

# Godly Sorrow

## Psalm 51

Paul writes: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Lillian Pearsall of Moravia, NY recounts:

"When I was a telephone operator, a customer talked overtime on a long-distance call from a pay telephone booth. Even with my friendly reminders, he refused to deposit his overtime coins. Instead he slammed down the phone, irate and verbally abusive. A few seconds later, he was back on my line - somewhat calmer. 'Operator, please let me out of the phone booth - I'll pay, just let me out!' He mistakenly thought I had control of the phone booth's {jammed} doors and had locked him in!"

Worldly sorrow is remorse over the consequences of our actions. It may be as trite and selfish as being "sorry we got caught." Or, it may be as genuine as being truly sorry over pain we have caused another person. But no matter how noble or shallow worldly sorrow is, there is something distinct about godly sorrow. The godly sorrow that leads a sinner to repentance must have some unique component that relates to God. As for a definition, I submit the following:

"Godly sorrow is that condition of a soul deeply aware of sin, deeply distressed by the estrangement from God that sin creates and deeply desirous of being restored to the fellowship and the praise of God."

There must be a yearning for God in any sorrow that leads back to Him. Psalm 51 is attributed to David on the occasion that the prophet Nathan confronted him about his adultery with Bathsheba. You know the story. This king, this man after God's heart, fell into a pattern of sleeping away his afternoons while his armies were at war. One evening, after naptime, he took a walk and saw a beautiful woman bathing. He wanted her and he took her - because he was the king and he could. The fact that she was married to one of his most loyal men did not deter him.

Bathsheba became pregnant, and David had a potential scandal on his hands. He sent for Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, and gave him a weekend pass. The plan was for the people to assume that Uriah had fathered Bathsheba's baby, but Uriah refused the pleasures of home while his brothers were at war. He slept at the palace gate. David got Uriah liquored-up, but Uriah was still more honorable drunk than David was sober. This guy would not go home. Finally, David orchestrated Uriah's death and took Bathsheba as just one more of his several wives. Enter Nathan.

Nathan told David the story of a poor man who owned one little lamb that was more family pet than livestock. When a rich man with many flocks hosted a guest, rather than slaughter one of his own sheep, he slaughtered the lamb belonging to his poor neighbor. Mean! Mean! Mean!

<sup>5</sup>David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! <sup>6</sup>He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

<sup>7</sup>Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! - 2 Samuel 12:5-7

Oops! David was shaken and out of this circumstance he penned Psalm 51, a song of one man's anguish over the damage sin had done to his relationship with God. Through the ages, this psalm has served as a striking example of a truly godly sorrow that leads to life-changing repentance.

## I. A Prayer of Painful Remorse (1-4)

<sup>1</sup>Have mercy on me, O God,  
    according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
    blot out my transgressions.  
<sup>2</sup>Wash away all my iniquity  
    and cleanse me from my sin.  
<sup>3</sup>For I know my transgressions,  
    and my sin is always before me.  
<sup>4</sup>Against you, you only, have I sinned  
    and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are proved right when you speak  
    and justified when you judge.

### A. Godly Sorrow Laments the Unholiness of Sin

In better times, David wrote: "The LORD (*JEHOVAH*) is my shepherd." *JEHOVAH* was God's personal covenant name, the most sacred designation for Him by His people. God had entered into a covenant with Israel, promising to bless her in exchange for her obedience. *JEHOVAH* was a tender shepherd for Israel, but nowhere in Psalm 51 does David address God by this name. David had not stumbled innocently from the path like some wayward sheep. He had obliterated God's covenant. Addressing God as *JEHOVAH* seemed crassly cavalier under the circumstances.

Some years ago, a woman bought an ice-cream cone at a Haagen-Dazs store in Kansas City. She turned and found herself face to face with Paul Newman, who was in town filming a movie. Those famous blue eyes caused her knees to buckle. She managed to pay for her cone, then left the shop, heart pounding. Suddenly, she realized she didn't have her cone. She went back into the store to get it and met Newman at the door. "Are you looking for your ice-cream cone?" he asked. She nodded, unable to speak. "You put it in your purse with your change."

Now, if mere celebrity can rattle some people, how shaken should a sinner be in the presence of a holy God? David cried in anguish: "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." His only hope rested in the fact that God had historically shown Himself to be amazingly gracious and merciful with His people. Still, David dared not approach God with a presumptuous spirit. He was too undone by his sin.

### B. Godly Sorrow Laments the Malignancy of Sin

David used three words to describe his failings. "Sin" described "a missing of the mark" of God's holiness, but it is not as if David had actually aimed for holiness in this scenario involving Bathsheba. He spoke of "transgressions" which refer to disloyal acts of rebellion as well as "iniquity" which implies consciously crooked action. The heading of this psalm mentions only the sin with Bathsheba, but that sin led to so much more. Tack on murder, cover-up, scandal, self-delusion and self-justification. If a song did not require a certain pattern and rhythm, David might have worked into this psalm a number of other choice descriptions of what he had done.

Godly sorrow does not firstly focus on the consequences of or the punishment due a sin. It is not sorrow over getting caught or even over hurting others. True repentance is born of the realization of the violence we have done to our communion with God. Sin itself, not the punishment or the consequence, is the true evil. Godly sorrow is a cry for mercy in that we know that we do not merit God's grace on any level. We simply trust that He is willing to bestow grace nevertheless.

## C. Godly Sorrow Laments Having Offended God

"Against you, you only, have I sinned ..." (verse 4). That was an odd comment given the vast amount of harm that David had done to others. After all, a man died! But, God is the only One Whose perfect holiness is breached whenever we sin. He is the only Sovereign from Whom we attempt to wrestle sovereignty when we sin. Every sin against our fellow-man is ultimately sin against God, a slap in the face to the Lawgiver and the Creator of that other human being. Godly sorrow recognizes the "sin against God" dimension to our misdeeds. How often we miss that part, even when we truly regret the things we have done.

God is entitled to judge our actions and call them as He sees them. No clever rationalization will alter the reality of our sinfulness. When Nathan confronted David with his sin, the powerful king could have turned on the prophet. Instead, he simply conceded "Amen" to the prophet's words.

## II. A Plea for Personal Renewal (5-11)

### A. Godly Sorrow Longs for a Divine Reconstruction verses 5-9

<sup>5</sup>Surely I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

<sup>6</sup>Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;  
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

<sup>7</sup>Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

<sup>8</sup>Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

<sup>9</sup>Hide your face from my sins  
and blot out all my iniquity.

Only God can honor David's plea to put him back together again. No worldly sorrow can accomplish that. We want assurance that God forgives us. We may wish to get beyond the consequences of our sin and even avoid them if possible. But, are we so crushed by the weight of what sin has produced that we ardently desire never to break God's heart again? Can we ask for cleansing because we know we are dirty? Will we make the sacrifices that cleansing demands? When David spoke of being "sinful at birth", he was not excusing himself by saying that he could not help messing up. He was simply describing just how severely sin had him in its grip.

Hyssop was a plant used by priests to sprinkle blood or water in various purification rituals. David saw the spiritual reality behind such rituals. Only God could really make him clean again. Only God could bring back that old "joy and gladness" and restore strength to a frame bent over by the weight of secrecy and guilt. Only God could forgive him so thoroughly that the shadows of past wrongs could never rise up to poison a newly restored fellowship. That's the forgiveness David sought: "Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity" (verse 9).

### B. Godly Sorrow Longs for the Divine Presence verses 10, 11

<sup>10</sup>Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

<sup>11</sup>Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

The damage sin had done compelled David to call in the Creator. He didn't need his heart simply repaired, but remade. Only a new heart would do. David sensed a need to begin again. He was terrified at the thought of being banished from the presence of God. What a horrible fall that would be for one who was once God's anointed king to become like an alien, cut off from worship and driven into exile because of the wicked things he had done.

David may have been thinking of his predecessor, Saul, when he begged God not to remove His Holy Spirit. After the Lord rejected Saul, no matter how desperately he desired divine direction for some crisis that lay ahead, God was silent. No priest, prophet, vision or dream made any difference. The Holy Spirit had left Saul. Earlier in his life, David might have laughed at the notion that he would one day commit a murder to cover up an act of adultery. Now, David saw things differently and feared that he too might have jeopardized the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Only God can restore the joy of salvation to a sinner. David cared nothing about a short-term fix of assurance that God would overlook what he had done even as he plotted his next wicked stunt. He wanted cleanness. He thirsted for the glory of fellowship with God once again. I can be deeply sorry for many things, but godly sorrow always longs for restoration to God.

### **III. A Promise of Provable Repentance (12-17)**

#### **A. True Repentance Empathizes with Fellow-Sinners verses 12, 13**

<sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

<sup>13</sup>Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will turn back to you.

A nurse found an elderly gentleman dressed and sitting on the bed with a suitcase at his feet. In spite of his protests, rules were rules, so he reluctantly let her wheel him to the lobby. Once downstairs, she asked him if his wife was meeting him. "I don't know," he said. "She's still in the bathroom upstairs changing out of her hospital gown." Our greatest impact on others emerges not from the regulations of our beliefs, but from the empathy born of our experience with sin.

We are not saved by works, but works are the proof of repentance unto real change. As David sensed God's forgiveness, he began to think of his rightful response. He would help other sinners like himself. After all, no one can instruct sinners on grace more effectively than one who has been touched by grace. The Apostle Paul often saw himself as the worst sinner ever because of the things he had done, but few could make a case for grace like this "chief of sinners." Paul understood sin and grace not just as theory and theology, but as a beautiful transforming reality.

#### **B. True Repentance Embraces Authentic Worship verses 14-17**

<sup>14</sup>Save me from bloodguilt, O God,  
the God who saves me,  
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

<sup>15</sup>O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.

<sup>16</sup>You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;  
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

<sup>17</sup>The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart,  
O God, you will not despise.

"O Lord, open my lips." I have a sense that David's harp had not been tuned for some time. I doubt that he had written many new songs. I know what it's like to avoid too intimate of confrontations with God. I know what it means to not want to spend too much time in prayer lest I scratch too close to certain issues I would prefer to avoid. If we praise God at all when we are steeped in sin, it can become at best a disjointed thing and at worst, quite phony. But now, David could sing again.

In the narrative of Nathan and David, the prophet assured the king, "The LORD has taken away your sin" (2 Samuel 12:13), and there is no record that David presented a sin offering though he might have. In any event, his words here demonstrate that he knew that the reality of fellowship with God is about more than offerings. The prerequisites for renewing fellowship with God are a "broken spirit" and a "contrite heart that is sensitive to the damage sin can do. But, even a mended heart and spirit must remain tender, because the prerequisites for maintaining intimacy of fellowship with God remain humility, gratitude, devotion, self-denial and obedience.

### **C. True Repentance Engages Others in the Praise of God verses 18, 19**

<sup>18</sup>In your good pleasure make Zion prosper;  
build up the walls of Jerusalem.

<sup>19</sup>Then there will be righteous sacrifices,  
whole burnt offerings to delight you;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

David was the King, and at some point in this process of repentance, he became sensitive to an inevitable toll that his sin took on his nation. Whole communities are scandalized when leaders stumble. We've seen that time and again. When the leader falls, the flock becomes disoriented. The whole community of God is disgraced, casting a poor reflection upon God Himself in the eyes of a scrutinizing world. For those of us who live by the power of the cross of Jesus, that cross appears powerless. Scoffers ridicule its alleged majesty and might. As individual believers, we must each be sensitive to personal holiness so that the corporate message of the community won't sound like just so much hot air, but this is especially true for those who lead.

Zion was another name for Jerusalem, a place that David had eyeballed for God's capital city long before he ever became king. It took a horrible judgment upon a horrible sin for him to remember his spiritual responsibility to his people. Now, he was sensitive that somehow his sin might result in a reluctance by God to bless the community. It was David's prayer that the nation and the city not be disqualified from a great legacy of worship because of what he had done.

Most people love their church in some respect. We love a church because we grew up there. We love it because of people we love and memories connected to it. Those are natural and noble affections, but love of God demands that we love His church for one other reason. We are His city on a hill, His light in a dark world. Do you love the church and are you committed to her welfare because she is God's vessel of choice for expanding His praise to the ends of the earth?

Whether godly sorrow is one man responding to private sin or a community responding to its rampant indifference to the holiness of God, it is less about avoiding punishment and seeking blessings than it is about regret that the heart of God has been broken by our disloyalty.

"Godly sorrow is that condition of a soul deeply aware of sin, deeply distressed by the estrangement from God that sin creates and deeply desirous of being restored to the fellowship and the praise of God."

I once heard a pious church leader scold a child, "You're not sorry. You're sorry you got caught!" He spoke beyond what he knew, because who can know the heart of another? A person can be authentically sorry for wasting opportunities, for hurting a spouse or for destroying a relationship. Paul never called worldly sorrow "phony," only "worldly." In your moments of sorrow, reflect on the violence you have done to your walk with God. Is that the most distressing thing of all? Is His the forgiveness you crave? Such is the sorrow that arouses true repentance.