

Introduction

I'd like to begin by asking those of you who follow Jesus three questions. First, when was the last time you committed a sin? Second, what was the sin you committed. And third, what did you do about it? The text we read, Psalm 51, is about that third question.

Notice the title of this psalm, which is part of the Hebrew text and thus, inspired, **"A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."** Most of you know the narrative. King David entered into an ongoing adulterous affair with a woman named Bathsheba. When Bathsheba became pregnant, he tried to cover it up by having her husband, Uriah, killed. God's prophet Nathan then confronted him and denounced him for the sins of adultery and murder. David repented when he did, after which he wrote Psalm 51 to express the whole gamut of that experience of his. He addresses four issues in that regard that teach us what to do when we sin.

Sin

The first issue is sin itself. David asserts in verse 5, **"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me."** This verse is one of the clearest expressions of what we call **"original sin"** in the Bible. It teaches that David and every other human being are born sinners. That means two things.

First, we were born deprived. Adam and Eve were created with a righteous nature. They had the power to be utterly good and to remain that way. But you and I were born without that power – without that original righteousness. Theologians call this deprivation.

Original sin means a second thing. We were born depraved. Each of us came into this world with what Oswald Chambers called **"the disposition to self-realization."** We have an inherently selfish nature in other words. Verses 1-3 reveal the result, which is **"transgressions," "iniquities,"** and **"sins."** We're poised to do evil when the conditions are right and do. We're quick to harm God, others, and the world in

order to achieve, promote, and protect our desires and needs.

Now let's put verse 5 and verses 1-3 together. We're born deprived and depraved. So, we routinely act according to our nature and will and contrary to God's. Simply put, because we're sinners, we sin.

That explains why professing Christians do the evil things they do. Consider one I knew who was banned from a department store for verbally abusing the assistant manager. Or consider what I did some years ago. My wife criticized me for something. I became defensive when she did and criticized her right back. Why do professing Christians do the evil things they do? It's because they were born deprived and depraved. They're sinners who sin.

Guilt

David addresses a second issue in Psalm 51 – guilt. Guilt is sin's constant traveling companion. Wherever there is sin, there is always guilt as well. That guilt is of two kinds.

The first is objective guilt.

Let me ask you. Against whom did David sin? Certainly, he sinned against Uriah. He took Uriah's wife and then his life. But notice the startling statement he makes in that regard, in verse 4, **"Against You (God), You only, I have sinned."** He isn't denying he sinned against Uriah. He's just making a point and it's a profound one. His sins and ours can be against others, but they are *always* and *first of all* against God. They always offend His holy nature and violate His moral law.

That in turn makes us objectively guilty. The second half of verse 4 teaches us that. David identifies what God does when we sin. He **"speaks against"** or **"judges,"** us.

When I was practicing law, a jury found a client of mine guilty of felonious assault and aggravated robbery. The judge then sentenced him, two to five years in prison. When we violate the laws of the State, it pronounces us guilty of crimes against it. It then punishes us for those crimes. It incarcerates us or fines us, or both.

In a similar way, when we violate the holy nature and moral law of God, He pronounces us guilty of sins against Him. He then punishes us for those sins. The punishment, according to verse 11, is being “**cast away**” from His presence. That means that our ability to act on Jesus and His kingdom at hand, and to be acted on by them, is diminished. If the sin is purposeful and routine, it may even be destroyed altogether.

Sin causes a second kind of guilt – subjective guilt. We see that in verse 3. David writes: “**I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.**” He reiterates that same point in Psalm 32:3, “**When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away, through my groaning all day long.**” Both verses speak to us because we’ve all experienced what they describe. We’ve all sinned and felt guilty because we did. And the guilt we felt poisoned our psychological lives. It dampened our spirits, deflated our self-concepts, and drained our vitality from us.

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote an acclaimed novel titled *The Scarlet Letter*. One of the characters is a young and enthusiastic Puritan minister who preaches brilliant fiery sermons and is beloved by his congregation. But then he gets sexually involved with a young woman in his congregation, who eventually becomes pregnant. As the story unfolds, the young woman and he are able to keep his involvement secret. He’s wracked with guilt though, which diminishes his ability to preach with passion. It makes him a captive to mediocrity, and the brilliance and fire that once marked his sermons all but disappear. He also loses his concentration and becomes listless from lack of sleep.

Does that sound familiar? It should because it’s precisely what David describes in Psalms 51:3 and 32:3 and what almost all of us have experienced. It’s subjective guilt

I’d sum it up this way. When we sin, we *are* guilty, objectively. And because we *are* guilty objectively, we *feel* guilty subjectively.

Contrition

None of us of course want to be and feel guilty and the good news is

that we don't have to. We can get rid of the guilt and verse 17 reveals how. It's by being "**contrite.**"

The word "**broken**" in conjunction with the words "**spirit**" and "**heart**" in verse 17 reveals one aspect of contrition. It's what the 16th century Council of Trent called "**a sorrow of soul.**" We're deeply pained or grieved that we committed the sin.

Soul sorrow is prompted supernaturally by God's grace. The Holy Spirit works to produce it in us. But there's a human factor as well. For non-Christians, soul sorrow is usually aroused by fear – of not going to heaven or of going to hell, which is a valid motive. Jesus Himself appealed to it. For Christians, it's also aroused by fear – of God's discipline. But it's aroused by love as well – for God Himself. We offended Him and loving Him makes us deeply sorry we did.

Verse 4 reveals a second aspect of contrition. David declares to God that he did evil and sinned against Him. This is what we call confession. Confession is coming to God and admitting our sin to Him. We admit it to Him with specificity, in detail. We state precisely not vaguely what we've done. We also admit it to Him without excuse. That means we take ownership of it. Notice the personal pronoun "**my**" that David uses five times in verses 1-3: *my* transgression (twice), *my* iniquity (once), and *my* sin (twice). He didn't put a positive spin on his sins or blame anyone or anything else for them. He blamed himself instead and so should we. We plead guilty to God with specificity and without excuse.

David's plea in verses 10-13 implies a third aspect of contrition. He requests that God give him a "**clean heart,**" "**steadfast spirit,**" and "**willing spirit.**" That request implies a firm intention. He intends never again to commit the sins, adultery and taking life, but always to do their opposing goods instead, sexually purity and giving life. That's what David had, firm intention, and so should we. We firmly make and devotedly carry out the decision *never again* to commit the sin before us, but *always* to do its opposing good instead.

Let's go back to my sin. I became defensive and criticized my wife

right back when she criticized me. But I immediately did the three things I just explained. First, I felt deeply sorry for what I did. I love God first of all and Jill second of all. So, it pained me that I offended Him and harmed her. Second, I confessed my sin to God with specificity and without excuse. I admitted I acted defensively, which was egocentric and unloving of me. I also admitted it was my fault not Jill's. Third, I intended never to do it again. I tried and trained my best to receive criticism with gratitude and joy, not with defensiveness and anger.

So, that's the third issue David addresses in Psalm 51, contrition. The Council of Trent states it well, I think. Contrition is **"a sorrow of soul and a hatred of sin committed, with a firm purpose of not sinning in the future."** May that be your posture and mine toward every sin we commit no matter how big or small it is.

Restoration

David addresses a fourth issue, in verse 12, which is a consequence of contrition. Notice what He asks God to do, **"restore"** him. The fourth issue is restoration. Restoration means two things.

One is forgiveness. David uses two metaphors in verse 7 that teach just that. The first is hyssop making someone ceremonially clean as in Leviticus 14:6-7 and Numbers 19:16-19. The second is something washed so that it's **"whiter than snow,"** a metaphor that's also used in Isaiah 1:18.

That second metaphor is a vivid one isn't it. The color white in the Bible represents righteousness and moral purity. The whitest thing David could think of was snow. But there is something whiter than that. The color white is created by something refracting most wavelengths of light. The more wavelengths of light something refracts, the whiter it is. Well, there's something that refracts more wavelengths of light than snow does. It's Titanium Dioxide, which is used in that white stuff lifeguards put on their noses. Titanium Dioxide is the whitest substance known to man. So, we would say, **"I shall be whiter than Titanium Dioxide."**

The message of the metaphor is clear. When God forgives our sin, we become white, utterly righteous and pure in His sight. It's to Him as if we had never even committed it. He perceives us as sinless, just as Jesus is. That's what happened to me after I was contrite about criticizing my wife right back. I became whiter than Titanium Dioxide. God forgave me and I was that night as righteous in His sight as Jesus is.

Restoration means a second thing. The first is forgiveness. The second is transformation. We see that in verses 10 and 12. Notice what David asks God to do because He knows He can: **"create a clean heart," "renew a steadfast spirit,"** and **"sustain me with a willing spirit."** Those clauses express God penetrating into the very core of his being and transforming it. Being contrite, he now intends not to do the evils he did but their opposing goods instead. And he relies on God to form and empower him so that he can do what he intends.

We can rely on that same thing. The main thrust of my ministry here at Bethel is discipleship to Jesus that becomes friendship with Jesus. We make and carry out the decision to be with Him in order to become like Him and to do all that He says. When we sin in that context, we will be contrite. We will intend not to commit that sin again but to do its opposing good instead. The power and graces of Jesus in us will then transform and empower us so that we can do what we intend. I speak from experience. 10 years ago, I became defensive when my wife or anyone else criticized me 9 times out of 10. Now, I rarely do. It's because I've been consistently contrite about that sin of mine in the context of my friendship with Jesus. That in turn enabled His power and graces to transform and empower me.

Conclusion

I opened with three questions. I close with one. When you sin, what should you do? You now know the answer to that. Be sorry for the sin, confess it to God, and intend not to do it again. God will restore you – make you white as Titanium Dioxide and transform you – if you do.