

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Psalms		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	17		Mason Depew
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THE JOY OF YOUR SALVATION

Introduction: Everyone would love to have the joy and renewed strength that David describes in Psalm 51, but how many are willing to confess their sins in order to get there? How many can accept the doctrine of original sin, which David alludes to in 51:5? We live in a culture which still bears many marks of Christianity's influence, but the substance of our doctrine is considered outrageous and offensive.

- a. D. G. Hart has recently recorded a series of lectures for the Reformed Forum on J. Gresham Machen and the 100th anniversary of his most famous book, *Christianity and Liberalism*. You can find these on YouTube. Dr. Hart titled one of these lectures, "The Fight against Sentimentality," arguing that vaguely Christian-sounding sentimentality is one of the most powerful cultural forces Machen had to defend the faith against.
 - i. This would usually take the form of optimism about human nature and perpetual social progress, which do not sound all that different from our world 100 years later. When you hear people expressing frustration that the situation in our country is not as good as it should be, "systems" or "elites" are usually blamed. The assumption seems to be that everything would be great if these arbitrary obstacles that exist for no good reason would just get out of the way. Then we would resume the natural progress, peace, and prosperity to which we think we are entitled.
 - ii. Machen pointed out that although Christianity certainly does lead us to great joy and hope for the future, it does not start there. Christianity begins with the worst news possible about humanity, that we are lost, and if left to our own devices utterly without faith, hope, or love. This modernized Christianity he was facing was really paganism dressed up to look Christian to the untrained eye.¹
 - iii. Machen further showed that only the fullness of the Gospel is the appropriate solution to our most basic problems. Modern people often do not realize that when they attack the atonement as cruel or barbaric, they are attacking the very object of our faith and the source of all our hope.²

¹ "As a matter of fact, not optimism but the deepest pessimism is the starting point of Christianity. It is paganism which finds hope in the development of the resources of man, whereas Christianity is the religion of the broken heart. ... 'I believe in man' - that is paganism. 'Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it'; 'There is none righteous, no, not one'; 'All sinned and came short of the glory of God' - that is Christianity. ... At the very basis of Christianity is the cry, 'Woe is me' and woe to a lost and sinful world." - "Relations Between Jews and Christians," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart, pg 414-415.

² "But that [pessimism] is not the end of Christianity but its beginning. For the darkness has been lightened by a radiance of divine light. It has been lightened by the coming of our Lord. Nineteen hundred years ago, the Christian holds, a strong Savior came from the outside into this sinful world and led mankind out from Egyptian bondage into a land of freedom and hope. ... But how pitiful are my words! I despair of letting you see how we Christians *feel*, how we hang with all our hearts upon just the thing that other men despise, how we abhor any subjectivizing of the work of Christ, how we depend above all just upon the fact that Christ has done not merely

- b. In Psalm 51, we see clearly just how vital this relationship between the “bad news” of the Law and the hope of the Gospel really is. David’s joy is so great precisely *because he has been forgiven so much!* If you take out his brutally honest confession in verses 1-5, you would lose the impetus for his exultant rejoicing in 8 and 12-15. This is the irony: if you tell people their sins are insignificant, they have no reason to rejoice at the news of forgiveness, and no reason to show love and mercy to others in turn. Thus, if you undermine the Law, you undermine the Gospel, and vice versa. They cannot be separated.
1. *Review:* The background of this psalm is, of course, David’s infamous sins against Bathsheba and Uriah in 2 Samuel 11.³
 - c. Psalm 51 is David’s public confession of his great crimes, but also a model for any believing Israelite to follow in confessing sin. When sung together by the assembly of God’s people for worship, this psalm has the effect of a public confession of their accumulated sins, much like when we read the Law and pray the prayer of confession each week.
 - d. These notes focus heavily on verses 6-19 of the psalm, because we covered the first 5 well enough last time, and the rest falls into place much more easily once you have understood the beginning.
 2. *Verses 5-13:* The roots of sin are so deep that only God can tear them out.
 - a. As we saw last time, verse 5 traces the particular sins being confessed in this psalm all the way back to the sinful nature which all people are born with after the Fall.
 - i. Psalm 51:5 clearly teaches, in contrast to modern views, that there is an essential human nature, and it is deeply sick with sin. We do not become sinners by sinning. We sin because we are conceived and born as sinners.
 - ii. Remember that while the occasion for this psalm’s composition is David’s peculiar sins, it is designed to be heartily sung by all God’s people. That includes the Israelites, and it includes Christians today. You and I did not get to choose who we are. Adam did, and he chose poorly.⁴
 - b. Verse 6 shows both why this sin nature is such a fundamental problem, and also why God alone can fix us.
 - i. The Lord delights in what is true and wise in all things, even those which are hidden and inaccessible to human observers. David himself knows this personally because

something *in* us but something *for* us when he died for us upon the cross and made all well between us and the holy God. What a mystery it is - and how simple to the man who believes!” - “Relations Between Jews and Christians,” pg 415.

³ There is much debate these days about whether what David did in that chapter qualifies as rape. It seems to me that if the author of 2 Samuel wanted to give us an answer to that question, he would have indicated whether Bathsheba cried out for help or not. That is the key test in Israel’s law for whether a sexual act is considered rape, found in Deuteronomy 22:23-27. Regardless, the text of both 2 Samuel 11 and Psalm 51 focuses the guilt entirely on David. This could be either because 1) he raped her, or 2) he abused the tremendous legal, moral, and political power of his office as King, making his sin far more egregious than hers. David’s sin is, of course, all the more shocking because he is the king who completed the conquest of the promised land and the father of the Messiah’s dynasty. It is highly likely that other kings of Israel and Judah committed similar sins, since this kind of thing was fairly common for pagan kings of the time, but Scripture focuses on David’s sin because of his importance in God’s plan of redemption.

⁴ If you think this is unfair, it is because you are imagining a merely human judge who did not graciously give you every good thing you have, and therefore does not have the right to take them away from you. If you are truly thinking of the God who made all things and governs them according to the counsel of his will, then you realize that he *did* give you everything you have, and he *does* have the right to take it from you on the basis of Adam’s sin, because he never owed it to you to begin with.

- God has taught him a significant measure of truth and wisdom over the course of his life.
- ii. The problem is that this also means the deep perversity of human nature after the Fall is completely exposed to God at all times *and* diametrically opposed to his own holiness. There can be no easy reconciliation while this problem persists; God cannot simply look the other way.
- c. Verse 7 calls on God to act alone, without David’s cooperation.
- i. Given the extreme depth and far-reaching consequences of the problem as David has described it thus far, it is perfectly clear why only the power of God can resolve the issue.
 - ii. Ironically, the word for “purging” here in verse 7 is the very same root that means “sin” in verses 2, 3, 4, and 5. This further highlights the poetic fittingness of the response David is calling for. David cannot wash himself of these stains, but if God does it, it will be perfectly thorough. God can make a sinner cleaner than anything in this world, even snow!
 - iii. David refers to the purification rituals of the priests using hyssop as a sign of spiritual cleansing. This reminds us that the sign is only effective if the Lord himself does the work which it signifies. Hyssop, like baptism or the Lord’s Supper, has no value if it is merely a man performing the sign.
- d. Verse 11 shockingly implies that the Holy Spirit has been with David this entire time. He does not say, “Send your Holy Spirit back to me,” but “take not your Holy Spirit from me.”
- i. What is the best proof that someone had the Spirit in the Old Testament? That he had a “circumcised heart,”⁵ meaning a heart which has had a stony outer shell cut away, so that the Word of God now gets through and sinks in. This does not mean the believer always remembers and acts out God’s Word well, but when directly confronted, the Word gets through to him. You can easily see this pattern in the lives of Abraham, Moses, and many others. David is by far the easiest king of Israel to see this with, as he has multiple instances where his heart is pierced, and he repents of some evil he did or was about to do.⁶
 - ii. This helps us to answer the common and very important question: what kind of fruit of salvation should we look for in ourselves and other Christians? It is not any particular action or list of actions, but rather *repentance*. Christians may commit all kinds of sinful actions born of all kinds of sinful desires, but the question is whether they recognize God’s Law, hate their sin as repugnant in God’s sight, and seriously strive against it to honor him. If they have circumcised hearts, the Word will get through to them, changing the way they think about their sin and driving them to change their behavior. The Holy Spirit does not, however, give us a timetable to hold him to, so that we know how much sanctification to expect by a given length of time. We ought therefore to be extremely skeptical of claims that “A Christian would never do this,” or “A Christian would never vote for that.”
- e. If the Lord does this wondrous work, verses 8 and 12-15 show what David’s response will be.

⁵ Compare Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 9:5, for example.

⁶ Nathan’s famous rebuke of David for his sin with Bathsheba is the most famous example of this, but there are several other instances that fit the same pattern. In 1 Samuel 25, for example, David is about to avenge himself on Nabal when Abigail (very gently and respectfully) rebukes him, as David would then bear the bloodguilt. David recognizes her discernment and obeys her counsel, forgiving Nabal and waiting for the Lord to do justice rather than take it upon himself.

- i. Joy and gladness, as if he had broken bones which were suddenly healed, pouring forth in specific actions: testifying about what the Lord has done for him and singing his praises.
 - ii. These two responses, worship and witness, should be our first instincts when we feel grateful for the Lord's gracious salvation.
- f. As David keeps emphasizing again and again, however, this must be the Lord's work and his alone.
 - i. If God does not renew David's heart and spirit (vv. 10, 12) through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit's sanctification (v. 11), David cannot be purified and joyfully testify and sing praises to the Lord. David needs both objective forgiveness (justification) and transformation of his inner person (sanctification).⁷
 - ii. David puts an extremely fine poetic point on this when he asks the Lord to actually *open his lips* in verse 15, as if David is so disabled he cannot even move his body parts without God's power. Spiritually speaking, this is an entirely appropriate image for us!
 - iii. We must pay careful attention to the fact that David does not ask for spiritual progress on the basis of his fruit so far. He asks for the Lord to work powerfully in him on the basis of the Lord's own character and promises.
- 3. As he brings the psalm to a close in verses 16-19, David recognizes that all we can bring when we come to the Lord requesting forgiveness and greater sanctification is a broken spirit.
 - a. Verse 16 makes this absolutely clear: we cannot come proudly, bringing goods that God needs as if we were equals and could bargain with him. We must come, humbled to the point of despairing of ourselves, so that we are ready to trust in God's power alone to save us from ourselves. In this way, God actually brings the good of sanctification out of our sin!
 - i. When we sin and feel ourselves losing ground, the Holy Spirit uses that guilt to break our spirits and drive us once again to the Cross, knowing there is no help to be found anywhere else. As we grow in faith by habitually confessing our sins and resting in Christ for forgiveness, the fruits of the Spirit gradually follow more and more. As you know better and better just how much you have been forgiven, you will love God and love your neighbor more and more, which is the core of the whole Law.
 - ii. It is important to emphasize that the Spirit uses sins of all kinds and sizes to drive believers back to the Gospel. It does not have to be a public scandal like David's sin. It could be merely the fact that you know how awesome and glorious God is in his sovereign majesty over all the universe, and so you are deeply and constantly ashamed of how often you get distracted during worship.
 - b. The final two verses of Psalm 51:18-19 show us that God draws out from his people the sacrifices that he wants by pouring out his grace and mercy upon them.

⁷ "But by the term *create*, which he had previously employed, he acknowledges that we are indebted entirely to the grace of God, both for our first regeneration, and in the event of our falling, for subsequent restoration. He does not merely assert that his heart and spirit were weak, requiring divine assistance, but that they must remain destitute of all purity and rectitude till these be communicated from above." - *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. V, 299.

- i. Reconciling himself to sinners, and drawing out beautiful, joyful worship from us is the Lord's great pleasure. There is no other work of God which better shows forth his majesty and his infinite power, because there is no one else who could accomplish it!
- ii. These final two verses also remind us that this psalm is not just concerned with David, though his sin is definitely in the background. The scope of this psalm is ultimately good news for the whole people of God, poetically represented in this case by "Zion" and "Jerusalem." If we have come to Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem, as Hebrews 12:22 describes, then it is also perfectly appropriate for us as New Testament Christians to sing this psalm. The Lord pours out his grace upon us and protects us, spiritually speaking, even more directly by his Spirit than he did in the Old Testament.
- iii. We can easily get lost in the details of arguments over the relationship of repentance and faith, justification and sanctification, etc. and lose sight of the big picture. Psalm 51 helps keep us grounded so that we do not miss the forest for the trees. David shows us the basic pattern of consistent growth in the Christian life is very simple: Confess your sins, believe God's promises of salvation, and then love God and your neighbor out of gratitude for God's grace. This is how the Law leads you to the Gospel, and the Gospel then recasts the Law in a new light, no longer as the basis for your death sentence, but as the wise guidance of your Father who leads you to honor him more and more.

Conclusion: David's joy and hope of salvation is no cheap optimism. He does not present the empty clichés of a trite sentimentality. David speaks with the profound conviction of a man who has passed through the dark midnight of guilt over his sin to see the radiant dawn of God's saving grace. This is what produces his rich and beautiful joy. In our modern context, it may seem compassionate to minimize our doctrine of sin so as not to hurt people's feelings, but we must remember this strips out the foundation of the Gospel. It would not be compassionate for a doctor to lie about his patient's cancer diagnosis in order to avoid bringing down the mood. If you downplay the Law that convicts of sin, you undermine the Gospel that promises forgiveness and the gratitude that produces true repentance. You can only enjoy the hope of a Christian to the extent that you despair of yourself and cling to the enduring love of your Savior.