

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
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THE CHARACTER OF SIN

In Galatians 3 Paul speaks of the Law being brought in alongside of the promise in order to define sin's true character – it is transgression (verse 21). The Law is meant to reveal to us the nature of our sin. The exceeding sinfulness of sin, along with its guilt and condemnation, is made manifest by the Law. William Perkins wisely wrote: “. . . the end of the law is conviction. And the end of our conviction is that the promise of mercy may be given to them that believe. Here is notable comfort, with encouragement to all good duties. Does the law as it were in the name of God arrest you? Does it accuse and convince you of manifold sins? Does it arraign you at the bar of God's judgment, and fill your soul with terror? Do you by the testimonies of the law and your own conscience see and feel yourself to be a most miserable and wretched sinner? Well. It may be you think that all this is a preparation to your damnation, but it is not. For it is contrariwise a preparation to your salvation. For the law with a loud voice in your heart proclaims you a sinner and threatens you with perdition, but the end of all this is that Jesus Christ may become a savior unto you, so be it you will come unto Him and believe in Him. For He saves no sheep but *the lost sheep*, and *He calls not just men, but sinners to repentance*. Let us therefore with all our hearts come unto Christ and believe in Him, and that by the faith of Christ, that is, with a faith joined with hope, love, and new obedience. Then shall the promise of pardon and life everlasting be given to us. Upon this ground, persons in despair and grievous offenders may see a plain way to help and succor themselves. For the work of the law concluding us under sin, by the mercy of God, tends to our salvation if we will use the good means.”¹ In order to more clearly see this biblical perspective, we are going to turn and examine Psalm 51. “This Psalm,” writes Plumer, “is often and fitly called *the sinner's guide* . . . Athanasius recommends to some Christians, to whom he was writing, to repeat it when they awake at night . . . Luther says, *There is no other Psalm which is oftener sung or prayed in the church*. This is the first Psalm in which we have the word *Spirit* used in application to the Holy Ghost.”² This is the fourth *penitential* Psalm.³ The historical framework for this Psalm is found in 2 Samuel 11-12. Old Matthew Henry summed up the essence of this Psalm when he wrote, “Though God may suffer His people to fall into sin, and to lie a great while in it, yet He will by some means or other recover them to repentance, bring them to Himself, and to their right mind again.”⁴

- I. **INVOCATION (verse 1).** “Have mercy upon me” is the Psalmist's plea. He desires a gracious God (cf. 2 Samuel 12:22; Luke 18:13). The thought, notes Kirkpatrick, “suggests the free bestowal of favor rather than the exercise of forgiving clemency and is connected

with the word rendered *gracious* in Exodus 34:6.⁵ Note that David appeals to two aspects of the mercy of God.

- A. ***Your unfailing love.*** The thought of *covenant* love is what David rehearses.
- B. ***Your great compassion.*** This literally refers to the abundance of God's pity. The plea is thus based upon the revelation of God's gracious character as depicted in His covenant faithfulness (cf. Isaiah 63:7; Lamentations 3:22).

NOTE: Three times the mercy of God is underscored. David entertained no thoughts of his own goodness as being the basis for God's kindness toward him. There is no plea for *fairness* or *justice* and there is no *excuse* on David's lips.

- II. ***CONFESSION (verses 2-6).*** The expression "I know" (verse 3) is strongly emphatic in the Hebrew. Note the personal pronoun: *my* iniquity; *my* sin; *my* transgression. Three different words are used to describe David's act.

- A. ***Transgression.*** The Hebrew is *pasha*. This refers to lawlessness. The Septuagint renders this with the Greek word *anomia* – to go against the law (cf. 1 John 3:4).
- B. ***Sin.*** The Hebrew word is *chataah*. The Septuagint has *harmatia*. Both words have reference to missing the mark, erring from the right path (cf. Romans 3:12).
- C. ***Iniquity.*** The Hebrew is *avon*. This describes the inward perversion of our heart, which is manifested in outward wrong doing. "At first our conscience becomes awakened to the guilt of some *act* of transgression, but as the terrible question presses itself more and more upon our attention, we are finally landed in the painful conviction that behind the isolated *acts* of transgression, and in the manifestation of sin, there is *iniquity*, the natural depravity of our being."⁶

NOTE: David viewed his sin from every angle. He looks at his sin in light of the *character* of God. He did not seek to play God's mercy against God's holiness and righteousness.

- III. ***CLEANSING (verses 7-12).*** "Cleanse me with hyssop" and "wash me" are both mentioned together in verse 2 and are repeated in verse 7 (cf. Exodus 32:33 and Isaiah 43:25).

- A. ***Cleanse me with hyssop.*** Hyssop was used in Levitical ceremonies (Leviticus 14:4ff and Numbers 19:18). It was a plant used as a sprinkler, usually with blood.
- B. ***Wash me.*** This also is a reference to a ritual cleansing ceremony (Leviticus 14 and Numbers 19). The word for *wash* is *cabas*, which actually means to tread or trample upon. The thought is of pounding and vigorously rubbing an item in order to really clean it. It refers not to a surface washing, but to one that goes deeply (used in Jeremiah 4:14 of cleansing the heart).
- C. ***Let me hear joy and gladness.*** David seeks restoration (cf. Isaiah 22:13; 35:10; 51:3, 11). In verse 8 David remembers the misery his sin had brought him.
- D. ***Hide your face from my sin and blot out all of my iniquity.*** This refers to expiation,⁷ the blotting out of sin (cf. verse 1).

- IV. **RENEWAL (verses 10-12).** David seeks not only forgiveness but inward renewal. His wayward acts stem from his wayward bent.
- A. **Create in me a pure heart.** The word *create* is *bara* (cf. Genesis 1:1), and refers to God's creative power. The parallel line (common in Hebrew prose) *renew* means to remake – a radical renovation.
 - B. **Do not cast me from your presence.** Against the Hebrew parallel is “take not your Holy Spirit from me” – to what does this refer? David is speaking as the covenant King – and he does not want God to remove him as He did Saul (1 Samuel 16:13-14).
 - C. **Restore to me the joy of your salvation.** The emphasis is on the *joy*. Sin had robbed David of his joy in God. Note how much David's sin had cost him!
- V. **RESPONSE (verses 13-17).** David now makes a vow – one made out of gratitude. One who has experienced the blessedness of forgiveness will not be content to go about life as before.
- A. **Testimony.** “Then I will teach transgressors (like myself) your ways.” The parallel line is “and sinners will turn back to God.”
 - B. **Praise.** “O Lord open my lips” to proclaim God's mercy. David *never* forgot the serious nature of his sin. He used the expression “blood guilt” (in the intensive plural) to describe graphically his sin of murder. He could rejoice in God's forgiveness, but he never completely forgot his sin (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:9).

CONCLUSION: David is an example of how God's people should respond to God's grace. Anyone who claims to have been forgiven and who does not seek to proclaim to others the grace of God has a very poor estimate of what forgiveness really is – and what it really costs. David valued God's forgiveness because he clearly saw how serious his sin was in God's sight. Until a person comes to see the true character of their sin, they will not come to see their great need for Christ's saving work. Only people, who see themselves as real sinners, will seek the Savior and take refuge in Him and in Him only.

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Works of William Perkins II* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), p. 201.

² William S. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 555.

³ There are seven penitential psalms (5, 32, 37, 51, 102, 130 and 143). They all portray a deep sense of sin and a heartfelt experience of forgiveness.

⁴ *Matthew Henry's Commentary III* (rpt. MacDonald, 1975), p. 429.

⁵ A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (rpt. Baker, 1982), p. 288.

⁶ David Baron, *Types, Psalms and Prophecies: Being a Series of Old Testament Studies* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1981), p. 91.

⁷ Propitiation and expiation are two entirely different concepts. Propitiation (the word is used by Paul in Romans 3:25), where the NIV has the expression "a sacrifice of atonement," cf. the footnote). Propitiation refers to something done *to a person* (Christ propitiated God by bearing His wrath against sinners.) Expiation refers to something done *to particular sins or acts* (they are removed or cancelled). In order for expiation to take place, propitiation must first occur. Leon Morris in his classic study on the atonement noted, "The recent tendency to replace *propitiation* by *expiation* is, in my judgment, mistaken. It is not linguistically sound, and it does not face the demands of context. Unless this expression means that Christ's death is the way in which God's wrath is averted from man, there is nothing to show how the wrath is turned away. And this after the care with which Paul has laboured to show that God is really wrathful against all sin. Nor should it be overlooked that God's righteousness is linked in this section with his wrath, and that, as in 2 Corinthians 5:21, God is the active one. He *set forth Christ* in this way. It is because He is the righteous God that He is wrathful against sin, and that He makes the cross the means of meeting both that righteousness and that wrath. This is not a denial of grace. The grace of God is seen in the fact and the way that He chooses to deal with man's sin. Paul is just as sure that God's grace has fully dealt with man's sin and the resultant wrath against him as he is of the reality of that wrath. And he looks out to the future and sees no further cause for anxiety, for Jesus *delivereth us from the wrath to come* (1 Thess. 1:10). The wrath of God is real. But so is the work of God in Christ. And on account of the latter we no longer fear the former. *The Cross in The New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 225.