

## Psalm 51

The background to this Psalm, as indicated by the title is “when Nathan the prophet came unto him after he had gone in to Bath-sheba”. The details of this event are outlined for us in 2 Samuel 11&12, to which we will go in the search for exhortation for ourselves.

2 Samuel Chapter 11 details certain events which took place between king David (a Gentile member of the Israeli army), Uriah the Hittite and his wife, Bath-sheba. Whilst Uriah was out with Joab leading the warfare against the children of Ammon, David lay on his bed. Verse 2 describes how “it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king’s house: and from the roof, he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon” (2 Sam. 11:2). The woman, named as Bath-sheba, was said to be “... the wife of Uriah the Hittite”, but despite the fact that she was united in marriage to another man, David sent his messengers, took her, “and he lay with her”. Committing adultery, the product of this sinful union was that Bath-sheba became pregnant with David’s child. What was David to do? He called Uriah from the front line, and told him to go home to his wife – it would seem, in the hope that he would lie with her, and it would appear that that child was his.

However, the gentile Uriah was more faithful than David the Israelitish king. He refused to partake of the comforts of his home, saying:

“The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing” (2 Sam. 11:11).

Uriah, as a member of the Host, recognized that his proper place was contending against the enemy in battle. What a contrast we have with David, who was lying on his bed, enjoying the comforts of his home, and the safety of the city! Uriah refused to go home, and instead he slept at the door of the king’s house with all his servants.

The way in which David dealt with the situation, was to arrange for Uriah to be killed in battle. He wrote a letter, and sent Uriah back to the front line with it, a letter which contained the way in which Uriah was to die: “set ye Uriah in the foremost of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten and die” (2 Sam. 11:15). Joab acted accordingly, and so Uriah was killed at the hand of the Ammonites, fighting for Israel. In these events, we find king David to be guilty of both adultery, and murder – two sins which, under the Law, were worthy of death. There were no sacrifices under the Law which dealt with adultery or murder; the penalty was always death.

Psalm 51 was penned at the time when Nathan the prophet came to David. He described a scenario which mirrored the actions of David, albeit in a veiled way, and invited him to pass judgment upon a wronged party. David, in his response, goes beyond the requirements of the Law, and pronounced his verdict: “David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, as Yahweh liveth, the man

that hath done this thing shall surely die ...” Then Nathan revealed the real application of this scenario: **“Thou art the man ...”**. Whereupon David confessed his sin: “I have sinned against Yahweh”.

This is the background for a number of the Psalms, particularly Psalm 51, which we are to shortly consider. But it is significant to note that there are a number of allusions back to these events in the New Testament book of Romans, and chapter 2.

Romans chapter 2 reads: “thou art inexcusable O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another; for thou that judgest doest the same things” (verse 1). So, as we have seen in condemning “the man” of Nathan’s story, David was condemning himself. Verse 22 reads: “Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery” – which fits David’s example as an adulterer. Verse 16 speaks of “the day when God shall judge the secrets of men”, whereas 2 Sam. 12:12 records the words of Nathan: “thou didst it secretly”. Again, verse 24 speaks of how “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you ...” which echoes verse 14 of 2 Sam. 12: “Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of Yahweh to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die”.

But interestingly, as an allusion of how a Gentile – Uriah was an example to a Jew, we read in Romans 2: “... when the Gentiles which have not the law do by nature the things contained in the law, these having not the law are a law unto themselves: which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness” (Rom. 2:14-15). Uriah had the principles of the law written in his heart, and his conscience would not allow him to go home, when he should be contending on the battle front with his lord Joab.

However, whilst in Romans, we look to chapter 4, a few pages later, which alludes back to David’s repentance, and acceptance before his God:

“... to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin” (Rom. 4:5-8).

David then, is an example of the ungodly being justified by faith. It is interesting that the last two sentences from this quote come from Psalm 32; another Psalm to do with the repentance of David following his sin with Bath-sheba. This Psalm reveals that his sin played heavily upon his mind. Before he confessed it before the prophet, David speaks of how it troubled him greatly: “when I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my groaning all the day long” (Psa. 32:3). But having confessed it, he spoke of the blessedness of the man who is forgiven, as cited above.

It is against this background that we turn to Psalm 51, which again details David’s confession, and request for forgiveness:

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness: according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me” (Psa. 51:1-3).

Notice the washing here, the washing away of his sin. His sin came about as a direct result of seeing Bath-sheba washing herself upon the roof of her house. That was the beginning, when his lust drew him away, being enticed by that which he saw (Jas. 1:14). But now, the penitent David beseeches Yahweh to blot out his sin, and to wash him from it.

There does seem to be an allusion here, to the Trial of Jealousy as described in Numbers chapter 5. This chapter describes the procedure to be followed if a man suspected that his wife had committed adultery. As part of the process, the priest had to take some of the dust from the floor of the Tabernacle, mix it with water, and give it to the woman to drink. There were a number of curses that were written in a book, which the woman would experience, should she be found guilty. These curses were then blotted out of the book by the same water that the woman was to partake of: if found not guilty, she would not experience the curses described.

In the case of David, it was he who was guilty. Some speculate as to Bath-sheba’s own willingness to participate, but the record does not condemn her for what took place. In this procedure, if the woman was innocent, the curses were blotted out – but David in recognizing his own guilt, asked for his sins to be blotted out instead.

### ***A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE***

Psalm 51 continues to reflect David’s troubled conscience: “my sin is ever before me” (v. 3). Hebrews chapter 9 and verse 9, speaks of the limitations of the Law “that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience”. But then chapter 10, and verse 22 speaks of the cleansing of our conscience through forgiveness and faith in Messiah: “... having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water”.

Notice again, the language of washing: our sins are washed away, and will not be imputed to us any more. What a great feeling of relief the knowledge of this brings! There may be times that we, as with David, feel the weight of our own sins and helplessness. We may wonder how can it be that God can forgive us? But just as David had his sin blotted out, even so do we, so that we can forsake it, put it behind us, and continue to walk forward on our journey to the Kingdom. So we read: “beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God” (1 Jno. 3:21). We approach the throne of grace with confidence, knowing that even when we are in the depths of despair, that God is with us, and will never leave us.

In verse 6 of Psalm 51, David alludes back to his situation at the time of his being called and anointed by Samuel:

“Behold, thou desirest truth ***in the inward parts:*** and ***in the hidden part*** thou shalt make me to know wisdom”

At the time of his calling, David was not selected according to his appearance, but by what was in his heart:

“Yahweh said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but Yahweh looketh on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

Yahweh looketh on the heart, and saw in David “a man after his own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14). But in his sin with Bath-sheba, David had let God down: he allowed the lust of his heart to take over, leading to the tragic events that followed.

The Apostle Paul spoke of the inward parts, and the conflict that is continually at work between the flesh and the spirit:

“I delight in the law of God *after the inward man*: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” (Rom. 7:22-23).

His inward man delighted in the law of God, but the Apostle found a continual struggle within him: a struggle that he was losing against sin. But he looked to God in hope:

“O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:24-25).

Here was David’s position. God desires truth in the inward parts, and his inward parts “delighted in the Law of God”. Interestingly, this expression is a quotation from Psalm 1 and verse 2, expressive of David’s delight for the things of the Truth.

### ***HYSSOP***

In beseeching Yahweh to forgive him, David speaks of a cleansing being effected by hyssop: “Purge me with Hyssop, and I shall be clean” (Psa. 51:7). Hyssop was used as part of the required procedure for cleansing from death. Numbers chapter 19 speaks of how the ashes of an heifer was mixed with running water, and sprinkled over the unclean person and various items which were defiled by association with death. So we read: “a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon all the vessels, and upon the persons that were there, and upon him that touched a bone, or one slain, or one dead, or a grave ... and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, and wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and shall be clean at even” (Num. 19:18-19).

Hyssop then, was the means by which the water of separation was sprinkled upon those things that needed cleansing from death – rather like using a sponge, we might suppose. It is also associated with the death of the Lord Jesus Christ: “there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth” (Jno. 19:29). David was associated with death by arranging for a man to be killed, and so he besought Yahweh that he be forgiven, and cleansed

from his iniquity, like a man could be ceremonially cleansed through the use of hyssop.

### ***A NEW CREATION***

Recognizing his sin, David besought the Lord to start a new beginning in him:

“create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” (Psa. 51:10).

Here, the language is of a new creation: “create in me ...”. His desire is that his heart might be as when he was chosen at the first: clean and pure. And he recognized that he could not do this of his own strength: he needed God to perform the work. Similarly, Israel in the future will have a change of heart given to them:

“a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you ...”  
(Eze. 36:26)

The emphasis here, is of a “clean” heart, and a “right” spirit. This is something which should be developed in the life of the believer. Jesus taught: “blessed are ***the pure in heart***: for they shall see God” (Mat. 5:8). And again, the Apostle taught that believers ought to “see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently” (1 Pet. 1:22). The heart of the natural man is only evil continually, as Jeremiah testified: “***the heart is deceitful*** above all things, and desperately wicked ...” (Jer. 17:9). There is a need then, for the heart to be renewed, as part of a new creation being developed out of the old. The new “heart” is the “inward man,” which is “renewed in knowledge, after the image of him that created him.” It is “created” by God, as it is through the begetting of his Word that this new Creation is formed. Such is the disposition we must seek to develop through the continual attendance to the Word.

### ***CAST AWAY FROM THE PRESENCE OF GOD***

David had committed murder, albeit through the hand of the Ammonites, not directly his own. Cain was the first murderer in scripture: indeed the very first human death that took place was the slaying of Abel:

“And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, slew him”  
(Gen. 3:8).

“and wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous” (1 Jno. 3:12).

Here we have a similar situation to that of David and Uriah. Why did David slay Uriah? Because his own works were evil, and Uriah was righteous. But Cain was banished from the presence of God (Gen. 4:16). In his affliction, David besought Yahweh, that he be not cast away. Indeed one of the major themes of this Psalm is that of how David stood in relation to God. Though he had gone the way of Cain, his prayer was that he might not bear Cain’s reproach.

## ***THOU DESIREST NOT SACRIFICE***

In confessing his sin, David recognized that there was no sacrifice under the Law, that would cover adultery and murder:

“... for thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psa. 51:16-17).

Here is what Yahweh requires: not a ceremonial slaying of a beast, but the conviction of a repentant sinner. True repentance involves a contrite heart: a forsaking of the sin committed, and a resolve to do better. These are the true sacrifices that God requires. But compare this with the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican: The Pharisee proclaims his own self-perceived righteousness, whereas the publican “standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

The Lord came to save sinners, not those who are righteous in their own eyes. Those who draw near to the throne of Grace with a humble and contrite spirit, seeking mercy and Divine favour. In Psalm 51, we are privileged to be able to read of David’s own repentance and forgiveness before God, and it behoves us to likewise confess, forsake, and lay aside every sin that doth so easily beset us, that we might become the recipients of Divine Mercy, both now, and in the Age to Come.

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