[30 : 00] Confessing sins in an Anglican church or a Presbyterian church because the minister says it's now it's time to confess our sins. It'll do us no good if we still love our sin.

But if we say the words, Have mercy on me, O God, cleanse me from my blood guiltiness. We say it from the heart and we mean it. It will do us good.

When we confess and believe that the blood of Jesus Christ God, some cleanses us from all sin, confession is the very best thing that we can do.

And a Psalm like Psalm 32 or a Psalm like Psalm 51 is powerful in the hands of the Holy Spirit when we pray and sing words like these with faith and with trust.

There's an old proverb, confession is good for the soul. We are to confess our faults to one another but we have to be careful about that.

[31 : 09] We can confess our faults in a way that draws attention to ourselves. We can confess our faults in a way that leads others into sin. And so I think that we have to exercise great wisdom and restraint in the way we confess our sins.

Confession in the Roman Catholic Church became a door to great evil and actually seemed to spread sin. So the way we confess I think should be with a view to building up and edifying one another, not having a dramatic story of a gruesome past that makes for an intriguing testimony.

I wouldn't want to confess in detail to a living human being the things that I properly must confess to my high priest Jesus.

But I must confess to living human beings that I have feet of clay and it would be helpful to me in the context of the friendship of the ministers in my presbytery to have maybe one or two ministers or elders or close Christian friends that I would go to and say, you know what, I'm struggling in a particular area of my life.

Ask me about it. Form me, text me, ask me how I'm doing. But I wouldn't want to be confessing sin in such a way that I was leading somebody else to think, oh, I never thought of that.

[32 : 58] And leading them into maybe an area of fresh temptation. You hear what I'm saying? We need to try to build each other up and edify each other even in the way we go about the matter of talking about our sin, talking about our failure, talking about our problems.

We want God to get the glory and we want the focus to be on the mercy of God in Christ, not on us, not even on our spectacular failures. We want the focus to be on the Lord.

Now our time is running away. So can I say something about what David experienced, which you will experience and which everyone will experience who confesses their sin to God?

Here's how it works. We have but one claim on God. We have but one reason to go to God with our blood, guiltiness and sin.

And that one claim on God is right at the beginning of this Psalm. It's the mercy of God. God's mercy is our only claim on God.

[34 : 16] That God is a merciful God who wishes to be approached by sinners, who has provided a way through the cross, a way through the sacrifice of his son. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your covenant steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy brought out my transgressions.

David knows that it's because God's nature is to be forgiven, because it's God's nature to be good to his enemies, because it's God's nature to be kind to those who fall and fall again and fall and fall and fall and fall again.

It's God's nature to be patient and to be merciful. And I want to say thank God, hallelujah, that's what he's like. Have mercy on me, O God, because if you weren't a merciful God, I would have to face the God of the Mormons or I'd have to face the God of Islam and I would be lost.

But the God of the Bible, the one true and living God is merciful. The one true and holy living God forgave David his greater things.

Is there any sin that you could possibly be guilty of that this merciful God cannot cleanse and cannot forgive?

[35 : 57] There's a hymn that is sometimes sung and jointly sung and maybe too jointly sung. The vilest offender that truly believes that moment from Jesus, a pardon received.

Some people find that really, really hard to accept. Are you telling me that the boys who killed James Bulger can be forgiven?

Well, if they repent, yes. The Khmer Rouge leaders who were part of the genocide in Cambodia in the 70s, one of them is a Christian.

Are you telling me that a man can brush the brains of other human beings out with a hoe? Can he electrocute people to death? Can drown people in an oil drum full of water and be forgiven?

Yes. Are you telling me that people in Barlily who are there for murder or are there because they've molested a child that they can be forgiven?

[37 : 12] Well, their heart is bad. But so is mine. And their sins are bad. But so are yours.

And instead of ranking ourselves against other sinners, I think we need to realize that the way the balance is that sin, all sin, is a horrible offense to God and that nothing but the blood of God's Lamb, Jesus, can cleanse us from sin.

And if God's Lamb died for you, He died for all your sin. And He died for the vilest defender who truly believes.

If you have lost someone because of some great wickedness, that's hard to accept. But then we put the light on our own sin and we realize no one deserves God's mercy.

And God's mercy is magnified in the life of vilophenders. And God's mercy is magnified in the life of a little child who becomes a penitent Christian.

[38 : 23] The question is not, why should God forgive that one? Why should God forgive somebody else? The question is, why should God forgive me and you? Why?

Because the blood of Christ was shed, His mercy is our only claim on God. Well that, at the end of this Thanksgiving weekend, only leaves us with one place to go.

And that is to the place of thanksgiving for the blood of Jesus Christ. Psalm 51, we didn't read it through to the end, but it's full of beautiful petitions, creating me a clean heart, when you are my spirit.

Don't cast me away, don't take your Holy Spirit away, restore to me the joy of your salvation and then I'll be a witness and I'll teach transgressively, deliver me from my guilt O God, and then you'll fill my tongue so that I'll sing aloud of your righteousness, open my lips and my mouth, will declare your praise.

The sacrifice of my life will be that I have a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart and I have the praises of the Lord on my lips.

[39 : 39] I will be thankful, thankful, thankful. Are you ready to give guilt to Jesus so that you can thank God for the rest of eternity, that God was merciful to you and that his Son took your guilt away?

There's an Australian preacher called Simon Manchester whom I've met once or twice, whose ministry I've greatly benefited from at Keswick and listening to him online and at meetings in Scotland as well.

Simon Manchester said once in my hearing, gratitude is unusually good for us. I'm glad you've had a whole weekend, Saturday, Sunday around the theme of being thankful.

We need to be helped to be thankful. And Simon Manchester says gratitude is good for us, good for us spiritually, good for us in our prayer lives, good for us in our families and our marriages.

Gratitude. Who are we thanking today? Who have we thanked in the last 48 hours? Who are we going to thank tomorrow? And how do we respond to God's grace and mercy with thankfulness?

[41 : 04] Gratitude is unusually good for us. In the story of David and Bathsheba of Nathan, in the story of that poor man you're either hit out, there's damage, damage, damage, there's damage everywhere.

But in the devastation of that sin and ugliness, God is merciful. God is gracious. God is good. God welcomes sinners for repent and God gives joy. It's one of the astonishing things about Psalm 51.

It's in verse 8, verse 12, verse 15, confession leads to joy. Confession leads to the bones that you have broken, rejoicing.

Confession leads to praise and declaration. In my lips and my mouth will declare your praises. Joy. [42 : 07] Joy after this. Joy. Whatever we have experienced of the damage of sin.

Have you been on the receiving end of that damage? Have you caused damage? Do you know situations and churches where there's hurt and there's damage?

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your steadfast love. Father, we bless you and praise you that nothing is better for us than to be thankful.

Give us joy tonight as we come to the end of our service. Give us joy and thanksgiving and health in our bones and health in our souls and health in our lives.

Spiritual health, mental and emotional health that we may be robust, that we may overcome the past and the shadows of hurt, that we may overcome temptation and patterns of sin, that we may overcome the lies and accusations of Satan and that we may be cleansed and that we may be white and that we may be clean because in mercy the blood of Jesus was shed for us.

[43 : 33] Help us to believe and to help others to believe and you shall have the honour and the glory, the thanks and the praise, Amen.

For closing in Psalm 51, from verse 5, Psalm 51, and sing, Sam, from my birth I have been sinful such to nature I receive.

Let this be our prayer and our confession to end our service and from the heart let us be freed from the burden of guilt by giving our sin to the merciful Lord.

Let's sing God's praise from my birth. From my birth I have been sinful such to nature I receive. In my mother's womb come see, the beautiful in my heart, the wisdom to be you impart, cleanse with His succulent power, I'll be whiter than the snow.

[45 : 13] Let the bones you crush be joyful, may I joy and gladness know.

From my failure hide your face, Lord out of my wickedness.

Lord, be it that you heart in me and let steadfast mind bring you.

Do not seek your spirit from me, cast me not away from you.

Give me by the joy I have, keep my willing spirit right.

[46 : 26] Gracious Lord, restore to us joy and keep restoring to us joy as we walk that path of sorrow, of confession, of repentance, of a new mind, of forgiveness.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us and with all God's people everywhere.

Amen.