Psalm 51 – Repentance and Restoration

[Intro]

So, this is the last in our summer series in the book of Psalms. And today we are going to look at one of the best known of David's psalms. It's a psalm in which David talks with real, gut-wrenching honesty about his feelings and emotions and desires and when you know what's going on in his life, and then reflect on your own, you may know just what he is talking about.

But before we look at the psalm, let me ask you a question. Have you ever got together with a good friend, or your spouse, and started reminiscing about the first time you met? And you can remember your first impressions of the other, and maybe even the first words your friend spoke to you.

Well, I want to remind you of the first words that the Lord Jesus spoke when he began his public ministry. We find this in Matthew 4:17, where it reads: From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

So the first public words of Jesus were 'repent!' You wouldn't get many public figures using that as their first words today, would you! Certainly this won't be the core message in leadership courses or in any form of advice on how to become a better version of yourself. And if you want a definition of repentance you could say that *repentance is a profound change of mind that results in an equally profound change in the way we live, in the way we perceive things, and evaluate things, and decide things and act on things*.

And this morning we're going to see in Psalm 51 how David goes through a deep, heart-changing, life-changing process of repentance, and as we dig deeper, maybe we'll understand a bit more as to why Jesus might choose 'repent' as his first public words.

So as we look at this Psalm, we're going to consider three simple questions:

- What is it that we need to repent of? Point 1: The significance of Sin
- How does repentance work? Point 2: A blueprint for true repentance
- What are the consequences of repentance? Final point 3: Restoration and fruits

[read psalm 51: 1-17]

Before we try to understand repentance I would like to unpack what it is that we need to repent of. This leads me to my first point today:

1. **The significance of Sin**

Let me tell you a story:
Once upon a time there were two men in the same city – one rich, the other poor. The rich man had huge flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. The poor man had nothing but one little female lamb, which he had bought and raised. It grew up with him and his children as a member of the family. It ate off his plate and drank from his cup and slept on his bed. It was like a daughter to him. One day a traveler dropped in on the rich man. He was too stingy to take an animal from his own herds or flocks to make a meal for his visitor, so he took the poor man's lamb, slaughtered it, and prepared a meal to set before his guest.

So far the story goes… Now, imagine you were a member of a jury and you had to decide which of the two men was right and which one was wrong. How would you decide? Or imagine you're the king, and it's your responsibility to see that justice is done in the land, and you were asked to give your thumbs up or down for either man.

We actually find this story in the Bible, in 2 Samuel 12, and it's the background of Psalm 51, when the prophet Nathan came to king David to tell this story. David's reaction was a clear thumbs down against the rich man; he goes "**As surely as God lives the man who did this ought to be lynched! He must repay for the lamb four times over for his crime and his stinginess**!" …finally justice(?!?!?!)… But Nathan said: "You are the man". You are like this rich man.

So, what had David done that led Nathan to compare him to this man? We find a very crisp and straightforward account in 2 Samuel 11: 2-5:

It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. [3] And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, “Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” [4] So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. Then she returned to her house. [5] And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, “I am pregnant.”

What did David do? He tried to cover his deeds. As a king it was easy for him to have Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, brought home from the battlefield. His idea was that after weeks or months away from home Uriah’s first way would lead him to his wife; to do what? …to sleep with her! ‘Perfect’, David might have thought, this way he will think the baby is his. Now Uriah didn’t join the game – he was too noble – he couldn’t stand the thought of his comrades dying in the field while he’s having some moments of pleasure. So David’s plan didn’t work out and he had to come up with a plan B. He arranged to have Uriah killed in the war so that he could marry Bathsheba and his sin was covered this way.

But of course, God saw it all and saw through all David’s attempts to cover his sin. And He sends Nathan to confront David.

Now, how would you expect David to respond to that confrontation? Will he try and preserve his public image, as a man after God’s own heart, and try and avoid any public fallout, try and limit who finds out about him being found out? Will he try and continue covering up as he’s done so far? Would he sit there and think, “I can live this down, I can control this, time heals all wounds and in the end everything will turn out ok”.

Now, just be honest with yourself for a moment, have you ever thought like that when you've done something wrong, and you know it's wrong? Have you ever tried to control and limit the consequences of your wrongdoing? Or cover up?

But the real question is not: can I get away without this spreading, can I limit the fallout, can I keep control? The real question is, what does God think of this? How does he view me trying to get away with it? How does he view my sin?

Turning back to the story of David: There is this man, a man after God's own heart the Bible tells us, who has committed adultery, ordered murder and has lied a few times on the way there and tries to cover up his sin. What does God say? Here's the bottom-line of the story: The thing that David had done displeased the Lord (2 Samuel 11: 27). And that's the fundamental problem with our sin – it displeases God.
In fact, you could define sin as 'deliberately veering off the road that God wants us to travel'. And it doesn't matter whether our motives are straightforward rebellion and disobedience against God or just a slight bending and twisting of what we know to be right. The bottom-line is God is displeased and what the Bible tells us is that as a result we reap his anger and his just wrath, and ultimately, death.

Now, you might hear that and think, 'yes but why should he respond like that? Why anger and wrath?' Because God is just! Think back to your and David's reaction to the story of the rich and poor man. If we as human beings –created in the image of God- react to injustice with anger, how much more must a God who is justice in perfection react this way?

But the good news is that God does not stop there, as you and I might.

In 1 Samuel 12: 13 we read: "David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die".

Just like that? Put away sin? A fresh start? A second chance? "Wait a minute" you might think – the man has caused serious havoc – he is an adulterer, murderer, liar… Where's the justice in that?

Yes, and the bible is clear in stating that all mankind, not just David, but all of us, are sinful, and that we are all in the same boat: For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3: 23).
But if that's the bad news, the good news is this 'one size fits all' principle applies to forgiveness and mercy just as much as to justice.

You see, God is just **and** merciful at the same time. He himself says: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, [7] maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" Exodus 34: 6-7.

So, here are some questions to ponder: how ***could*** David find forgiveness just like that? And once he's been forgiven, how could David get out of the downward spiral of sin? And in dealing with the consequences of his sin, how could blessing spring from the marriage between David and Bathsheba as it did in her giving birth to King Solomon later?
Well, the answer to these questions, and similar questions we could ask of ourselves when we have veered off the road that God wants us to travel, is found in Psalm 51, and it's repentance.

This leads me to my second point this morning

2. <u>A blueprint for true repentance</u>
    a. Viewing reality from God's perspective

When David comes to realize what he has done, he is aware of the significance of his sin. He knows that first and foremost he has displeased God and he knows who God is. When he turns to God he is aware that God hates sin and won't leave any of it unpunished. He also knows that God is a merciful, gracious and forgiving God. And this is exactly the God he turns to in verse 1 of Psalm 51:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions." And how does God respond? He says what he says to everyone who will repent of their sins: "I have mercy on you, oh repenting sinner, according to my steadfast love; according to my abundant mercy I blot out your transgressions"

So, true repentance, and the way back to God, begins with knowing and acknowledging who God is, and who you are in his sight and what the significance of sin is. I would understand if David had focused on the harm and the pain he has caused for Bathsheba, for Uriah and his family and for the sheer unending circle of people who had to accompany him on his downward spiral of sin. But, they don't get a mention in Psalm 51. 'Are they not important?' you might ask. The answer is yes they are, but sin is primarily an offense to God and all the other people who get hurt as a result of our sin suffer, sadly, as a terrible byproduct of us offending God.

While asking for cleansing and forgiveness David comes back to this point in verse 4: "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". David's aim of repentance is not to feel better after having talked to someone, but to get his relationship and his position right with God. Again it is about knowing who God is and to acknowledge who is setting and judging the standards. When we understand this we can find relief from having to set our own standards and adjusting them constantly depending on whether it's us or other people who fail to live up to them. God's divine standard is much more solid and he raises the bar to a level that we typically wouldn't think of. While we often look at the outcome of sin and set our standards accordingly, God is approaching the problem right at the source and set his standards accordingly. Think of Jesus's teaching in Matthew 5, verse 27 & 28: [27] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit

adultery.’ [28] But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” It becomes very clear: you don’t need to commit adultery with your body or kill somebody to miss the mark here.

And when we are trapped in sin, this change of mind of viewing reality from God’s perspective and seeking to get God’s order right, as opposed to my order, leads to light at the end of the tunnel. When David says in verse 6 “Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart” he knows that he has turned back on the path that he had deliberately left before.
And that leads me to my next characteristic of true repentance: which is truth itself:

b. Being true to God and bringing truth to bear on yourself.

You see, when you are stuck in some sin, and become aware of it, it can feel as if the last place you want to be is in God’s presence. You withdraw and it feels like there is this vast distance between yourself and God. But that distance disappears as you humble yourself under God’s truth, that what he says about himself and about you is true and you let that truth shine into your heart. It’s as you become vulnerable before him, and acknowledge that what he says about the situation is true that that truth will begin to guide you back. And David can see that as consequence of him yielding to truth, God is teaching him wisdom.

David’s confession of sin and his plea for forgiveness and cleansing is very bold, clear and true. Knowing who God is, against whom he has sinned, he doesn’t even attempt to make his sin presentable. There are no excuses. There is no spin. In verse 3 he says: “For I know my transgressions […].” Note, he doesn’t say things like ‘I guess that wasn’t my best day’ or ‘I acknowledge I could have done better’ or ‘I confess my sins (…because I have to)’, no…, true repentance is characterized by personal knowledge and bold confession of this knowledge. But this is not a one-off:

He goes further by saying "[…] and my sin is ever before me". That's interesting, isn't it? David doesn't wish to forget about his sin asap in order to carry on with life. Instead he displays here that true repentance has a sense of continual awareness and tension: that we never lose sight of what we are really like, or capable of, but neither do we lose sight of just how gracious God is.

The next truth that David reveals about himself is as simple as 'I am **not** better than this, I **am** inherently bad'. In verse 5 we read: Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Now how different is that from how people view themselves today! A few years back a sporting superstar had to publically admit that he had cheated on his marriage multiple times. In his public confession he effectively apologized for not having been true to himself. He reckoned that he was a good person on the inside and these actions were an aberration: they weren't the real him. But David knows much better. He knows that it's what he's really like on the inside that's the problem. He knows that his sin ***was*** him being true to what he's really like. And David is not finger pointing at his mother, he is simply acknowledging his sinfulness as a state of mankind that we all share, and it's in stark contrast to God's righteousness.

And he realizes that the condition of his heart, of all our hearts, of who we are and what we are capable of, is so bad, that after pleading for cleansing multiple times in this psalm he ultimately calls upon the creator God in verse 10 "Create in me a clean heart, O God". **'I need a new heart, God!'** It needs that kind of a radical solution.

You know what the good news is? This is exactly what happened about 1000 years after David asked for it. Jesus Christ, the son of God, came to live a life without sin and died the death that mankind should have died. Everyone who repents and put his faith in the cleansing and re-creative power of Jesus's blood as a sacrifice for your sin and sinfulness has a new position

before God. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 the Apostle Paul says: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Becoming true to God and allowing His truth to do its work in your heart, means to call sin what it is and to acknowledge that you were born in sinfulness and that only God's creative power can save you from yourself and all sorts of downward spirals.

If you watch children being caught after breaking rules, or you think back to how you behaved in these situations, you will easily find them hiding, only admitting what is known anyway, blaming their friends or circumstances, etc. Maybe you will even recognize elements of this within adults you know or even yourself. This shows that being real and true is not our natural composition. Even if you are a Christian it can be possible that you find yourself behaving according to patterns of the 'old self'.

The answer against these patterns is a willing spirit.

c. A willing spirit

After praising God for who he is, after confessing his sin and pleading for cleansing the psalm could end, couldn't it? Sin confessed, relationship with God restored for the time being, what else does one need to find fulfillment and happiness? When David confronts himself with his sin and his sinfulness he comes to realize just how far he has been off track and how much distance from God his own sin has created. Falling into the merciful hands of God and finding compassion, forgiveness and true meaning, he wants to stay there. He doesn't want this sort of thing to happen again. But he knows he can't sustain this by himself. That's why he is asking God for help: In verse 10 he asks:"[…] renew a right spirit within me"; further in verse 11: "[…] take not your Holy spirit from me" and finally in verse 12: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit". He realizes that he has this ongoing need for God's Spirit to be working on his spirit. He needs a humble and teachable spirit that can pray to God 'your will be done.' And he knows that the only way that can happen is if God's Spirit is at

work in his life: the same Spirit that Jesus later refers to as the helper; the same powerful Spirit that raised Jesus from the grave. And the work of the Holy Spirit is to transform us to be more like Jesus, and there is no hope of us doing that in our own strength, and David knew that, everyone of us needs the Spirit to be doing it for us. And so if we are serious about repentance, and stopping the downward spiral of sin, then asking for a willing spirit that submits itself to God and his Spirit is crucial. As Paul says, "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is…be filled with the spirit (Eph. 5:17-18).

May this be real for you and for me.

My final point:

3. Restoration and fruits

After receiving forgiveness and a willing spirit David turns towards the content of his new life. Instead of displeasing God, he wants to please him. And how is God pleased? When people turn to him and begin to seek his glory. And in his restored life David wants to be part of that movement: "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you" (Psalm 51: 13). He wants to help others avoid his same errors. He wants to encourage others in repentance. He wants to "sing aloud of God's righteousness and declare his praise" (verses 14 & 15). Part of his new mindset is "a broken and contrite heart" (verse 17), which is a sacrifice that God will not despise. This brokenness is the continual awareness of God's righteousness and goodness, and my repeated attempts to displease him. It is the awareness that I am dependent on his grace and his continual help to live up to his will and produce fruits that please God.

To sum up: Repentance is a change of mind that results in a profound change of life. And it's necessary because we repeatedly displease God through sin. And God's reaction to sin is anger and wrath because he is just. But when we repent, then we discover that God is merciful and forgives.

True repentance is characterized by people getting real about who God is and who they are. Sin needs to be called sin and any attempt to cover or justify sinful behavior or any other form of managing sin is simply wrong, as well as a waste of energy. But God is gracious and cleanses from sin through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, he promises to sustain this new, repentant mindset by giving his spirit to work in and through us for his glory. We can ask for a willing spirit to allow him to do the work. The same power that was at work at Jesus's resurrection will restore us and use us for good, if we let it happen.
Amen.