



Prayer as Confession

Psalm 51

TRINITY PULPIT

Michael Wear recently commented in an interview that we have lost the capacity to change our minds. As adults we have become emboldened in our opinions and views and leave very little room to change our minds and gain a new perspective. Bill Wilson, commenting on this interview, wrote that in over forty years of his pastoral ministry he noticed that the only time he had truly seen a change in mind was after a crisis. Sometimes it takes a loss of a loved one, a layoff, or a health diagnosis to get us to wake up and change. If we truly have trouble changing our minds and hearts, then we have a significant problem, because becoming a follower of Jesus and being a follower of Jesus requires the ability to have a changed mind.

As a young man David had never been at a loss for words when speaking to and of his God. His job tending sheep left him alone for hours and sometimes nights and days, and he found solace talking to God as he tended the sheep of his father. He not only spent time in conversation with God, but he also found it easy to write songs of praise to God. His conversation with God was ever present and a natural part of his life. Whether singing or praying, conversation with God was something that was part of his life.

It was not only conversation that came easy to David. David seemed to have no question at all in believing in the power of God. Whenever he was faced with danger — like a bear or lion that might threaten his sheep — he knew he would be victorious. As a young boy he had defeated the great Philistine giant, Goliath. Goliath had taunted the army of God and God's king, Saul, but no one would go and fight him. Yet David, just a young boy unable to even wear the armor of a soldier, stood on that field that day and with a weapon of his own — a slingshot and a smooth pebble — brought down the great Goliath. It was one of the great moments in Israelite history to see how the boy, David, could defeat the great champion, Goliath. David never seemed to doubt the power of God in his life.

David also trusted God's protection. Whether it was when jealous King Saul was chasing him and trying to kill him, or in the various battles when his enemies were out to get him and encamped around him, David was sure that in the end God would not forsake him but would deliver him, so he could sing praises to God. David never doubted God's ultimate protection.

David also never doubted God's plan for his life. David had been anointed as a young boy to be the king of Israel, but years passed without him coming to the throne. A lesser man would have given up on such a dream and decided that Samuel had been forsaken — but not David. David seemed to know, in the depths of his heart, that no matter how long it might take, and no matter how hard the road might be, God's plan for his life would be fulfilled. David never doubted his call and his anointing as king.

No wonder David is called a man after God's own heart. Here was a man who, since he was a child, had found conversation with God to be something that came with ease. He was a man who believed in God's power in his life. David was a man who trusted God's protection in his life. David was a man who believed God's plan for his life.

That is why, when we find the words of Psalm 51, we are surprised. This cannot be a prayer of a man who trusted God, spoke to God, believed in God and was sure of God's promise. What has happened to David that he would need to utter such a prayer?

It is simple. His problem is the problem we all struggle with and that is the problem of sin. David had sinned and his sin had created a chasm between him and God. Where there was once conversation there was now silence. Where there had been trust there was now fear. Where there had been certainty of God's blessing there was now the certainty of God's judgment. Everything had changed and everything needed to be restored, and so we have David's soul confession in Psalm 51.

We all remember David's great sin. According to 2 Samuel 11 it happened "In the spring,

at the time when kings go off to war.” At a time when kings go off to war David sent his general in his stead. He sent his army and he sent his officers but he did not go himself. He stayed in Jerusalem. When David should have been off fighting his own war, because that is what warrior kings did, David stayed behind. David had changed. I am sure he used to look forward to leading his army, but David stayed this time. One evening while David was walking around on the roof of his palace he noticed a woman bathing. Instead of turning and looking away, David kept looking. He looked so long that his look became lust. David was so overcome by lust that he sent for her and slept with her. There are many things wrong with this story but one of the most grievous is that Bathsheba was the wife of one of his soldiers, Uriah. That one night of lust turned into a lifetime of trouble. Bathsheba became pregnant and now everyone would know that the king had committed adultery. So David hatched a scheme to cover his sin.

David sent for his servant soldier, Uriah, and had him come home from the war so that he might sleep with his wife, then everyone would think the child belonged to Uriah. The only problem with David’s scheme was Uriah was a man of great character and loyalty. He came home; but instead of going to Bathsheba, he was so committed to his king that he stayed at the palace gate instead of going to Bathsheba. David asked, “Why have you not gone home after coming from such a distance?” Uriah said, “The army of God and the ark of God are dwelling in a tent. How can I come home and eat and drink and be with my wife?” So, David went to plan B. Plan B, according to the scripture, was to invite Uriah to stay and dine in the palace. That next day David invited Uriah to eat and drink with him and he got Uriah drunk and thought, for sure, that a drunken Uriah would go to his wife, Bathsheba, but he did not. Instead, he remained on a mat at the palace.

David, frustrated with Uriah, came to Plan C. This time he thought he would take care of Uriah once and for all. So he sent Uriah back to the war and gave Joab orders to put Uriah at the fiercest part of the battle so that when they fought, he would die. That is what happened. Uriah was put at the very worst part of the battle and was killed. Joab was upset that Uriah had died and sent the word to David. David responds, “The sword devours one as well as another.” In other words, “*Que, sera, sera*, someone had to die, don’t worry about it Joab.” When Bathsheba hears of Uriah’s death she mourns. When the proper time of mourning is complete, David sends for her and she becomes his wife and bears him a son.

David — the one who had once conversed and trusted in God — had fallen prey to sin, and now his sin was growing and taking root in his soul. He had not only committed adultery but also, essentially, murder, and

he had covered it up and done so without any compassion for Uriah or guilt for what he had done. 2 Samuel 11 ends with these words, “But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.”

David thought he had gotten away with his sin and no one would ever know what he had done. But Nathan the prophet knew. Nathan was called by God to come into the very presence of the king and accuse him of adultery and murder. That is what he did. He began with a story about a man who had many sheep and cattle but still had to have one poor man’s only little lamb. When a traveler was in need of some food, instead of taking one of the many cattle or sheep of the rich man, the rich man took the one little lamb from the poor man. When David heard this he was angry. In his own self-righteousness he said, “The one who did such a thing deserves to die and pay four lambs for what he has done.” Then Nathan looked at David and said, “You are that man.”

In that moment David’s sin became public. In that moment, David knew that his sin was not only before him but before others as well. In that moment, David’s sin came full circle to the consequences sin brings. David is left broken and mourning the death of the child that Bathsheba would bear.

That is the picture of David in Psalm 51. Gone is the man of confidence. Gone is the man of conversation and trust in God. David has been reduced to a man who is paying the consequences personally and in his family for his sin. What is he to do? What can ever restore that which he once possessed with God? The answer is confession. It is David’s soul confession in Psalm 51 that becomes his hope again. It would be his confession that restored joy and the certainty of God’s goodness in his life.

David had arrived at a place in his life where we all arrive. After we have rationalized our sin, after we have denied our sin, after we have covered up our sin, finally we come to a place where we can stand to look at it no longer, and the only thing that gives us hope is confession.

In David’s confession I think we find four things that confession can bring to our lives. Let me briefly share with you four things confession does for us.

First, confession creates conversation. As I mentioned before, David had been a man who enjoyed and loved conversation with his God. However, in the process of his sin and trying to cover his sin, we do not find one time David is mentioned praying to God. Instead, we find David scheming and planning from his own ability. David’s next time of prayer is mentioned only after Nathan has confronted him. Then he is found praying and fasting for the life of his son.

Confession creates our lost conversation with God. The first thing we note is that the whole prayer is an at-

tempt to create conversation with God. David is not satisfied with simply speaking his prayer; he longs for God to speak to him. In verse 8 he cries, "Let me hear joy and gladness." In verse 15 he cries, "Open my lips and my mouth and I will declare your praise."

There is a story about a woman who sits down in a confessional booth, but says nothing. After a long silence, the priest says, "What can I do for you, my daughter?"

She doesn't say a word.

The priest prompts her, "You may begin by saying, 'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.'"

Still nothing. After a few more moments, the priest says, "I'm sorry, but I can't hear your confession if you're not going to say anything."

She replies, "Whatever happened to the right to remain silent?"

In Psalm 32, David offers another prayer about conversation. He reminds us that silence is not the answer. He writes:

*When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD"—
and you forgave
the guilt of my sin. Selah.*

When we live with unconfessed sin, the direct result is our conversation with God comes to a halt. We tend to find less time for prayer. We tend to want to spend less time thinking about God and going to God. We simply do not want to be aware of the presence of God, because that presence reminds us of our sin. David discovered that when he confessed his sin, it created the lost conversation of prayer.

The second thing confession can do in our lives is restore our relationship. There is really only one thing that separates us from God and that is our unconfessed sin. Over and over again, the Bible teaches us that it is our sin, and our sin alone, that separates us from God. Our sinful nature, before we come to salvation, is what separates us from God, and without Christ, it can separate us now and for eternity. Yet, after we become Christians, we discover that our sin separates us in the sense of our fellowship with God. When we come to Christ, we always will have a relationship with God and nothing will separate us from God; however, our choice to sin can separate us in fellowship. Simply meaning, when we are living lives filled with unconfessed sin, our relationship

with God suffers.

David realized this. So his prayer was that his sin no longer rob him of the fellowship of his relationship with God. What did David pray for? He prayed he would once again enjoy the feeling of knowing forgiveness. Cleanse me and I will be clean, wash me and I will be whiter than snow. He longed for the experience of joy and gladness. He longed to have the weight of guilt that crushed his bones be lifted. He prayed for a renewed spirit and the joy of the salvation of God.

Many of us live with the knowledge of our salvation through Jesus Christ but we have lost its joy. The guilt we carry from unconfessed sin weighs us down and robs us of the fellowship that we need and that God longs for. Confession restores the fellowship of our relationship with God. Confession releases forgiveness, joy and gladness.

The third truth that David's soul confession reminds us of is that confession opens opportunities. Notice what David writes, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will turn back to you."

David understood that before he could share with others the salvation of the Lord, he had to experience it for himself. David understood that as long as his unconfessed sin remained in his life, God could not use him for his glory. Confession opens opportunities for us to be used by God.

God just cannot use a person that is unwilling to confess his or her own sin. Now that does not mean that God does not use sinners; in fact, that is all God uses. What it means is that as long as we rationalize our sin, try to cover our sin, or deny our sin, we are handicapping what God can do with our lives. David tells us that what God desires is not our offerings and our sacrifices but a contrite and broken spirit and heart.

David is reminding us that we can spend our time in devotion through worship, deeds and good intentions. David could have brought sacrifice after sacrifice and gone to worship over and over again, but what released God's opportunities again in David's life was a broken and contrite heart. It was a change of heart that comes through confession that opened the opportunities of God in David's life.

Do you ever wonder what God has in store for you? Do you ever wonder what God could do with your life if you were giving yourself totally to him? Do you ever wonder what opportunities God has for you in the days ahead? Please understand that without confession, some of those opportunities might never come. This is simply because God needs servants whose hearts desire God most of all. Confession opens opportunities in our lives.

Finally, and I think most importantly, confession re-

leases us from self-righteousness. Let me tell you what I mean. David came to the conclusion that what he needed was not to do better but to be forgiven. What he needed was God's kindness and love to restore him. He came to the conclusion that there was nothing he could do to make this situation better. That is why he concludes, "Against you and you only have I sinned." David knew that what would restore his life was not doing better — it was confession that freed him from himself.

Most of us here today want to live lives that open up God's possibilities. We want to know the fellowship of our relationship with God. We desire to be in conversation with God, yet we struggle with the guilt of not being able to do what we believe God requires. We have determined that the only way to finally be pleasing to God is to find some way to do right. Most of us choose self-discipline or self-righteousness as our way to please God. We decide we are going to do what is right. We are going to obey God and so we decide we are not going to do this anymore and we are going to do this. Then we set about our day trying to do what is right and not do what is wrong, and at the end of the day, we calculate the choices we made and we try to figure out if we have had a successful day being a Christian. We keep score, and when we are on the losing end, we become discouraged and frustrated. Some of us are so frustrated with our inability not to sin that we are ready to just give up. Some of us may have already given up. We decide this is the way we are and we will never change.

In the book, *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller tells the story of his own struggle with self-discipline instead of grace. His faith began with warm feelings like that of a romance between lovers, but it soon became stale and cold — like taking a test and always failing. Miller shares in his book:

I found myself trying to love the right things without God's help and it was impossible. I tried to go one week and not have a negative thought about anyone and found that I had negative thoughts about everyone. I thought I could make myself think the right things and do-good things but I could not. I thought the answer was self discipline but self discipline only led to guilt and I would try and start again... it was very de-humanizing.

Then later, after an experience with grace, Miller says: Self discipline will never make us feel righteous or clean: accepting God's love will. The ability to accept God's unconditional grace and ferocious love is all the fuel we need to obey. Accepting God's kindness and free love is something the devil does not want us to do. If we hear in our inner ear a voice saying we are failures, we are losers, we will never amount to anything, this is the voice of Satan trying to convince the bride of Christ that the groom does not love her. That is not the voice of God. God woos us with kindness. He changes our character with the passion of his love.

Miller closes this chapter by saying,

Most of us think of the love between Jesus and the church as like Romeo and Juliet but it is more like Lucentio's pursuit of Bianca in the *Taming of the Shrew*. The groom endears the belligerent bride with kindness patience and love. Our behavior will not be changed with self-discipline but fall in love with Jesus and a human will accomplish what he never knew possible.¹

I have come to give you good news this morning. I have come to free you from the endless cycle of self-righteousness that leads to failure, guilt and frustration. Confession is the key. Confession releases us from the never-ending cycle of guilt and frustration that self-righteousness brings.

David's prayer reminds us that confession creates a lost conversation with God. Confession restores the fellowship of our relationship. Confession opens opportunities. Confession releases us from self-righteousness.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation... It begins with confession. ▲

¹Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003)

