

Psalm 51 - Scandal Management

Friends there is no doubt that Psalm 51 was intended to be read and understood in a very specific context since it is prefaced with a statement that reads; *“For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”*

In fact it’s so important that the reader know about this context that this statement is marked as verses one and two in the original version of the Psalm.

So it’s very obvious that the author wants the reader to make the connection with the context – and that is surprising, since the author, King David, is the one guilty of adultery.

Because if history has taught us anything about human nature, and especially human nature in politics... It’s that when these types of situations occur, when a leader commits an *“indiscretion”* or has a momentary *“lapse of judgment”* or is involved in some sort of scandal, there is usually a considerable amount of effort spent on covering things up.

And if somehow the details get out - then the scandal management team kicks into overdrive.

And they work to spin the details and discredit the sources so things won’t appear to be as bad as they really are. They help the person involved *“get out of front of things”* and craft a public statement about what happened - using terms like *“indiscretion”* or *“momentary lapse of judgement”* - so that they can come through the scandal with minimal damage done to their position or reputation.

Just think about how we’ve seen these sorts of dynamics play out in the recent Jian Ghomeshi-CBC scandal, or in the Mike Duffy / Nigel Wright \$90, 000.00 Senate expense scandal, or in the life of the former Mayor of Toronto, Rob Ford – the King of personal scandals and outrageous behavior.

In the case of Rob Ford, after months of denial, when the indisputable evidence of his *“inappropriate behavior”* became public, he was forced to own up to the truth and admit that he

had lied about drug and alcohol usage and he offered up an apology for what he had done.

“I know what I did was wrong and admitting it was the most difficult and embarrassing thing I have ever had to do,” he said. “To the residents of Toronto, I know I have let you down. And I can’t do anything else but apologize, and apologize.”

And apologize he did – over and over again – for crude comments and unbecoming behavior in city council and as incriminating photos and video footage of him continued to surface.

“Obviously, I was extremely, extremely inebriated,” he said in response to footage of him spouting profanity, enraged and threatening to kill someone. “I’ve made mistakes. I don’t know what to say.”

And to be honest, by that point, it didn’t matter anymore what he said... because people had made up their minds about him and they either loved him or hated him.

Rob Ford could have delivered up the most eloquent and moving apology in the history of scandal management and it would have made no difference to those who despised him...

And for those who loved Ford, his “indiscretions” and erratic behavior only served to illustrate that he was just an ordinary person, like them, with faults and flaws and imperfections.

And friends, knowing the context and the story behind Psalm 51, it can be easy to judge King David in the same way.

Much has been made recently about the fact that Scripture doesn’t hide the faults and flaws of the major players in God covenant redemption plan. And we appreciate this open and honest treatment of David’s affair with Bathsheba – because it shows that our biblical heroes are ordinary people, just like us, with faults and flaws and imperfections.

But it’s also possible to read Psalm 51 from a more cynical perspective which realizes that David is very good, extremely good with crafting words and saying just the right thing... and

perhaps this could be yet another example of a leader getting out in front of a scandal trying to salvage his reputation – apologizing only because he got caught.

If you're not familiar with the back story I'll fill you in.

King David was in the later years of his life – he no longer lead the army out to war as he used to, but stayed home at the palace. One evening he was enjoying the view from the top of his palace, and from this vantage point he noticed a woman bathing in the city down below.

She was very attractive and David decided to have her brought to him and one does not say no to the King's attentions and desires.

Not too long after this encounter, Bathsheba sent King David a message that she was pregnant.

David figures the best way to fix this is to bring her husband home from the battlefield and have him spend a romantic

evening with her, and if her husband isn't too observant about the math – it should look like the child is his.

But her husband Uriah will not indulge in such pleasantries while his fellow soldiers are in the midst of the campaign – so David sends him back to the front, along with instructions to place him where the fighting is fiercest, so that he might be killed in action.

All goes according to plan, Bathsheba mourns for her husband, and after the grieving period is over David graciously takes her in as his wife - and no one is the wiser as to what has happened, except 2 Samuel 11:27 says “But the thing David had done displeased Yahweh.”

So friends, while there is some comfort we can take in this scandal that biblical heroes have faults and flaws just like us, and while it is true that David wasn't initially convicted about what he had done and only wrote this confession after God confronted him about his actions...

Psalm 51 wasn't written out of regret for getting caught and it certainly isn't meant for us to take comfort in our own failings by comparison.

David's purpose in writing Psalm 51 and making it public – specifically addressing it to the director of music so that would be used in worship – is described in vs. 13 *“Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.”*

Out of his own experience of being confronted and convicted of his transgression by Yahweh, David found a renewed sense of his Covenant calling as the King of Israel, not only to lead the people to be faithful covenant partners expressing their faithfulness through obedience to the Law, but to help them understand what to do when they had been unfaithful and broken the Covenant of Law – as He had just broken the Covenant of Kingship.

So he wrote Psalm 51 and shared it with the nation to help them identify and confess when they had been unfaithful – both individually and corporately – so that they may also

experience restoration in their relationship with Yahweh, and a renewed sense of their covenant calling to be *“a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”* (Ex 19:6)

Thus when David speaks about offering sacrifices in vs. 16-19 saying *“You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.”* He wants Israel to understand that they can't just pay off their transgressions with animal sacrifices, the way we pay off a speeding ticket and are willing to absorb that as the cost of driving however fast we want. That sort of attitude is not the spirit of their Covenant relationship with God.

Animal sacrifice must be done in the spirit of true repentance and sorrow for the transgression – that shows you grasp the nature of the offence as you seek restoration from it. That's why David says *“My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”* (vs. 17)

But what is it that leads them to that place of a broken spirit and a contrite heart friends? Well this comes from what David

confesses about himself in vs. 1-6 – the goal is that all who read Psalm 51 will realize that what David is admitting about himself is true for the rest of us as well.

But before we take a closer look at what we would confess about ourselves, we first need to discover how this Psalm leads us to Jesus Christ? Otherwise we might develop thoughts and notions about confessing our sin outside of Christ - and we're not even going to go there!

So as I mentioned earlier – with his specific and deliberate transgressions of adultery and murder, not only had David broken the Law of Moses, but he also failed in his own Covenant responsibility as King to lead the people in obedience to the Law.

So this whole Psalm is set with-in the context of Covenant failure – and that point is revealed right at the beginning when David asks for mercy and he does not call God by His covenant name... Instead David uses “Elohim” the generic term for God as the supreme most powerful being – but not Yahweh, the

intimate name of the covenant that he so often uses in his other Psalms.

In fact the covenant name of Yahweh is completely absent from this Psalm – indicating that David knew his disobedience was more than just an “indiscretion” and a “temporary lapse of judgement” it was covenant failure – so he does not presume to call God by a name he has no right to use anymore.

Instead he appeals for mercy on the basis of God's “hesed” which we translate as unending love, but really would be better understood as “covenant loving-kindness” - I'll say more about that in a minute.

The point is that David's covenant failure as the King of God's people, and the consequences God enacted on David's house and his reign, foreshadows the future failure of his descendants.

And remember that what's hanging in the balance of each Covenant Administration is God's initial plan to redeem the Covenant of Creation – and His Covenant of Kingship with David is the latest initiative to pull through all the promises and hopes and dreams of what He originally intended for this world to be in relationship with Himself...

If the King can lead the people to overcome their unfaithfulness and stay faithful there would be a chance that through Israel the rest of the nations would come to know Yahweh and learn to become faithful covenant partners as well – and the Kingdom of Heaven would be established on earth.

All that is tied up in what it means to be the King of Israel... (And we think being the President of the United States carries a lot of pressure with that position.)

And I want you to understand this friends – just in case you decide to go and read more of the back story behind this Psalm in 2 Samuel 11-12 – because that will help you

understand God's word to David regarding the consequences for this covenant failure; and why David can confess in Ps 51:4 *"you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge."*

And without know this, it would be easy to think the consequences are harsh and that God is severe, but in understanding what David has just failed to fulfill – it becomes easier to see the grace that God will still continue to honor his covenant with the House of David – even though David and his future heirs are incapable of fulfilling it perfectly.

But David's failure is what leads us to Jesus Christ.

David's failure demonstrates the need for God's people to have a King that will not fail them in helping them be obedient covenant partners...

Not just for the sake of God's people – but for the sake of God's plan to bless all nations of the earth and restore the Covenant of Creation!

David's failure is why the gospels go to such lengths to show that Jesus was born from the house and line of David... and also why it was important that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born to the virgin Mary, while she was still pledged to be married to Joseph.

David confesses that his failure as King is rooted in the fact that he was *"sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."* (vs. 5)

So if God's plan and promise to restore the covenant of creation, through all the successive covenant administrations which had culminated thus far in David, was going to be fulfilled, it would need someone from David's line who was not conceived or born in sin.

Thus the Holy Spirit caused Mary to conceive our Lord Jesus, while engaged to Joseph – a descendent of David – and the Messiah Jesus Christ was born... and in thus God fully answered David's prayer in vs. 10 for a clean heart and a steadfast spirit within him and also provided someone who

could be that faithful Covenant King to fulfill the all the prior covenant plans for restoration of the creation.

This is how Psalm 51 leads us to Jesus - Amen!

So, now that we have come to Christ through this scripture – what does it have to teach us about confession?

First we since it leads us to Jesus Christ, our prayer of confession is to be addressed to Jesus Christ, since in the person of Jesus God has revealed the perfect covenant partner through whom anyone may enter into a new and unbreakable covenant relationship with Yahweh!

So while David refrained from using God's covenant name in his confession so as not to appear presumptuous - we follow the advice of Hebrews 4:16 *"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need!"*

You see friends in our confession to Christ, we also confess Christ as the Messiah.

So we confidently come to Jesus to confess but our attitude is still one of humility because we are asking for mercy, which is something that is undeserved, based on God's "*hesed*" – his covenant loving kindness, which acknowledges that we understand God's covenants, and means by which He invites us into them are undeserved relationships of mercy and grace and love.

And when we confess we need to be specific.

David's confession seems to be somewhat general, and that is because his purpose in writing Psalm 51 is to provide us with aid to confession.

So he makes a general request that God blot out his transgressions, wash away the iniquity and cleanse him from his sin - without specifically mentioning the lust, adultery and murder that he had committed.

But we know he is specifically referring to these sins here because of the introductory statement at the beginning of the psalm – and so we must also specifically mention and articulate what it is that we are confessing and asking to be forgiven of.

So we need to describe specific instances of our disobedience, we must articulate how we've twisted what God meant for good, and give examples of how we've personally turned away from covenant faithfulness...

And as we do this, we will come to realize that all our offenses, even the ones against our fellow human beings, are ultimately all part of our sin against God which has broken our relationship with Him.

So we will echo David in saying "*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.*"

And at this point friends, we also realize there is no place for excuses in our confession either.

There's no place in confession for saying things like "*I only did it once*" or "*I didn't mean to do it*" or "*I know it was wrong but...*"

And there's no place for comparison in confession either – this is between you and God.

It's not about whether you are better or worse than someone else, or if you think your offense wasn't really all that bad, or trying to put your iniquity in a more flattering light.

Friends there is no place in biblical confession for spin doctoring or softening our transgressions by calling them "*indiscretions*" or "*temporary lapses of judgment.*"

Who are we trying to fool here?!! The Almighty, all-knowing God already knows the raw and uncensored truth about each of us, about our human nature...

When we confess we have the chance for us to show that we know at least some of the depth to which Sin has affected every aspect of who we are.

And so there is also no place for qualifying what we've done by saying "*this isn't really who I am*" because in fact - it is...

You see by specifically confessing our transgressions we will realize these are not just one-off offences, rather they flow out of how we are "*sinful at birth, sinful from the time we were conceived...*" (vs 5.)

So Psalm 51 teaches us that our confession must also include an admission of our sinful nature, along with our how it has manifested itself in our particular transgressions.

And friends this is why we did not start to look at what's all involved in confession until we could see how this Psalm leads us to Christ – and his sacrifice for us.

Because without knowing that Christ has been provided as the answer to David's prayer...

Without knowing that in Jesus Christ there is THE clean heart and THE renewed spirit, THE steadfast spirit that we so desperately need – we would despair in having to face this harsh truth about our sins and sinful nature.

But friends – we are confessing to Christ, and as I said in doing so we are confessing Christ.

We are claiming that He is the one who has truly and sincerely and honestly with a full and contrite heart repented on our behalf when He was baptized in the Jordan river.

And so in confessing our sin and sinful nature to Jesus we are saying that we need him.

We need his covenant sacrifice to cover our unfaithfulness and we need his blood to cleanse us and make us whiter than snow.

We are professing that the only way we can have a covenant relationship with Yahweh is for Christ to have that relationship for us, so that we live through Him and He lives in us!

Because he alone is the King who can help us live faithfully in obedience to God – and He has poured out His Holy Spirit upon us so that our hearts might be clean, and renewed.

And so we to, like David, have to say *“Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.”*

We confess to Christ, we confess Christ – friends do you have the joy of salvation?!

Then lets sing his praise again - Amen.