

Psalm 51

A Man after God's Own Heart

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I have not read this psalm in view of its dispensational meaning. I suppose most of us know that it is the confession of the believing Jewish remnant before God, on the ground of having caused the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. They confess their bloodguiltiness, and thus come into blessing – the fruit of that death in expiation.

What I wish you now to look at a little is the personal, directly personal, application and meaning of the psalm. There is a wonderful reality in it, and in its meaning too. You may say the Psalms do not apply to Christians, that the Christian state is beyond them; but here, at any rate, is a psalm that, if we will only consider it simply, will search our hearts in the reality of having to do with God. We have here the characteristics of a man after God's own heart, for David was such a man. But how was this true of him? What was there in him, and about him, in his life and ways, to entitle him to this distinction? A little study of this psalm will help us to understand, as we get light from God upon it, what it is to be in this world according to the heart of God.

First, then, we have here a man who had the knowledge of God, who knew Him for himself; a man chosen of God, anointed

of God, preserved of Him and sustained by Him; a man who had personally the experience of God and of His ways, experience of His goodness, His love, and His power. In order to apprehend his position here, we cannot too closely study the previous details of David's life and ways. When a mere lad, alone with God, and in dependence upon Him, he had single-handed slain the lion and the bear. Later on he had stood up alone with God against all the power of the enemy of His people, and had delivered them from the giant, thus putting all Israel to shame. He had refused the proffered amour that Saul trusted in, preferring to go forth in simple dependence upon a known and trusted God. All the enemies before him were but "uncircumcised Philistines" – they were that and that only to him. He went forth with God, and God was with him. A wonderful, and yet a simple practical lesson for us!

But now that was all past, all gone by – surely not forgotten of God who had called him. David was now on the throne, the throne of Israel, preserved by God, brought there by Him, and established by Him, as the man of His choice, to rule over His people. It is here, upon the throne, that he learns more than he had ever learned in adversity – he learns himself, his own heart, and the evil there. You may make excuses for him, speak of the

times in which he lived, the circumstances surrounding him, passions, &c., but who, that is in earnest with God, is going to make excuses for sin? Looking at these things will not help us to understand this psalm. We must look at things exactly as God presents them to us, if we are to learn of Him.

David, as we have seen, had been preserved by the hand of God; there had been nothing more wonderful for him than God's preserving power over him. And here he now was, the anointed head over God's own people – power placed by God in his hand, and see how he used it. In the day of prosperity the lusts of his own heart get the better of him; he learns that he is not their master, but that they ruled him. This was more than he had learned in the day of adversity, when he was hunted “as a partridge upon the mountains.” This is true of each one of us, if we know anything of experience. People nowadays say they do not believe in experience. For my part, I do so most fully – indeed souls cannot be right with God until they have had experience, But it is experience that comes to an end, or, rather, that leads to a new kind of experience – the experience of God.

2. Samuel 11 gives us the circumstances that occasioned this

psalm. Led away of the lusts of his own heart, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, he falls into sin. It is a sad, an awful history; but, at the same time, it is in result beautiful and blessed. Some have said, "Oh, if I could only be like David!" Well, come and look at him now, and learn the lesson God would teach us from him. It is not only that David sins in the matter of Bathsheba, but he uses his royal, God-given power to cover up the sin. He stood before no earthly tribunal, but he has a reputation in the eyes of men, and this must be maintained at all cost. How true it is, "The way of transgressors is hard"! Lust conceives and brings forth sin; and he is hurried on by it, and by the thought of his own reputation too, to add murder to it, in the vain hope of blotting it out. He succeeds; the power is in his hand – alas! the power God had entrusted him with, and this is the use to which he puts it.

And now he rests. Uriah dead by the enemy's hand and David's orders, Bathsheba becomes his wife, and David seeks to rest, to settle down in the state he had arranged for himself. But God is faithful, and now shows His faithfulness to him. He sends His servant to him, a special messenger from Himself, and through him he recounts in his hearing a simple record of what he had done. There is no excusing, there is no making it out worse. It is

the simple record of the fact – this one ewe lamb thou hast taken. Ah, when God speaks, how brief, how simple, how heart-searching, how straightforward it is! The message came home to David's heart and conscience. One word from God and the work is done. "Thou art the man" – THE man, the one single offender before Him, no other such sinner on the face of the earth as David. All welled up in his heart and conscience – the abuse of the power God had given him, the position God in grace had placed him in turned to hide his sin from the sight of men. So far he had succeeded in hiding it up; but there it still was before God – scarlet before Him – and there was no hiding it up there.

And now note the effect. There is no hardening, no stiffening of the neck under this message – this convicting message. Nathan says, "Thou art THE man." David bows his head. In spirit he says, "My God, I am THE man; I have sinned against God." Here is reality. Here I begin to learn "the man after God's own heart." He owns his sin before God. None can have a worse opinion of him than he has of himself. If you and I are children of God, it is that God has singled us out, each one especially, as special sinners, in order that He may have special mercy upon us, each one. It is not as a company, nor as with a company

here, but as individuals the soul has to do with Him, and come to this: “There is no one like me for badness, and there is no one like God for love, and goodness, and grace!”

And now let us begin this psalm; and here we come to the beautiful and blessed fruit of this awful history. Ah, what a lesson for us, each one! David comes to God not on the ground of repentance, nor of his own prayers, nor of his own tears. You may repent, and it is a blessed thing if you do. You may pray, and surely it is blessed to pray. You may weep, ay, weep bitter, bitter tears, and this is well. But none of these is the ground on which forgiveness is known; none of these is the true ground of approach to God. Forgiveness does not come from Him on the ground of what we are, but on the ground of what He is. Thus David comes to God. And listen to his words: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.” I begin now indeed to learn who and what the man is that has to do with God – the man who knows God. You may say he knows his own transgressions and his own wickedness. That is true; but he also knows the only ground on which it is possible for God to have to say to him, to do with him about them, otherwise than in judgment. Further, it is the only

way in which there is, or can be, uprightness with God – being before Him, and having to do with Him on the ground of what He is in Himself. “Thy tender mercies;” “Thy lovingkindness.” Thus he can say, “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.”

Let me ask, Have you ever come to God in that way? Is that the ground upon which you stand before Him? “Thy lovingkindness,” “the multitude of Thy tender mercies.” Are you a child of God? Have you done wrong? You cannot say you never do wrong. But if you do wrong, what is the ground on which you come to Him? Do you come to Him as to a Father? If so, do you come saying, “I have judged the thing, repented of it, and that is how I now come?” That ground is good in its place; but it is not the ground on which you can rest in full confidence – unfailing confidence towards Him. No; the only sure, unfailing, unchanging ground is what He is in Himself – “Thy lovingkindness,” “Thy tender mercies,” “the multitude of Thy lovingkindness.” There is nothing equal to them, and on that ground I seek forgiveness. He does not present a false ground to God, but the simple and plain ground on which he knows God can act towards him – “Thou art THE man.” Ah! it is in

mercy and in lovingkindness He has followed me. He has called me out from this place where I had hidden myself. He is real with me, let me be real with Him.

In 1. John 1 we have the difference between confession and forgiveness. Coming to God merely to seek forgiveness may or may not be accompanied with full confession. In making confession to Him, forgiveness is not the first thought of the one who thus draws near to Him. If it is merely forgiveness that is sought, circumstances and feebleness will be pleaded as excuses, in order that a ground for forgiving may be presented other than what there is in Himself. But in true confession there is no question of the force of circumstances, nor of one's own feebleness. And with the Christian this goes still further; for there is consciousness that grace has been left on one side, and that there has been lack of dependence upon it, and that self-will and pride have led away from Him and His grace into the commission of that which is being confessed. There is thus no question of circumstances, nor of one's own weakness; no question of the temptations or trials surrounding one. It is a question solely of "Thy grace" and my self-will. His grace would have kept me; I refused it, thought nothing of it, and did not count upon it as needful for me. His power would have kept me,

but I looked to another power, and left the place of dependence. Thus I placed myself in the temptation, and fell. I allowed it, and why? If I look upon the circumstances, and shelter myself behind them, I am taking refuge behind lies; and the one that has to do with God says ever, "Away with all refuge of lies; let me be real with God; it is with Himself alone I have to do."

We now come to a verse that is a difficulty to some: "Against Thee ... have I sinned." There is no difficulty about that. But he says, "Against Thee only." Had he not sinned against the woman? Had he not murdered the VERY man he had sinned against? How, then, could he say, "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned"? We need not go very far to find the reason. He is occupied with God, and with God only. The thought of his fellow-man, would pass through his mind – "My fellow-man! Ah, yes! I have indeed sinned against him. But what is that compared to my sin against Thee?" It is sin before God, in the sight of Him who is of purer eyes than to look upon iniquity. The man, the woman, I have sinned against, the evil I have done my fellow-man, I would not ignore nor cover up for a moment; but it is before Thee, Thou God of glory, before Thee, Thou God of all grace, whose tender mercies, whose lovingkindness, I know. Let there be no excuses, no second causes, no refuge of lies,

between me and Thee. I am before Thee alone, and on Thee alone can I count.

“That Thou mightest be justified.” I do not palliate the sin by speaking of the poor creature with whom I committed it, of my reputation before men that weighed so much with me, nor even of the man I destroyed in order to conceal my sin. I stand before Thee – bare and naked as the day I was born – in Thy sight, and now there is nought, no hope, no rest, no ground of confidence but in Thee, Thy tender mercies, Thy lovingkindnesses. Now, let me ask, is that the way you come to God? Is that the way you know Him? If so, “Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight,” will be no difficulty, but a divine, a blessed reality to your soul. I may fail to make you understand it, but I am sure of this, until you do understand it experimentally in your own soul, you do not know what uprightness of heart before God is. Until you know the practical meaning of this, you have some reserve there, something you are not prepared to have searched out, something you are seeking to hold back in your heart. In short, you are not fully free with God.

In David we have a man without reserve; everything that would

come in to hinder is for him but a refuge of lies. And this he refuses, in order that there might be no impediment in God's way, nothing to hinder in His speaking to him, and judging and putting away his sin according to the resources there are in Himself. There were circumstances; but here we get back to the old Adam – "I have an evil nature, passions, lusts, etc., and they were too strong for me. The lusts of that nature ran away with me, and I was captive to sin." Supposing he had pleaded this to God, His reply would have been, "That is all true; but I cannot have mercy on you except on the ground of My lovingkindness. You are like Adam in the garden, saying he was led astray by the very mercies given him." But David stood on other ground, blessed be God. To him it was, "My sin is between Thyself and me. I hide nothing of the wrong I have done others. But it is all before Thee – I, a man of Thy gifts, Thy grace, Thy counsels, Thy love – a man who has had such experience of Thee and Thy ways. Ah, it is Thyself alone I have sinned against! I have sinned against my knowledge of Thee, against the power Thou gavest me; and my desire is, that Thou shouldest be justified in judging it." Here are the characteristics of a man after God's own heart.

You may say, "It is easy to confess thus;" but if you have ever

been through it yourself, you will never say that. If you have ever been in His presence, really before Him, about yourself and your sin, you will know it is heart-breaking, heart-searching work to be before Him on the ground of no excuse whatever. You cannot make me know your experience of it, nor can I make you know mine – being before God without any excuse, and resting solely on what is in Him, His lovingkindness, and the multitude of His tender mercies, is a personal, an individual experience; and knowledge of Himself is incommunicable, unexplainable, but will show itself in the life and ways of the one who knows it.

But he goes on: The root of it all is in myself; “I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.” With me it was sin from the commencement of my being; sin and iniquity are what characterize me. Lovingkindness and tender mercies are Thine, O my God! But “Thou desirest truth in the inward parts” – truth, not the semblance of it, not the profession of it, but the thing itself, the reality of it. Now if there are any unconverted here this evening, let me tell you, you do not know what that means. You may make a fair outward show perhaps, you may make a profession; but until you have to do directly with God, you do not know what “truth in the inward parts” is. You may

have done good actions – what you conceive to be your duty to your neighbor, and what you conceive to be your duty to God; but these must be judged of by God, according to His estimate of them, not according to yours. You may put them all into the balances, and place upon them the very best construction you can; but the balances of the sanctuary are true, and God puts into the other scale “truth in the inward parts,” and then your side is light indeed. This is what you cannot do without, if you are to have to do with Him; what He cannot do without. You cannot be at peace, you cannot be at rest, in the enjoyment of His presence without it. You cannot be “after His own heart” without it; and if you are not that, what are you? It is no use talking about believing this, or that, or the other, if we are not walking in His presence, if we are not happy before Himself, in the conscious enjoyment of His favor. The mark of the enjoyment of His favor is “truth in the inward parts.” It is truth coming and searching, truth finding a lodgment; and then, on the ground of His lovingkindness and tender mercies, he can say, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

Now he says, “Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.” As I look upon that sin I am conscious that Thine eye

is upon it too, and that is what makes it so terrible to me. Blot it out from Thy sight, according to Thy lovingkindness, and the multitude of Thy tender mercies, and then, and then only, will it be blotted out of mine.

In verse 10 he comes round to the root of the whole matter. It is a great thing for anyone to get really to the root of things. David here touches the very ground the Lord took in speaking to His disciples. It is not the things outside, that entering in, defile a man. It is a very awful truth for us. You may shut your eyes to it, harden your conscience against it, but there the truth stands in all its reality before you, in the very words of Jesus. And this is the truth about you – that, as a child of Adam, there is nothing from without that entering in can make your heart worse than it is. Yes; thank God, that is the truth, an awful truth, but still THE truth; and yet how widely denied and practically ignored! Children are taught from earliest infancy a denial of it – “Be a good child, and God will love you!” Let me ask you, Is it true to you: Is the heart so evil that nothing outside it can make it worse? If you say it is not true, not really so bad as that, you are trusting your own heart, and Scripture says, “He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool.” You are trusting that which God says is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” Let me

add, as to the child of God, the natural affections of the heart will always be wrong unless regulated by the exercise of conscience. When the two go together the affections will be rightly regulated; otherwise you will make idols of the objects of your affections.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” Have you got thus far, in the judgment of yourself, as to say, THAT is where the evil comes from? Do not shelter yourself behind this, “I am on Christian ground, and it would not be an intelligent thing to say.” David says, “It comes from my heart; not from the beauty of the woman I gazed upon, not from the effort to sustain the tarnished reputation of the king, but from the king’s own heart.” It is the heart, the unclean heart, I find; and that is why I cry, “Create in me,” not “Change in me,” but “Create in me a clean heart.” Is this the ground on which you have been in your soul with God?

Let us look for a moment at experience. If you have not had experience, may God help you to get it! It is the reality of having to do with Him. Here is a man, honest-hearted before God, owning that the root of iniquity is in himself. Thus he says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God. . .and take not Thy Holy

Spirit from me.” Take not from me that which brings home to heart and conscience the sense of evil before God; the exercises of a troubled soul; the exercise of heart before Him. That is what it is. We could not, it is true, as Christians, say, “Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me;” for, thank God, the Holy Spirit will remain with us to the end. But there is the sense in David that he has forfeited everything – all right and title and claim – and that God’s mercies and lovingkindnesses are the sole ground on which God maintains everything He had given him. Thus he says, “Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me;” “Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation;” “Uphold me with Thy free Spirit.”

Now he says, “I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto Thee.” See what a wonderful and blessed place is reached by him; not teaching transgressors his ways – sad and sorrowful they had been – but “Thy ways”; Thy ways of grace, of lovingkindness and tender mercy. He does not say “the righteous,” but “sinners.” No need to tell the righteous of such ways as these. It is sinners who will appreciate them, and turn to Him; therefore to them will I declare them. Those who are full of pride and satisfaction with themselves will not care to hear, but those who, like myself,

know what it is to transgress, will hear, and turn to Thee. Here is a power, greater and more searching than any double-thonged lash, that drives and arouses rebellion. I will tell them of Thy love, Thy resistless love, Thy pity, Thy pardoning love, Thy never-failing grace, Thy tender mercy, the multitude of Thy compassions. The sun may stand still at noonday, but Thou canst never fail; and the result shall be that sinners shall be converted to Thee. Thou shalt have the glory. Only let me have the restoring light of Thy presence, the blessed sense of Thy present favor, and I will tell it out to those in their sins. Surely this brings afresh to us the words of our Lord Himself – “Go ye, and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.” Here in David we have the utterance of the same Holy Spirit, through a man after God’s own heart, – a man who had sinned, and who owned it fully before God. He does not say “I will teach the law,” but “I will teach transgressors Thy ways, because I have learned them for myself, and in them I have learned Thee.” Those who know something of the foolishness, the wickedness, of their own hearts are the ones to whom this message is to be carried.

But we must know His ways before we can teach them to others. Do you know these ways – the ways of God with the

soul? Have you learned this wonderful lesson, how God can pass His hand over the hearts of men – those hearts so full of sin, self-seeking, and wickedness – and cause heavenly music to come forth from them? For it is heavenly music indeed – praise to Himself for what He is. “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth Me.” Man is alienated from Him by wicked works. His mind is enmity with God; but God loves man, and seeks to bring man to Himself. And, as Christians, cannot we add to this tale of God’s ways, this recounting of His mercies and lovingkindnesses? He spared not His own Son, but gave Him up to die for sinners. Look at the cross, and you will see the greatest, most glorious display of that lovingkindness and of that mercy that endureth for ever. Alas! alas! for rejecters of that love, that mercy, that gift!

Verse 14 is the great confession of the remnant, as to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. But here David himself also speaks, and he says, “Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of Thy righteousness.” Thy righteousness!” How wonderfully that comes in here! Not “Thy grace,” but “Thy righteousness.” Grace, true grace, reigns through righteousness. Through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, God can be, and is, righteous in

forgiving, justifying, receiving all who come to Him through that blessed One. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.” He loves to restore the soul, but He only restores it on this one ground. He is faithful and just to Jesus, and therefore faithful and just to us. And it is only thus that we can stand before Him and make a clean breast of it.

Now, I would ask you, Can you, dare you, tell Him everything – even what you would hide from your nearest friend, the one you know best, who knows you best, even from your very self? Dare you lay it all bare before God, as David does, and, indeed, in a still deeper way, because you know the love of His heart, who gave the Son to die for you? Be sure of this, that in laying it all bare before Him, you will not, cannot, change His love one hair’s breadth. But if all is not thus laid bare before Him, you cannot know and enjoy that love. All the blessed fruit of His lovingkindness and tender mercies. He will have you before Himself, as if He said, “I have uncovered My heart to you, all My heart, and I have uncovered your heart too; now be real with Me; uncover your own heart; let all come out, and let there be no excuses.” Making excuses, and having reserve of heart, is not having to do with the heart of God – that heart manifested in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, that

blessed Sacrifice for sins. God says, "Here is the ground of assurance – the love of My heart, proved in the gift of Jesus – now let all come out." The devil says, "Don't be too sure. There must be something of yourself in it. You must at least be upright in heart. There must be uprightness in you." "Ah!" I say, "but where is the uprightness to come from?" The enemy says, "You would not be half a man if you had not some kind of pride of self about you, some kind of self-esteem." It is just this self-esteem that hinders the people of God more than anything. But when you have to do with God, you cannot talk to Him of self-esteem. You cannot speak of your own character, of yourself, when in His presence. When I see a man defending himself, I say, "There is a man who is not in the presence of God." When we know what we are before Him, and what He is for us, we can leave all that to Him. It is His heart, the sense of His love, His lovingkindness and tender mercies that make us upright with Him. That is where uprightness comes from, and nowhere else – let the father of lies and self-sufficient man say what they will.

So he continues; "Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it; Thou delightest not in burnt offering." I would search the world through for sacrifices, but I cannot speak of them to Thee. Thy lovingkindness sweeps them all away. The beasts upon a

thousand hills, He says, they are Mine. What then am I bringing to Him? There is no real honesty, no uprightness here, no really having to do with Him. But now One Sacrifice has been offered and accepted too. The blessed Lord was delivered for our offenses, and raised again for our justification. Thus God has swept everything away, that we may have to do with Him, directly with Himself, each one, and on this blessed ground – what His Son has done for Him and for His glory, and for us and for our blessing. He gave His Son to die for us, and now He calls us to come and walk with Him on this ground – perfect openness with Him, unclouded openness, ever the unclouded light of His presence, and then you will know what true joy is.

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” “If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin.” Here it is that we learn the value of the blood as we never learned it before. When you come to the cross as a guilty sinner, you learn the value of the blood of Christ, as applied to all that you have done; here in the light you learn the value of the blood as blotting out all that you are capable of doing. It is the same blood, but viewed in a deeper, fuller way, as blotting out all that, as a child of Adam, I am

capable of doing. Thus I come to be really upright with God, real and true in His presence, and only thus. May the Lord in His mercy give us to find the reality of this. It is blessed ground to be on. Thank God there is no other upon which God can permit His people to be with Him, or that brings us near to Himself after His own heart.

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