

A Prayer for the Guilt Ridden

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Date: 17 August 2025

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[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. It's great to be here with you this morning at Brunsfield. And I'm aware that many of you won't know me. So I hope you won't mind me asking a personal question.

When you feel guilty, how do you process your guilt? So I'm assuming that you do feel guilty, at least at times.

If you never feel guilty, that's pathologically worrying. Whether it's that twinge of guilt that passes really quickly or that burden of guilt that weighs us down year upon year.

When you feel the pang or the burden, how do you deal with it? What's your process? David, in Psalm 51, has a quite unusual way of dealing with his guilt.

At least unusual in our secular, godless culture. He prays about it. David processes his guilt by crying out to God.

[1:19] And not only does this transform how he feels, but it changes the course of his life. And it impacts the community around him.

So let's revisit David's prayer and see if God might use this to speak into our lives today. Keep that passage open if you've closed it at Psalm 51.

There's 51st song in the Hebrew songbook. Now, if I were to sum up this message in a sentence, it would go something like this.

To be free from the grip of guilt, humbly pray to a merciful God. You don't need to copy David's prayer, at least not word for word.

But you do need to pray like David. Authentically, humbly, to a merciful God. What does such a prayer sound like?

[2:31] What are the dynamics of a repentant prayer? How is such a prayer answered? Is it answered? And in what way? Well, let's retrace that as we go through David's prayer together.

There's four bits to this prayer. First of all, it begins with a desperate cry. A desperate cry in the opening couple of verses.

It's a desperate cry that arises out of a desperate situation. Look at the inscription of the psalm. The bit before verse 1, which is part of the psalm.

And a very important backdrop to the psalm. Why was David so guilt-ridden? In what circumstances was he crying out so desperately?

Well, he tells us it was because he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. A very grim reason for David to have a desperate cry to God.

[3:40] Now, in our society, adultery is often minimized and even glamorized. Adultery, I mean, people rarely use that word nowadays.

It's just a fling. A bit of fun. Or if it's seen negatively at all, it's a lapse of judgment. The scripture speaks with far greater seriousness about this.

Adultery is sin. And it leaves devastation in its wake. Tragically, David, not a man without any morals, but a man of God, falls in to the sin.

The long and sorry story is recorded at length in the Bible in 2 Samuel chapter 11. A story of a king who abuses his power, indulges his lust, and then covers up his tracks.

David uses his considerable resources to try to not only ignore what he's done, but to bury the evidence of his sin. But there was one set of eyes in the universe that David couldn't escape.

[5 : 03] God saw. And the prophet Nathan was sent to call David to account. This psalm is written in the aftermath of that confrontation.

Perhaps it was immediately on the back of that that David went back to his room and finally stopped pretending and began praying.

With desperation, not only in his heart, but in his voice, he cries. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love.

Now, it's worth just pausing here at the beginning and reflecting on what David doesn't do in response to his sin.

There's a number of other avenues that David doesn't take. He doesn't cower in a corner, feeling crippled with guilt for the rest of his life.

[6 : 05] Neither does he minimize his sin or make excuses for his errors, which is always a popular strategy.

The yes, I did it, but approach. I was wrong, but I was tired. I was stressed. I was sinful, but don't you know the circumstances that I was in?

Don't you know what the other person did? There's none of that here in David's cry. There's no bargaining with God either. That's another common approach, isn't it?

God, if you forgive me my sin, then I will take the rest of my life to make it up to you. None of that in the opening of this psalm.

All this psalm records is the cry of a desperate man who has nothing to trade with God. David's only hope is in the character of the God to whom he cries.

[7 : 15] A God, verse 1, of mercy, unfailing love, and great compassion. And a God who, out of that compassion and love, blots out his transgressions and erases his worst errors.

This brought to mind a school teacher. Interesting, this school illustration today. I remember a teacher I had who used to mark our work at the front of the class.

You would go up and, of course, my maths in particular was pretty weak. So there were plenty of errors to mark and to cross.

But what I loved about this teacher is she used to take her own rubber and she would erase my errors on the page. I loved that teacher.

I never even needed to go back to my seat and rub them out myself. And that's exactly the kind of God that David has.

[8 : 19] His God is like this. His God does this. There's a long-running series on television called The Equalizer.

Some of you might have seen the film version with Denzel Washington. Who is the equalizer? The equalizer is the guy you call when what you need is justice.

If you've been the victim of a crime and the courts have failed and the police can't help, he's the man you need when what you need is justice.

But I'm guessing he's not much use when what you need is mercy. Who do you call on when what you need is mercy?

Well, you can call on David's God. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who Paul in the New Testament calls rich in mercy and great in love.

[9 : 26] But how do we get the ear of this God? Very simple, isn't it? We cry to him. It doesn't need to be polished or sophisticated, but it does need to be real.

And that takes humility, doesn't it? And vulnerability. Because when guilt weighs heavily on us, the last thing we often want to do is admit it.

But that's exactly where we need to begin this morning, if we're feeling the weight of our sin. So a desperate cry. But notice that David continues.

There's a depth to this psalm of repentance. There's a depth. Secondly, we move to a deeper diagnosis in verses 3 to 6.

And what we have in these next verses is David's deeper reflection on his own sinfulness. It's interesting that, isn't it?

[10 : 35] Often when we're feeling guilty, we want to get out of that emotional space as quickly as possible. Because it's an unpleasant feeling to have. We don't like to linger in thinking about our sin.

But David lingers. He meditates even more deeply on the depths of his sin and the heights of his unholiness.

And as he does this, as he meditates, a couple of insights come to him, inspired by the Spirit. The first is that his sin, first and foremost, is a crime against God.

You'll see that in verse 4. Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. People sometimes think that David is having momentary amnesia in verse 4.

I mean, how can David say this? Has David forgotten all the people he has hurt? All the people he has sinned against? Not least Bathsheba and her husband.

[11 : 50] How can David say that against God only has he sinned? Let's just be clear of one thing. David is not whitewashing his own sin or ignoring the victims.

And the reason we know that is because of the inscription that we just read earlier. At the start of the psalm, the mention of Bathsheba is something that David wrote.

David's making that publicly available in this psalm. So David knows his crimes against people. The nation knows his crimes now through the psalm that he has wronged others.

But what David is pointing out is that there is a deeper crime. There is a more ultimate crime.

David had sinned against his creator and rebelled against his maker. And that is so serious that it is as if that is the only thing that matters in this equation.

[12 : 56] Until that is reckoned with and sorted, nothing else can be sorted. David's deepest sin wasn't lust or murder.

It was godlessness. At the end of the day, that's what makes all bad behavior so bad, so serious.

If you don't believe in a God, if you don't have a divine judge in your worldview, then who's to say what's right and wrong?

It all becomes a matter of personal opinion and personal feelings. But if there is a God who is above us and who has designed us, then he can tell us what is good and tell us what is destructive.

That's David's first deeper diagnosis. All sin is a crime against God. That is much more serious than even what we've done to others. But notice there's another deeper insight here in verse 5.

[14:06] And buckle up for this one. Listen to this. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Now, David doesn't say, and he could have said, I was sinful from the moment I committed adultery. What does he say? I was sinful from conception.

I was sinful from birth. Theologians call this the doctrine of original sin. The idea that we are born into the world as sinners on the basis of the sin of Adam.

We sin because we are sinners. We don't become sinners because we've committed a sin. It's a biblical truth.

It's a biblical truth that, of course, raises a number of questions in people's minds. Not least, is this unfair?

[15:12] Is it unfair that people should be born with a propensity to sin? Well, that's a question we could spend a lot of time discussing.

Very philosophical discussion. But let me say this. That however you feel about the doctrine of original sin, I'm sure you will agree with me, it is the most provable doctrine on the planet.

Right? If you doubt that, if you doubt that original sin is a real thing, spend five minutes in a kid's nursery or two minutes in a kid's playground on day one of school where kids who have never been taught to be jealous are jealous, where children who have never been taught by their parents to be unkind are quite capable of it.

It's instinctive. And so the real shock about David's sin is that it actually wasn't out of character.

It was an extreme expression of the sinner he always was. Friends, if we really want to deal with guilt in our life, we must move beyond the incidence of sin and recognize that sin is part of our identity.

[16:45] It's a much more fundamental problem. It's not just that I need to be saved from certain mistakes. I need to be saved. Reminds me of the man, you know, in the story Jesus told in the Gospels, the tax collector, a man who had lived a pretty sinful life, and one day he feels moved to go up to the temple and confess his sin to God and see if it works.

And the Bible says that he couldn't even raise his head towards heaven, such was his sense of guilt, but he beat his breast and he said, have mercy on me, the sinner.

Notice that the man does not even list his sins. He does not even catalog his many wrongs. He was wrong.

He was the sinner. The Bible says that that man went home forgiven. Because he identified his core problem.

And it's only when we grasp that, that sinners indeed we are, that we will be in the position to receive the deliverance that now follows. And that's what comes next in verses 7 to 12.

[18:09] So having spent considerable time pondering his sin, David finally swivels and he thinks about God's deliverance.

So thirdly, a divine deliverance. Now, notice that David is still praying for forgiveness. In fact, that's the case through the whole of this psalm.

At least in how this psalm is written, it's a psalm of expectation. He's anticipating the forgiveness to come. David starts to list the ways in which he expects God to answer his prayer.

What can you and I expect when we humbly cry for mercy, when we bank on the cleansing power of God?

Well, we can expect a whole number of things. A cascade, a kind of waterfall of blessing and deliverance.

[19 : 15] Let's quickly note these. It's almost a list of them. In verse 7, there's cleansing. Remember that muck of David's sin?

Earlier on, he describes it almost like a, it's almost like one of these rugby shirts, you know, that our mother's got to wash every Thursday night that you can't even see the original color. David needed that cleansing.

And he says in verse 7 that he will be purged with hyssop. I'm guessing hyssop isn't a particularly familiar word to us.

Hyssop was, in the Old Testament, a branch that the Israelites used to dip into animal blood, animal sacrifices.

It was something the Israelites used in acts of atonement. In other words, David expects cleansing to come through atonement, through the blood of atonement.

[20 : 14] That is always how cleansing comes. Why do you think Jesus died on a cross? Secondly, he expects healing as part of his deliverance.

That's verse 8. David's bones, which have been crushed with guilt, will now return to the joy of health.

Did you know that guilt is bad for you physiologically? Did you know that forgiveness is actually good for your physical health?

It is. David even expects more than that in verse 9. He talks of the blessing of God hiding his face from his sin.

When your sin's forgiven, God chooses not to see that sin anymore. Often we continue to see it, but God doesn't see it.

[21 : 14] That's the promise of his word. And what is more, verse 10, there's a purifying that happens when we're forgiven.

There's not just the expunging of our record before God, but the purifying of our heart. I mean, this is not stingy, is it?

It's a cascade of blessings. It's an overwhelming deliverance. It results, look at verse 11, in God abiding with David and restoring his joy, verse 12.

One thing that often happens when we really mess things up in life is that people get real scarce really quickly.

Family, friends who were loyal to us often don't want to know us. Will God abandon David too? Well, not if he prays this kind of prayer in Psalm 51.

[22 : 20] He will not be abandoned or cast from God's presence or have the Holy Spirit removed from him. No wonder that will lead to his joy.

Notice his restored joy. It's very easy to preach this to someone that's maybe not a Christian, and I'm going to do that in a moment, but actually, here's some hope for you.

If you're a believer who's stuffed things up, David once enjoyed joy in fellowship with God, and sin has disrupted that.

Misery has flooded in, but in repentance, that joy of fellowship is restored. It's a comprehensive transformation.

It's a comprehensive deliverance. It's a comprehensive joy. Now, in my house, I have a number of people who love house programs of all descriptions, and one of the genres of this is house transformations.

[23 : 28] I actually like those ones. Often there's like a family living in a house, and the house is completely unsuitable for them, and so they'll send them out of the house into a hotel for a week, and then they'll send this huge team of people in to transform the house, and it's not like a minor set of changes.

They knock through walls, put in new ramps and stairs, reconfigure rooms. They totally change it on the interior, and then they bring the family back in, and what's the result?

Wide-eyed wonder and tears of joy streaming down their cheeks. It's the same house, but nothing in it is the same.

That's what God's deliverance feels like in somebody's life. It's an absolute transformation of your past, present, and future, of the inside of your life and the outside of your life.

I'm wondering this morning if you have ever had that complete transformation. Has God given you that inside-out deliverance?

[24 : 56] Have you experienced the joy that only comes from sins forgiven? Listen, don't misread Psalm 51.

It is not a psalm designed to make you sad. It's a psalm to take you out of sadness. And Brunsfield Church, how aware are you of how greatly you've been forgiven?

The happiest people on earth are forgiven sinners. If our joy is low or absent, could it be, I'm not saying it necessarily is the case, but could it be that one of the reasons is we have lost sight of our epic deliverance?

We have lost sight of how in debt to grace we are. Maybe we are robbing ourselves of Christian joy because we are not regularly practicing the confession of our sin.

Not just waiting for the big ticket items to come along where we know we really need to get on our faces and our knees, but living that life that's dependent on grace, that life of continual confession and trust.

[26 : 32] It's that kind of life that will result in a displayed devotion. That's our final heading this morning, a displayed devotion.

Notice that this psalm, which has been very private in some ways so far, becomes much more public, visible toward the end. One of the features of the way that our culture encourages us to process guilt is that it's often quite personal and, dare I say, self-centered, right?

A secular counselor will say to you, process your feelings of guilt so that you feel better, right? It's all about you enhancing your life. But David's repentance leads to the benefit of others.

So, verse 13, he says that if God restores him, then he will teach transgressors God's ways. David will start a master class in forgiveness.

And if you want to enroll in his course, he would be happy for you to do so. It will be a lecture on the road home for prodigals and how to travel it.

[27 : 53] Because David has taken the journey himself and he knows the way. Restored sinners are the best evangelists. In fact, restored sinners are the only evangelists.

They must be very humble evangelists because they're speaking out of their own needs and their own salvation. And as we've already said, they are meant to be happy evangelists.

As they notice, not only teach God's salvation, but they sing of it and they praise it. Verse 15 and 16. Actually, our singing, which was very good this morning, is something of an indication of the joy of our sins forgiven.

such people will live lives that aren't characterized by fake sacrifice, but by an ongoing broken spirit of confession.

And this devoted life will involve prayer for others as well in verses 18 and 19. Notice that the psalm ends with David no longer praying for himself, but praying for Jerusalem.

[29 : 09] and praying for the spiritual condition of the nation. Remember that David was the king of the nation. He was meant to be the spiritual leader of the people.

His prayer for them is that not only will his life be restored, but that everyone's life will be restored and built up to the glory of God.

We haven't really got hold of Psalm 51 if it ends with us hiding in our rooms, confessing all the sins we can ever think of.

Out of the joy of private restoration, we're called to public witness, living lives with integrity, teaching the gospel with clarity, and praying for others diligently that they too might know this joy.

And we do this, of course, in the knowledge that Jesus makes all of Psalm 51 possible. Maybe you've been wondering as we've gone through this psalm, how and where Jesus features.

[30 : 29] And it's one of the trickier Psalms in that regard, isn't it? Because, well, we know, after all, Jesus wasn't a sinner. It's not quite so easy to say that Jesus sang this psalm in quite the way that we would sing it.

Yet while he wasn't a sinner, Jesus bore the burden of sin. All of the filthiness, all of the blots on the book, all of the body-wracking guilt that was ours was laid on his body.

God's face was hidden from him so that God's face might be hidden from my sin. Psalm 51 only works because Jesus bore the burden of dying like a sinner.

And through his church today, Jesus is teaching a guilty world the road of repentance. He's showing us the way home through a psalm like this.

And he's praying for each of us this morning in words that he would cry from the cross. Father, forgive them. I wonder today whether we will enter the joy of those sins forgiven.

[32 : 03] And I wonder as God's people whether we will continue in that joy living what Martin Luther called a lifestyle of repentance.

Not just the beginning of the Christian life but the pattern of the Christian life all the way until our cleansing and forgiveness is complete.

Let's pray for just a few moments. And let's not let these moments pass without considering what God is saying to us personally by his spirit.

Whether we're here as someone who isn't a person of faith whether we're here as a person who is and we've messed up and we've not confessed it let us bring our cries to God quietly in our hearts.

Have mercy on us O God according to your unfailing love according to your great compassion blot out our transgressions wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin we ask in Jesus name Amen.

[33 : 42] Amen.