

Isaiah 30:15 states, “*This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength...*” Have you noticed how scarce every one of these things is in our world today? Instead of *repentance* there is a stubborn refusal to admit that we may be wrong about something. Instead of *rest* there is a preference for a schedule that is so packed with activity there is no time for reflecting on anything meaningful. Instead of *quietness* there is clamor and noise that fills the air with shouts and sounds that produce even more anxiety in us. Instead of *trust* there is a cynical distrust of everything and everyone that has fallen over our world like a shadow. How are we to find the salvation and strength that we long for? In a word: Repentance.

The festive Christmas season has wound down, and we find ourselves 13 days into the new year: Back to work, back to the regular rhythms of our daily lives. One of those rhythms in this hour of worship is the act of REPENTANCE. The Scripture for today is one of the classic passages of the Bible that deals with repenting of our sin and shame. The superscription for Psalm 51 in our Bible says that it relates to a really terrible incident in David’s life, even though there’s no specific mention of it. But the 51st Psalm certainly fits the situation.

The story behind the Psalm is told in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. You may remember it from last summer’s sermon series—a sordid tale of adultery, intrigue, and murder. David deliberately takes another man’s wife—Bathsheba is her name—and commits adultery. To make matters worse, he sends her husband Uriah to the front line of battle where he is killed. Taking Bathsheba as his wife, they have a child, but the child dies shortly after he is born. David apparently thought nothing of his crime until the prophet Nathan confronts him to his face. Then in tears, David confesses his sin. David. The greatest king in Israel’s history, behaving like the worst king. This is the traditional setting for Psalm 51, yet the language is so universal that it speaks to all of us. This psalm is filled with the vocabulary of guilt.

Philip Yancey says, “All nations have heroes. But Israel may have been alone in making heroic literature about its heroes’ failings” (*The Student Bible*, p. 604). The fact that David confessed his failures openly made him unique in his day. He knew his place before God, and more than anything in life he wanted his relationship with God to be right.

The psalm opens with a plea for God to have mercy, to forgive, and to cleanse him. David does not claim any special status or any moral high ground but can only cast himself upon the love and mercy of God. *Repentance* is the door into the presence of God’s mercy and grace. To find forgiveness we begin with an acknowledgment that we have done something wrong. We know that we have missed the mark. We acknowledge that our load is too heavy and that we cannot bear it alone. The awareness of our sin opens the way, then, to God’s *forgiveness*. The best word to sum up David’s attitude is “contrition,” a word which means “a feeling of remorse for sins.”

David then uses three different terms for his wrongdoing. The first word is “transgression.” A transgression means to go beyond the boundary line; it is a rebellion against authority. The second word is “iniquity.” Iniquity is a wicked, unjust or unrighteous act. And finally he says, *My “sin” is always before*

me. I've always liked St. Augustine's thumbnail definition of sin: It is "a word, a deed, or a desire in opposition to the eternal law of God."

In this brief paragraph David also prays that God remove his sin in these four ways. He says, "*Have mercy on me.*" David knows he needs God's mercy; not God's justice. He then asks God to "*blot out*" his transgressions. This image suggests the idea of a book in which one's activities were recorded. Nehemiah spoke of such a book in which his good deeds were recorded.

David also asks that he be "*washed*" thoroughly from his iniquity. This image suggests a stain that has become set in. "*Cleanse me from my sin.*" Our sin can stain us so that we have difficulty feeling clean again. Shakespeare has Lady MacBeth say those words which are so well-remembered: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 5, Lines 34 – 39) We remember this line because it tells the truth about our sin. It causes a stain that is impossible to get out—even for Heloise! I don't know how many conversations I've had with people who have said they feel unworthy to serve as an Elder or Deacon in the church. That is often what the Nominating Committee hears when they call someone to invite them to serve. But, dear friends, you must see that if sin kept us from serving God through the church, then *none of us* would ever qualify to serve. We come to church *because* we are sinners and in need of God's grace, not because we are perfect people who have every sin under control.

In verses 4-5, David confesses his sin to God this way: "*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.*" He openly confesses his sin to God. He sees his sin as primarily a matter between him and God. When he says, "*you only,*" he is not trying to imply that humans do not sin against one another. But he is saying that *all sin* is basically an affront to God. Others have been hurt by David's sin, but at its core his sin is against God. He offers no excuses. He doesn't attempt to squirm out of the consequences of his sin. He says that God is justified in rendering a judgment against him. He ends by acknowledging that his very nature is sinful in its orientation. His line, "*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me,*" says that sin is a universal and deeply rooted part of our human nature. This comes as close to a doctrine of original sin as we can find in all the books of the Old Testament.

David then continues his plea before God, by saying, "*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.*" (51:6-9). And David ends with these words, "*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right 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*" (51:10-12). David's request is for renewal and re-creation. To be forgiven is not to return to some former status quo. Rather to be forgiven is to be changed.

It is to exchange a heart of despair for a heart of service to God. This only happens by the grace of God. One of the harshest words in the vocabulary of guilt is the word "disgraced." It's a word implying humiliation, loss of favor, loss of respect and public dishonor. But the very construction of the word points to the real problem with guilt. Dis-graced is to be without grace, and that is a very very sad state to

be in, because apart from the grace of God we are absolutely incapable of dealing with human sin and evil.

In the 1995 film “Casino” there’s a clip of Robert DeNiro saying “Las Vegas has a way of washing your sins away.” DeNiro’s character was saying that everyone in Las Vegas has a past they would just as soon leave behind. Nobody in Las Vegas is interested in a close moral scrutiny for others or for themselves. The implication is that amid all the glitz and glitter, along with the shows and gambling, people can easily hide their sins or hide from their sins. But it doesn’t really wash away anything, let alone your sins. Only Jesus Christ does that.

We Christians affirm that the cross of Jesus Christ provides us with God’s forgiveness and restoration in a way that we cannot find anywhere else. God has taken the initiative in bringing us forgiveness. What God has done for us in the cross of Jesus is to restore our broken relationship with him and bring us back into fellowship with him. Jesus came to bring us the grace of God. Grace is the antidote for dis-grace. And God’s grace is truly *amazing*.

In the final analysis, David was remembered fondly by all the people of Israel. They looked forward to a Messiah who would be “a son of David.” They admired him more for his humility before God than they did for all his military might. David shows us that it’s possible to move from dis-grace to grace with God’s help. Finally, David shows us the perfect model of grace in verse 17 when he says, “*My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*”

*Oscar Thomas Olson once told this story. As a boy he begged and pleaded for an air rifle, until his father finally bought one for him. One day he was up in the barn loft, shooting his new gun, when he heard the breaking of glass. He remembered that the old-fashioned storm windows from their house—the wooden-sash type that are removed in the spring and reinstalled in the fall—were stored in the loft. Sure enough, there they were, piled together in a vertical stack against the wall. The pellet from the air rifle had broken the panes in every window except the last one. Quickly young Oscar moved the unbroken window to the front of the stack, to hide the evidence.

His summer was ruined. His new air rifle gave him no joy. Every day brought him closer to autumn and the day the windows would be brought out to be re-installed on the house. To make matters worse, his father seemed to go out of his way to brag on him, to tell all their friends and neighbors and relatives what a good boy his son was and how proud he was of him.

Finally the boy could stand it no longer. He went to his father and told him how he had broken all the windows. “Oh, I knew that,” said his father. “I was just waiting for you to tell me.” “I never felt so close to my father in my whole life as I did right then,” Olson said. (John Robert McFarland, *Now That I Have Cancer I Am Whole*. Andrews and McMeel. Kansas City. Page 251-258).

God uses broken things to bring us back—broken relationships or broken bodies.” “*My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*”

Like David, every time we gather for worship, we need to say to God, "I'm sorry." Believe it when I say that God is always listening. Amen.

*From a sermon by Mickey Anders.