

A Sermon on Psalm 51  
Ash Wednesday  
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For David there may yet be a season to smile, but it certainly is not yet. For this is the season of remorse. This is the season of wishing you had it to do over again. This is the season of owning up to being a frail and fallible human being.

For all of Israel's brayed to God that they wanted a king so they could be important just like other peoples, Israel never really had many that lived up to the name. A lot of the lesser ones were like the local magistrate that had risen finally to his own particular level of incompetence. Then there was Solomon and David. They alone were something like kings. Solomon was known for his big plans and wisdom. David was known for his good looks.

Combine good looks with power and you can predict the scandal already. David spied her in her bath, pulled some administrative strings, and had her husband killed in the line of duty. This transgression might have stayed a state secret but for the prophet Nathan. He blew the whole thing into the headlines, "You are that man!" David's disgrace was equivalent to his grief.

There is much in the Psalms that is aware of our need to come clean before God. Psalm 32, for example, is a kind of exhortation to the benefits of confession.

*While I kept silence, my body was wasting away  
Through my groaning all day long. . .  
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
And did not hide my iniquity.  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"  
And you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

With Psalm 51, however, it gets personal. The language is first person. we are moved to participate in an actual confession, by tradition King David's.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
According to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
And cleanse me from my sin.*

This is a direct address to God asking for forgiveness. It is not an exhortation or recommendation. It is not even a stanza *about* confession. It is confession uttered in the first

person. “The remainder of the psalm may be taken as an exploration of the implications of this initial statement.”<sup>1</sup>

This psalm explores the vocabulary of sin with the words *iniquity* and *transgression*. In this particular psalm, what with the very public scandal in the background as its cause, it would be easy to resort to a kind of calculus of law. And in that calculus reduce sin to misbehavior or “mistake.” And that would be to make of sin something very manageable. But sin is much more dangerous, more serious than naughtiness or some momentary slip up in the committing of sins, a resistance to the rules of God. That would be to make of sin something out there, external to our relationship with God. That would be to render sin as, “the devil made me do it.” Luther hit this point hard in writing, “It is the nature of sin not to wish to be sin.”<sup>2</sup>

The psalmist knows better. He knows that sin is relational and social. Just as his sin against Bathsheba and her husband is social, so too his sin is about relationship with God. Somehow that sin is profoundly and deeply the delusional distortion of our relationship with God. It is not “breaking the rules.” Sin is only sin in relationship.

*Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.*

Sin at heart is the root human delusion you and would prefer to live independent of the grace and promise of God. Sin is the transgression self who would be sovereign, self-realizing, self-actualizing. “sin is the lack of fear of God, of trust in God and is desire ranged against God. Or, as Augustine put it: Sin is a turning away from God, a *motus aversionis a deo*.”<sup>3</sup> Sin is human.

*Indeed, I was born guilty,  
A sinner when my mother conceived me.*

This does not mean that sex is sinful, nor that this speaker himself has had a perverted beginning, or that his mother was morally compromised. Rather it means that the psalmist is sinful from the beginning, in principle, from the beginning.<sup>4</sup> You can’t lie to God.

Eventually, the psalmist turns to God and reminds God of what God does. He does so with a list of imperatives – orders, really -- directed at God: purge, wash, fill, hid, blot out, create, cast not, take not, restore, uphold, deliver. The speaker reviews “the full range of actions that God can take that will bring life.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally the confession turns on the hope of being restored. A “clean heart” means to have a new beginning, a capacity to live again. This is confession which ends in prayer for God’s fresh wind

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Bruggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), p. 98.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *Die Promotiondisputation von Theodor Fabricius und Stanislaus Rapagelanus* 1544 quoted in Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. By Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2001), p. 95.

<sup>3</sup>Jüngel, p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>Bruggemann, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup>Bruggemann, p. 100.

to blow into one's life as a gift. Here is David's prayer that he might come yet again to a season of the smile.

Ash Wednesday accuses that the season for our smile is not yet here either. We come not to exhort to confession, or to learn about confession or sin. We have come today as guilty as David. We have come, as this psalm has done, to confess ourselves. Today it gets personal. Our season to smile may yet come, but it is not yet.

Let us make confession to the Lord. Amen.