

Psalm 51 “Confession Plus” by Shawn Honey

The need for confession

“Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of what is left unsaid sin poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and closed isolation of the heart. Sin must be brought into the light. What is unspoken is said openly and confessed. All that is secret and hidden comes to light. It is a hard struggle until the sin crosses one’s lips in confession. But God breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron...”¹

These words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer are full of insight into ourselves. Sin leads to shame, shame leads to hiding. And which one of us hasn’t known the instinct to shove all the gross and humiliating things about us as deep into the darkness as we possibly can? But what we don’t realize is that in trying to hide our sins, we end up hiding ourselves. And that darkness becomes a prison.

But the key to our escape is actually on our own lips—the key of confession.

David walked this very road from commission, to cover-up, to confession. He slept with Bathsheba, the wife of one his soldiers, Uriah, and got her pregnant. And when David failed to pass off Uriah as the father of the child, David had Uriah killed. And David hid this scheme from the light for a little over 9 months—coveting, adultery, lying, murder, theft, despising the LORD. There was hardly a commandment David hadn’t transgressed.

And there he sat in this darkness until finally his sin crossed his lips in confession. And his confession crossed his pen here in Psalm 51.

And this confession has served throughout generations to assure us that “Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid”² invites us to, “with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”³

Confession, as we’ll see, is a beautiful grace, and it is that first key to cleansing. But is confession the end? Is confession all we’re invited to, or is there something more? Let’s explore that question together.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 110.

² From the “Prayer for Purity in Worship” in the Eucharistic liturgy

³ From the “Law of God” in the Eucharistic liturgy

The heart of confession

David begins in verse 1: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy."

It's crushing that a parent might withhold affection until a child has been made to feel more acutely the full weight of wrongdoing and then, and only then, begin to show a glimmer of warmth.

But God isn't like that. From the start, he meets us with his grace. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love." This is God's sworn love for his people, sealed by an oath. David isn't striving to earn his way back into God's affection; he knows he can only move toward God because God's affection is already moving toward him. The steadfast love of God.

And along with this grace, God also meets us with compassion. "According to your abundant mercy," it says. This is an emotionally charged word. God's tenderness doesn't take time to warm up like a parent's scowl turning slowly into a half-hearted smile. No, on our way to meet God, it's God who was already running to meet us, according to his abundant mercy.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy" because there's an ugliness I'm bringing to you. David elicits three images of this ugliness: The pages of my story are inked with shame. "Blot out [erase] my transgressions." I'm stained, so "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity." I'm defiled, so "cleanse me [purify me] from my sin."

"For I know my transgression," verse 3, "and my sin is ever before me." And here we get into the confession proper, the full acknowledgment of what sin is, and it goes like this: Here is the boundary you have set for my love for you, God, and for my neighbor, and here is how I have crossed it. "I know my transgression, and my sin is ever before me." I had hoped to hide it, but it "looms up as an accusing presence," as one writer said,⁴ to confront me.

Verse 4 continues beyond the acknowledgment of sin as transgression to the one that sin is a transgression against, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." And here we pause. Was David's sin only against God? What about Bathsheba, what about Uriah? But we have to understand. David is simply tracing his sin, all sin, to its ultimate object. It's like Jesus' words to the Pharisees about oaths. The Pharisees thought they were more loosely bound to oaths sworn by heaven, by earth, or by Jerusalem; after all, they weren't swearing by *the Lord*. But Jesus said all oaths sworn by creation are ultimately oaths sworn by God because all of creation finds its source in God.⁵ In the same way, a sin against the image of God (whether that's Bathsheba or Uriah) is ultimately a sin against God, "who is justified in his

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 190.

⁵ See Matthew 5:33-37.

words and blameless in his judgment." That is, God is righteous and has the right to hold us to account.

To acknowledge our sin as transgression, a transgression against God. This is the heart of confession. But is this the end? Is this all we see in this Psalm? Yes, confession is the key out of the prison, but when we turn the key, what does God meet us with?

Beyond confession: more sin?

This is an important question because we all find ourselves sinners in a world of sinners who sin. Verse 5: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." This isn't saying that sex is somehow inherently sinful. That idea is foreign to Scripture. No, what this verse is talking about is the "*yetzer hara*" as the rabbis called it, the "evil inclination"—or "original sin" as Christian theology calls it.

Now, there are many ways of parsing "original sin," and we don't have time to go into them. But at heart, what the rabbinic "evil inclination" and the Christian "original sin" are getting at is that the propensity to sin is with us from birth. Even so, God, makes a claim on us: He "delight[s] in [and desires and calls us to] truth in the inward being," verse 6.

Now, you may think this sounds hopeless. I've just confessed, but I'm only back to a place where sin seems inevitable. And yes, you will sin again, and you will need to confess again. But on the other side of confession God doesn't want to meet us simply with a vision of our sinfulness but with the confidence of our renewal. The confidence of our renewal.

Beyond confession: renewal

Look at the end of verse 6. The ESV says "Teach" as though it's imperative. But it doesn't say "teach" in the Hebrew; it says "you will teach." You will teach me wisdom in the secret heart. God, the impurities I closed up inside, you will teach me to close up wisdom there instead.

And verse 7, not "Purge" and "wash" but "you will purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. You will wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." God, I know that you will "de-sin" me (that's the idea behind purge, and I know I won't be half-washed in confession. I will be fully purified.

And that suspicion that we should remain crushed and sorrowful after confession, at least for a season, God dispels that. Verse 8, Not "Let me hear," as a plea, but "You will cause me to hear," a confident assertion, "joy and gladness; you will cause the bones you have broken to rejoice."

This is the confidence of renewal after confession: that we are poised to learn wisdom, that we are clean again, that we are invited into joy.

And in verse 9, the scope of the renewal begins to go deeper. "Hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquities." This isn't the sin he just confessed; this is all David's sins. Verse 10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from

your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

With these words David goes to the root of his being—heart and spirit—with the plea for re-creation and renewal. “Create in me a clean heart,” verse 10 again, from which no impurities will pour forth. “Renew a *right* spirit within me,” a firm spirit, an established spirit—not one that is weak and tossed around by all my passions.

Verse 9 again, “Hide your face from my sins,” but don’t, verse 11, “Cast me...away from your face.” Face, not presence, in the Hebrew. And “take not your Holy Spirit from me.” What hope for renewal of our root do we have if God removes from us his Spirit, because it’s the Spirit who renews our spirit?

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” May the joy of your gracious renewal be mine, and may I be inclined in my desires not toward sin but toward you and your ways.

On the other side of confession, God isn’t there to rub our faces in our sinfulness but to meet us with the promise of renewal—that by his Spirit he will re-create us from within.

Confession leads to renewal. But is that the end? What does the Psalm say?

Beyond confession: worship

Verse 14: “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.”

From confession, to renewal, to worship. Now, worship is a strange thing—a strange and scandalous thing for some. Now how, you might ask, is worship scandalous?

CS Lewis described how worship was such a stumbling block—especially God’s demands that he be worshiped. It sounded like God was saying, “What I most want is to be told that I am good and great.”⁶ Lewis went on: “We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people round every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand.”⁷ So how is the worship of God different from this?

Just think of the new author you’ve recently discovered. She’s better than the last author you discovered and so your *enjoyment* of her is greater. And imagine you discover an author even better still, what happens to your joy then?

⁶ CS Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 91.

⁷ *Ibid*, 80.

Joy is found in what is greatest. Now, go back to the author. What do you want to do when you've discovered that new author. You want to tell someone about it. Even more, you want to meet the author and share your praise. Why?

Lewis wrote, "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with. . . The Scotch catechism says that man's chief end is 'to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him."⁸

God made us for joy. Joy is found in what is greatest. Joy must be expressed if it is to be complete. Joy is found ultimately in God, who is greatest. Joy in God must be expressed if it is to be complete.

So for God, the great God, who receives us in confession, who renews us in our being, our worship is the natural outcome.

And our worship is deep union with God and whole devotion to him. Deep union with God is behind the word "sacrifice" in verse 16. This word designates a particular type of sacrifice in the old covenant—the peace offerings—the sacrifice that the worshipers themselves would get to eat to strengthen their union with God. And we, too, have a peace offering—the communion meal, the Eucharist—where we feed on the once for all sacrifice of Christ to strengthen our union with God.

And the "burnt offering" of verse 16, this is where the whole animal would be consumed in flame. This is what designates our whole devotion to God. "[P]resent your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God," Paul writes in Romans 12. So, imagine yourselves coming to communion later, consumed by flames on your way up, wholly devoting yourselves to God, and feeding on his sacrifice, in confession and renewal, so that he may dwell in you and you in him. Union and devotion. Worship.

But it seems that David is disparaging sacrifice in verse 16: "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering." But here we see the Hebrew way of saying, as one writer puts it, "Don't do this without also doing this."⁹ Don't do sacrifice

⁸ Ibid, 93-97.

⁹ Kidner, 193.

without also doing what? Verse 17: “the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Don’t go through the outward motions unless you also want the spirit and heart that are embodied in the motions. But what is a broken spirit and a contrite heart?

You remember, I said earlier that God doesn’t invite us to remain sorrowful and downcast after confession, and that’s true. But that’s different from the call to remain soberly mindful of who we are. We are at core broken people, crushed (that’s the sense behind “contrite”) by the reality of sin in our hearts. We know we don’t function right; we know what gross things we’re capable of. It’s not that we’re consumed by that fact in perpetual despair; it’s just a sober, humble acknowledgment of the reality of our core. But it’s God who will not despise us, but who welcomes us in the grace of confession, with the promise of renewal so that we would know the joy of worshiping him.

The Psalm closes with these words: “Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.” My suspicion, and I’m not alone in this,¹⁰ is that these words were not penned by David but added later by the people who were returning from exile to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. These were people, who like us, took David’s prayer of confession for themselves—confessing the idolatries that had sent them into exile to Babylon in the early 6th century B.C.—but hopeful in the promise that God would renew them and welcome their worship as they returned to their land some 70 years later.

Regardless, we could stop here and have a complete message. God invites us to confess our sins, promises to renew us from within, to turn us into joyful worshipers. And if this word meets you as something new, I would never want to take that from you. But I think it’s a message that probably most of us know already: Confession, to renewal, to worship.

So what piece do we perhaps not know so well from this Psalm? Confrontation. Confrontation.

The missing piece

Go back to the beginning of the Psalm, and then go further still. Go to verse 0, the introduction: To the choirmaster. A psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

We started with David’s sin. We moved then to David’s confession. But what led to David’s confession? A confrontation. A courageous confrontation from Nathan the prophet. David had done something reprehensible, but it was a confrontation, by Nathan—by a friend—“David, you have sinned,” that brought him to confession.

¹⁰ Cf. Kidner, 194.

And David implicitly remembers this. After his own confession and plea for renewal he says this, the verse we skipped, verse 13: "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you." Because of me, David said, others too will know the grace of confession, renewal, and restored worship. I, too, will be a confronter.

So what does this look like for us? Be open to confrontation. Now, I thought about using a different word—maybe something a little softer, like community care. But I'm going to stick with confrontation because it captures an urgency and an import that makes us just the right kind of uncomfortable.

Be open to being confronted. When hearing your sins on the lips of another, would you be open to owning those sins on your own lips? It doesn't mean that everything you hear is automatically right. But would you be honestly and humbly open, before you would automatically pivot into self-defense, would you be open to the hard words, maybe hard truths, you hear?

And be open to confronting. "I will teach transgressors your ways." And David wasn't talking about evangelizing the non-Jews here; he was talking about those like himself—God's people who knew the bounds but had crossed them. Now, this confronting doesn't look like incessant fault-finding. It doesn't mean that you need to confront any and all things. But if your brother or sister is in a place like David was, hiding... Perhaps a place to start is with how our reading from Galatians instructs us: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."¹¹ However, you might confront, do it with gentleness and humility.

I know this is all frightening. And it takes wisdom and care to do well. But we need this as the body of Christ: To love one another enough to be confronted and to confront, and to trust God that out of confrontation he delights to bring redemption. Out of this confrontation here in Psalm 51 came a wonderful redemption. From our Gospel reading: "Jesse [was] the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,"¹² This is the genealogy of Jesus—the one who makes our confession, our renewal, and our worship possible. And what does this show us if not that God is eager to bring redemption from even the greatest failure.

So let us in humility be confronted and confront so that confession can restore us all to the worship of the God who redeems.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹¹ Galatians 6:1

¹² Matthew 1:6