

## I. Set Up

A. Welcome, Guests. Intro

B. Read Psalm 51:1-10.

## II. Introduction

A. Imagine the following scenario. The leader of the free world – a married man – has an affair.

B. As is always the case with something like this, there are implications, consequences and complications, and – not unexpectedly – a coverup unfolds. Lies are told. Friends are recruited to defend and strengthen the coverup. Their integrity is compromised, but they go along with the plan out of loyalty for the leader.

C. Eventually there is an independent effort to get to the truth – an agent of the courts, someone whose job allows him (or her) to get the facts – gets involved and confronts the leader. **Traps** him really. Through carefully questioning he chases after the truth.

D. And in the end, as the proverbial nose tightens, something surprising happens: The leader lies some more; Or, pays hush money; Or painfully parses the meaning of words like “is.” Or, says that this is a private matter that does not affect his ability to lead; Or, says that he will sleep with whoever he wants to sleep with, because that is his prerogative. No, actually, none of those things would be very surprising.

E. I am saying something surprising happens. He admits to the whole thing, falls on his face before God, begging for forgiveness and then publishes his prayer of confession for all to read.

F. Today we are looking at the last option. Both the history books and the headlines are full of the other scenarios. But what we find in the Bible – more to the point – what we find in Psalm 51 – is the unthinkable example of a leader (King David) who confessed.

III. If you are not familiar with the story you can read it in **2 Samuel 11 & 12**. But the bottom line is that King David slept with a woman who was not his wife.

A. One night while his men were at war - and he is not, though he probably should be - he walks out on his balcony, looks down and sees a woman, named Bathsheba, bathing.

B. Whether the first look was innocent or not, the second surely wasn't. Nor was having someone find out who she was and bring her to him.

- C. At which point things move from lust to adultery.
- D. And because she got pregnant and his initial attempts to cover-up their affair failed and he eventually orders the murder of her husband so that he would be free to marry her, he becomes guilty of murder as well.
- E. We do not have as many details as we might like, but it appears that he initially thought his secret was safe and he was moving on with his life when Nathan, a prophet, is sent by God and confronts him.
- F. And at this point, David wakes up to the reality of what he has done and he is broken.
- G. It is his prayerful confession and repentance that we find in Psalm 51.
  1. This is one of the better-known Psalms.
  2. In fact, the best known of the seven penitential Psalms - the kind that open with someone who is quite broken and who moves from despair and confusion to restoration and hope.

IV. There are a variety of things that might be noted as we jump in – such as the fact that:

- A. Most of the people who are highlighted in the Bible were scoundrels, King David being one. He possessed some noble qualities, but he was also a liar, adulterer, and murderer.<sup>1</sup> I was on vacation this week – had a chance to do a lot of reading. One book was talking about one of the purposes of a family is to expose us as fools – because you can't help it – but to show us that we are loved anyway.
- B. The prayers in the Book of Psalms are real. More real than the prayers many of us pray. More than a few people approach God in prayer the way we approach church on Sunday – that is, they make themselves presentable, clean up their children and language, and pretend to be someone they are not. Of course, it's silly to masquerade before an all-knowing, all-seeing God, so why do we?<sup>2</sup>
- C. Let's approach this Psalm line by line.

V. **Have mercy on me O God, according to your unfailing love.**

- A. This is a request from someone who has no right to make this request. The use of the words “unfailing” or “steadfast” love – **Have mercy on me O God according to your unfailing love** – are loaded terms. David is using covenant language here. This is not unlike like the prodigal son who, after acting in an extremely irresponsible way, goes back to his father and says, “Father, I have I sinned and should no longer be called your son.” He confesses that he has no rights and yet at the same time he appeals to the relationship. He doesn't say, Mr. Smith, I have no right to be your son. He says, “Father.”

B. David does the same thing. He pleads for mercy – confessing that he has no right to do so. But he frames it all using terms designed to remind God of the promises God has made about their relationship.

C. And in doing so he beautifully captures the tension that we live under. We do not have any grounds to ask for God’s favor and yet, He has made it clear that – in Christ - He will look with favor upon us.

**VI. 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.**

A. Let me start by hitting pause to note how bizarre this Psalm – and the events surrounding it – actually are. turn of events.<sup>3</sup> Not the adultery part. That is not surprising. We’ve seen too much of that to be surprised. What is surprising is that David comes clean. That he wrote—and then circulated—this very private confession. And on top of that, the Jews kept it in their book.

B. Think about it. Think is no reputation management going on here. Leaders hate to look weak – and yet he does.

C. Remember, David is the King. He’s not just prime minister or president. All three branches of the government report to him. Beyond that he’s a war hero. And beyond that Israel is a bit of a theocracy and he was taped by God’s prophet.

D. He not only has job security, David has power in ways we can hardly imagine. And so, at one level it shouldn’t surprise us that when he looks down from his balcony and sees Bathsheba and decides that he wants her. That he would send for her. That he would sleep with her. And that when her husband becomes a problem, he has him removed.

E. I’m not saying it’s right – I’m just saying, it’s not a surprise. Because this kind of stuff happens all the time. It’s relatively common place among people who have less power than David.

F. And it’s not just expected, it is accepted. It is understood that every effort will be made by party loyalists to keep these kinds of matters out of the press.

1. Now today this has taken a bit of a left turn as every house-keeper and chauffer is selling the rights to the stories about their boss. But that’s only happening in capitalistic democracies. I haven’t heard that Putin’s aids are selling the dirt on him.

G. David has lots and lots of power. And people with lots and lots of power do these kinds of things. So, what happened is not a surprise. What is amazing is that: Nathan walks in to challenge the king. Nathan, who has: No power, No army, No office. He could be crushed by David. But he walks into the room and calls David to account for his sin. And then, what is more amazing yet, is that

David breaks down. He doesn't have Nathan killed. He doesn't have him silenced. He doesn't laugh him off. He breaks down and repents.

H. Though David answered to no man on earth, he confesses that he has sinned against God. And if that isn't amazing enough, he then makes his humiliation public. His fall from grace – his sin, corruption and wickedness are not silenced. When people ask him about it, he doesn't say: This is a private matter that only concerns me and my family. It does not affect my ability to fulfill the obligations of my office. I am looking forward to getting back to serving the people of Israel. And we'd appreciate it if you would respect our privacy during this time. No, he writes out this heartfelt prayer and it gets added to the national hymnbook. The Book of Psalms. And once a year the people read about it in their public worship.

I. And then it gets bound together with the writings of many of the other leaders – God's anointed people – and it becomes something that is used to communicate God's message to all mankind.

J. Can you imagine something like this happening today?<sup>4</sup>

K. And by the way, this confession is not being squeezed out in congressional hearings or by hostile journalists.

1. This is not a story being published by muckraking journalists looking for the dirt in hopes of winning a Pulitzer for investigative reporting.
2. They are told by the Jews themselves. They are writing about their own country, their own leaders – their own selves.<sup>5</sup>
3. In most religions there is a need not only to deify the leader but also those around that person. In the New Testament we get none of that. The disciples are portrayed in ways that suggest they seldom understood what was going on, even when it was going on six inches in front of their face. Sometimes they lacked common sense. They certainly lacked greatness. And in some cases they failed miserably. Think of Peter. Not only does he deny Christ three times. But at one point Jesus rebukes him and says, "Get behind me Satan."

L. This is not the stuff that a press secretary would release if they were trying to control the story. But it is exactly for this reason that it rings true. One scholar noted:

1. If the Bible were like our Christian biographies – which describe a steady stream of pious, faithful, insightful leaders - Jesus would seem to be one more example of selective reporting. But since the Jews' tendency was definitely not toward exaggeration—since even their great founding King David was described seams and all—Jesus and his holiness shine out, unparalleled.

M. I think, in this odd, sort of backwards way, Psalm 51's surprising inclusion in the Book, argues very powerfully for the inspiration of the Bible and for the deity of Christ.

N. I want to make three points today:

VII. We need to call sin “sin.”

A. I know that sin is not anyone's favorite word. The term has an ugly reputation and a “slithery, reptilian sound to it.” But David uses it. He doesn't hide behind euphemisms. He doesn't suggest that his affair with Bathsheba was a private matter between consenting adults, a momentary lapse in judgement or the prerogatives of a king. He calls it sin.

B. In fact, he uses three different Hebrew terms for sin. One implies defaulting on an obligation to God; one is best translated as “wickedness” – it focuses on our rebellion. And the third shows up in our Bibles as “guilt.” Which is what set Sigmund Freud off. He advanced the view that our feelings of guilt are not caused by actually guilt, but because of the church.

1. He basically argued that ideas of right and wrong—good and evil—are man made constructs forced upon us. That morals in general are created by the church (or by our parents and by other institutions - but especially by the church) to keep our wild ids in line. And that once you accept the validity of these rules, you're in trouble. Either you fall in line – walk lock step behind the teachings of the church. You suppress your true nature, which leads to repression, lots of crazy dreams and Freudian slips and eventually, if we stay repressed, to neurosis. Or you follow your urges and violate the rules and live with the guilt. Which will also likely lead to some sort of neurosis.<sup>6</sup>

C. Guilt is tricky. It is possible to feel guilty when we shouldn't – or to not feel guilty when we should. But let's focus for a moment. The point is, David recognizes the reality of sin.

D. He advances the idea that the reason he feels guilty is because he is guilty. And this guilt stems both from his nature and also from his actions. It is critical that we call sin “sin,” and that we realize how deep it goes.

VIII. It is essential that we realize how deep sin goes – that it is a condition not just an action.

A. We see this implied in verse 5: **Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.**

B. This is not a suggestion that David’s mom conceived him in sin because sex in and of itself is sinful. It’s not. The Bible celebrates the idea of marital love. God is not embarrassed or surprised by erotic love. He created us. Wired us as He did.

1. The point David is making is that we are fallen. We are marred by original sin. Against the popular notion that we are currently more than we once were - the temporary pinnacle of the evolutionary process - the Bible suggests the opposite. It says that we are now less.

C. As anyone who is bothering to pay attention is aware, our culture is dividing. And one of the dividing lines breaks out over issue of objective moral standards.

1. I remember back when I was a college pastor. Four different campus ministries had been called into a meeting with an associate Dean – never a good sign.

D. The doctrine of Original Sin – the idea that we are broken and rebellious at the deepest level – is one many do not fully appreciate. The thought is that I am called a sinner because I sin, not that I sin because I am a sinner. Once you realize this is what is being said – by David and others – you start to see it everywhere.

E. In his classic tome *Confessions*, St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) writes about a childhood situation when several friends and he stole pears from a tree near his family's vineyard.

1. He wasn’t hungry. He did not think the fruit was attractive or appetizing. So, what prompted him to steal them?
2. Our real pleasure [in stealing the fruit] consisted in doing something that was forbidden . . . it was only my own love of mischief that made me do it.
3. He realized that this was his nature.

F. C.S. Lewis – who notes that when he actually got around to examining his heart “with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds.

My name was legion” – writes that we are not just imperfect creatures who need improvement, we are rebels “who must lay down our arms.”

G. He goes on to note that this process of surrender—this movement full speed astern—is what Christians call repentance.” He then adds: “This repentance, this willing submission to humiliation and a kind of death, is not something God demands of you before he will take you back and which he could let you off if he chose: it is simply a description of what going back to him is like. If you ask God to take you back without it, you are really asking him to let you go back without going back. It cannot happen.”

H. David acknowledges that his actions with Bathsheba were wrong – as were the subsequent lies and the murder of Uriah. And he notes how easily one led to the next – but what he is really acknowledging is how unaware of how dark his own heart is he was. And he begs God not to leave him.

I. Create in me a clean heart

J. Renew a steadfast spirit within me.

K. Cast me not from your presence

L. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me.

IX. That leads to point three: We must confess / repent.

A. The way forward starts with calling our sin, sin. (By the way, let’s worry a lot less about calling anyone else’s sin sin).

B. Point two: we need to see how much trouble we are in – it’s not just what we’ve done it’s who we are.

C. Point three: We need to confess our sin – to God and others. To be honest before God, yourself and a few others about what is going on. This is a step toward mental health – because it is just admitting what is real.

D. There are several reasons for this:

1. It’s the truth.

2. It’s attractive. Humility is.

a) Billy Graham at Harvard

3. It makes us bullet proof. When we have named the worst things about us, no one can blackmail us.

4. It’s a way forward.

a) We can't repent of confusion or psychological flaws inflicted by our parents—your stuck with them. But we can repent of sin and move on in freedom. We can go back to the Gospel and have that wave of freedom wash over us again. I have no secrets, the worst parts of me are known and I am loved all the same.

E. But repenting is hard. And the truth is, not everyone is brave enough to repent.

X. I love how C. S. Lewis develops the idea of repentance in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one of the books in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series.

A. We first meet the character who will illustrate repentance with the classic line: “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.” That is quite a line from someone named “Clive Staples Lewis.”

B. Eustace is a remarkably unlikeable boy. He is a self-centered, narrow-minded and unimaginative little jerk that no one can stand.

C. And in a brilliant literary move, Lewis has him turn into a dragon. Because, that is what he is like. And once he's a dragon he can see what he is like. And realize what a jerk he has been. He keeps trying to change back – to fix himself. But the changes never last. Three times he thinks he has taken the dragon skin off, but he hasn't really. He is never able to cut deep enough to cut down to his “boy skin.” And so he has to ask for Aslan – the lion who is also the Christ figure – he has to ask for Aslan's help. And asking – repenting – is hard and frightening.

D. Eustace narrates the “un-dragoning” scene – which is one of the rare first-person perspectives in the series. He is recounting what happened to him to Edmond – who had his own experience, and who notes:

1. You were only a jerk. I was a traitor.

E. Let me read it to you. “Then the lion said — but I don't know if it spoke — You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

F. “The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know — if you've ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away.”

G. “I know exactly what you mean,” said Edmund.

H. “Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt – and there it was lying on the grass, only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there was I smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller

than I had been. Then he caught hold of me – I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on — and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again. . . .”

XI. There is much more that needs to be said about repentance.

A. Such as the fact that there is a first time – when we come to faith. Lewis wrote: “Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. . . . this process of surrender—this movement full speed astern—is what Christians call repentance.” He then adds: “This repentance, this willing submission to humiliation and a kind of death, is not something God demands of you before he will take you back and which he could let you off if he chose: it is simply a description of what going back to him is like. If you ask God to take you back without it, you are really asking him to let you go back without going back. It cannot happen.”

1. There is a first time – that some of you have yet to do.

B. It's not a one and done event.

1. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis notes that our steps forward are faltering. “To be strictly accurate,” he writes, “Clarence began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun.”

2. Martin Luther wrote a piece called “All of Life is Repentance.”

C. Some of you have some serious unpacking to do – and you may need to talk with somebody. You are not going far until you do.

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<sup>1</sup> As an aside, this incident in the history of Israel is almost normal. If you read the Old Testament you find that it tells us a great deal more of Israel's failings than it does of Israel's greatness. Of the hundreds of characters described, nearly all of them have some startling flaw. Adam flunks right out of the gate. Abraham is willing to let his wife sleep with other men if it will keep him from harms way. Isaac does virtually nothing but fill space between Abraham and Jacob. The later is a chronic liar. Moses looses his cool on several occasions One results in murder the other keeps him from entering the Promised Land.

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis said, “We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.” This is what David modeled in his prayers. So, what is in you this morning?

<sup>3</sup> See, “Publish Bad Tidings,” by Tim Stafford, *Christianity Today*.

<sup>4</sup> And former President Clinton is not alone. As Stafford asked, “if George Washington had been caught in adultery would his mea culpa been set to music for the Fourth of July?”

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<sup>5</sup> As Stafford wrote: They laid themselves open to 2,000 years of Gentiles saying, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.”

<sup>6</sup> I could remind you that Freud developed his theories after spending his life talking to people who were neurotic. He didn't try to unpack the healthy psyche so his reference set was hopelessly skewed. But we won't go there. Sigmund isn't here to defend himself