

Week Four- Psalm 51: Praying our Sin

1: CONTEXT

A quick look back: Spend a few minutes reviewing the big picture of Psalms from Week One. What kind of literature is the book of Psalms? Who is one of the primary authors? What is the book's main purpose? Where are we in the large story of Scripture? Share some of the main themes or learnings from the past weeks (lament, trust).

Today's Passage: This psalm is one of the few that we can directly connect to a specific time in David's life. Here's the context (2 Sam 11-12): David is king, he has power, life is good. He sees Bathsheba while he's on the roof of his palace. She is bathing (most likely taking a ritual bath) and David can't get her out of his head. He has her brought to him, has sex with her, and sends her back home. She lets him know that she is now pregnant. So he summons her husband, Uriah, from the front lines of battle (which is where a good king should be, by the way), sends him home, and hopes that if they have sex, everyone will assume the baby is Uriah's. But Uriah is a good soldier and refuses to be with his wife while his comrades are still in the field. So David sends a message to his commander to create a scenario in which Uriah will be killed. When this happens, David takes Bathsheba into his house to be his wife.

God is not happy. The prophet Nathan is sent to inform David that his sins are known by God, and that the baby to be born to Bathsheba will not live. David is distraught. He fasts and prays for the child to live. The child dies. Psalm 51 comes out of this time in his life.

2: CONTENT

Read Psalm 51 out loud and then pick ONE of the following ways (Option A, B, C, or D) to help your group engage with this passage.

Option A. Notice/Wonder: Ask everyone to read the passage again quietly on their own. As they read, ask them to make a list like the one below. Remember that what people notice or wonder can just be small, simple things.

What do I NOTICE about this text?

What do I WONDER about?

Once everyone has had the chance to make their list, come together as a group and share your observations, writing them on a board or a place where everyone can see the list as it develops.

Option B. Creative Engagement: Give everyone paper and drawing supplies. Have everyone read the passage again on their own, then invite them to spend some time illustrating the passage (or a part of the passage) in whatever way they want- concrete, abstract, colors, images, words. When everyone has completed their art, come together and spend time sharing with each other what you drew and why.

Option C. Lectio Divina: Scripture is read four times, pausing after each reading:

1: HEAR the passage.

2: MEDITATE on the passage in the silence that follows.

3: IDENTIFY a word or phrase that stands out to you from the reading (leader may ask group to speak this out loud after the 3rd reading, or to share it as a group after the 4th reading)

4: REST in the presence of God.

Take time to share your reflections with each other as a group.

Option D. Guided Bible Study Questions:

1. David uses a variety of words/images to describe what He wants God to do with his sin (vs 1, 2, 7, 9).
 - o Which of these words/images strikes you most? How do they help you understand David's heart as he prays? Understand the effects of sin?

- *Side note: hyssop was one of the most potent cleansers of the time, used to tan and soften the hides of goats. So when David asks to be cleaned with hyssop, it is like asking for acid to wash your face.*
2. In verse 4 David writes, “Against you, and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” In what ways do you think this is accurate? In what ways might it not be true based on the context of this Psalm?
 3. David doesn’t just ask God to deal with his sin. He also asks God to restore him in a variety of ways (vs 8, 10-12, 15).
 - What are things David asks of God? Which of these images/words strikes you most?
 - Talk about this idea of being emptied and filled. Is one more important than another? How are they related? Why might the “filling” matter?
 4. What do you think David means when he writes that God wants a “broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart?”
 5. What does the act of confession do for David?

3: APPLICATION

No matter what method you used for content, spend some time talking about what this passage might mean to us now. Here are some questions to help guide this discussion. Feel free to use several or to just focus on one or two.

- This week is called “praying our sin.” In what ways does your prayer life involve or not involve confession? What does this look like, feel like for you?
- Many worship services have time for confession. What do those look like in your church or small group or chapel experiences? How are they the same or different from the prayer we read here?
- We asked in the content section what this act of confession does for David. What does confession do for us (or does it do anything?)- practically, in our spirits, in our lives with others? Is confession required/related to forgiveness?
- David doesn’t only pray this prayer quietly to himself- he chooses to write it down, which means his sin gets “published” for all the world to see, for every generation after him. Why do you think he chose to expose himself this way? Do you have any experiences related to sharing/hearing/publicly confessing sin? Are there benefits? Are there pitfalls?
- Talk about the idea of sin affecting the individual and community. Do our “independent” sins matter in the big picture? Do you have examples from your own life or from things you see around you?
- David asks for joy and gladness, a pure heart, a steadfast spirit, a restored joy, a willing spirit. Are there specific places in your life- hurting places, lonely places, complicated places, sinful places- where you need the same? What would it look like to open those places to a God of “unfailing love” and “great compassion?” (vs 1).

4: PRAYER

Close your time together in prayer using one of the ideas below

- Use words/images/themes from the passage to guide your prayer.
- Raise up your “wonderings” from the notice/wonder section to God in prayer
- Take prayer requests and pray over each other as a group or in small groups
- Use this written prayer:

Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy. When we read David’s story it is easy to think that we are not that bad. But any sin, every sin, separates us from you. Forgive us for being content with being good enough and blind to where we are deeply evil. Open our eyes to see our sin, open our hearts to be broken by it, and open our whole selves to the cleansing and renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Forgive us, and for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ have mercy on us, for it is in his name that we pray. Amen.