

A Repentant Heart and God's Forgiveness

Ps. 6, 25, 32, 38, 51, 103, 130

by Dellen Ludwig

This week our lesson has led us to examine the heart of man as described in these Psalms, and it's not a pretty picture at first glance. But I'm not breaking a new story to you. You have heard this each night in the evening news reports. In fact on some stations the report of our nation's evil is amplified as a motivation to vote during this election year.

The California Department of Justice website, is required to keep track of arrests and convictions. I found a report on California's crime rates for last year to verify what the news has said:

The crime rates per 100,000 population in California in 2021:

- violent crime rates are up 6.7 percent
- homicide rates are up 9.1 percent
- burglary rates are down 5.3 percent
- arrest rates show a total of 7.3 percent lower than 2020 totals.

If we focus on such reports, we might be too terrified to leave our homes! But this situation is not new, it's just flashed into our homes nightly! The writers of the Psalms also saw the sin and evil all around them. They recognized that sin was rampant in people's hearts. They cried for justice. They cried for God's intervention. But it wasn't until they cried for God to change their own hearts that they could see the real problem they were facing. It wasn't those "bad guys" doing all this "bad stuff." The bad stuff comes from inside each of us. This is a heart problem and it isn't a new phenomenon.

David in Psalm 51 revealed his heart in verses 1-3. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me." [Psalm 51:1-3]

Before we examine the repentant and unrepentant heart in the Psalms, let's first define these three words: transgression, iniquity, and sin.

The Cambridge Bible defines these words as follows: "The words thus rendered describe sin in different aspects. (1) [transgression] as rebellion, or breaking away from God; (2) [sin] as wandering from the way, or missing the mark; (3) [iniquity] as depravity, or moral distortion."

Vine's Expository Dictionary would add that a transgression is always a breach of the law. When one violates a commandment of God, you have transgressed against His law. The word sin in the New Testament became "a generic term, yet sometimes inclusive of concrete wrong doing" while the words translated as iniquity in the New Testament relate to lawlessness, wickedness, unrighteousness, wrong or injury; "a condition of not being right whether with God, according to the standard of His holiness and righteousness, or with man, according to the standard of what man knows to be right by his conscience." [Vine's Expository Dictionary; Sin: p.1055; Iniquity: p.600]

The Bible definition says, "everything that does not come from faith, is sin." [Romans 14:23] The standard to measure sin that the Bible uses is that of God's holiness. And according to Romans 3:23, we "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We all have "missed the mark;" we all have wandered from the way; we all have rebelled, breaking away from God.

If God made us, why would we rebel against Him so universally? David examined his heart to notice a striking point, in Psalm 51:5. "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." [Psalm 51:5] If we look at it objectively, we understand we were all born as sinners, thanks to Adam and Eve. You don't have to teach a child to be willful or to disobey. They easily choose their own way.

The Old Testament prophets saw this propensity to sin as a heart problem too. Jeremiah 17:9 described Israel's problem in this way. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

Ezekiel knew his people had this problem, and suffered exile because of it. But God didn't want them to languish in their rebellion. He said, "I will give you back the land of Israel again. They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh." [Ezekiel 11:18, 19]

It's not hard to think of evil to do. The difficult part is to learn to do good. In Psalm 25 David recognized this fact. "Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord are good. Good and upright is the Lord; therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way." [Psalm 25:7-9]

Sinfulness is our natural state, but God can change our hearts. He can teach us a new way. When we humbly approach God and receive instruction from His Word, He will change our sinful hearts into repentant hearts. Let's look at the process of this transformation as revealed in our study of Psalms this week.

David was a man after God's own heart. He served God in Saul's kingdom and faithfully respected God's timing until finally he himself became King of Israel. But David sinned. We may be familiar with his story in 2 Samuel chapter 11 when he lusted after Bathsheba, committed adultery, and had her husband Uriah killed when Bathsheba became pregnant with David's child.

David tried to act like nothing was wrong. He married Bathsheba, brought her into his harem and thought he had covered his sin well. But God knew. And David knew it was wrong. In Psalm 32:3,4 he wrote, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." [Psalm 32:3,4]

In Psalm 38:4 and 6 he described his guilt again. "My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear...I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning." [Psalm 38:4,6]

David realized that his sin was not just against Bathsheba, or just against Uriah, but against God Himself. "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so, you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge." [Psalm 51:4]

Since sin is "missing the mark" of God's holiness, all our transgressions are rebellion against God. Although we may try to ignore our pangs of guilt and say nothing is wrong, guilt does have an effect on us emotionally, physically and spiritually.

David worried that his "hidden sin" would cause God to totally reject him. He cried out to Him, "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." [Psalm 51:11] Would God do that? If we have all sinned, is there any hope for us? Emotionally, that is a devastating thought!

But yes, there is hope. Romans 6 verses 22 and 23 explain, "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus Christ came and died for all of our sin. He saved us from our old naturally sinful nature and gave us His merciful grace, creating a new nature within us!

That grace leads us from the point of salvation toward learning to be holy. God places His very own Holy Spirit within everyone who accepts Jesus as their Savior. During David's time, God's Holy Spirit was only given to indwell a few prophets and kings, for specific times. David had seen God's Spirit leave King Saul when he had repeatedly disobeyed God's directions. So, David was fearful that God might leave him too.

We, however, have the benefit of knowing Christ's new covenant and finished work on the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, He gave His Spirit to all who believed in Him as their Savior, as a "down payment" for His promise of eternal life. "When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory." [Ephesians 1:13,14]

We now know God will never take His Holy Spirit away from believers. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit dwelling inside us Who convicts us of sin and reminds us of the eternal life Christ promised us. In God's mercy and love, He didn't remove His Spirit from David either.

David understood that God was his salvation. Our passage in Psalm 51 goes on to say in verse 14, "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness." [Psalm 51:14] He may not have understood the depth and breadth of God's salvation that would come through Messiah, but David knew God was willing to forgive.

God had established the Mosaic sacrificial system to demonstrate that by the shedding of blood, God would cover sin. But David understood that this couldn't just be a sacrifice done automatically at a weekly ceremony, but must be a demonstration of his heart's inward repentance. He declared, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." [Psalm 51:16,17]

David wanted to make it right; to take back what he had done and never do such a thing again! But it was already done. Now he could only confess his sin and repent from it, and ask for God's mercy and forgiveness. In Psalm 6 he begs: "Have mercy on me, Lord for I am faint; heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long? Turn, Lord, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love." [Psalm 6:2-4]

In Psalm 130:1 and 2 the people of Israel cry for mercy too: "Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can with reverence, serve you." [Psalm 130:1,2]

Our sin is committed against God, and it is God alone who can forgive our sins. Our sinful heart moans for His forgiveness. We know without His forgiveness we are doomed to be forever separated from Him.

But He sent Jesus to save us from our sins, once for all. So, what are we to do when we fall back into those same sins, again? When our repentant hearts are convicted by the Holy Spirit that we have wandered from the way, we must confess our sins to God. David called out to God, "Lord, do not forsake me; do not be far from me, my God." [Psalm 38:21]

When I sin against the Lord God, it is like I have put up a wall between He and I. I feel awful for what I have done, and ashamed to admit I've fallen into that same old sin habit again. I put up another brick between God and myself. I don't want to see condemnation in his eyes if I delay to cry out, "I've done it again!" My wall adds another brick.

But God doesn't see a brick wall between us, just an unrepentant heart. He waits for me to admit my sin and confess my sinful heart. He is waiting to forgive, but I must confess.

In Psalm 32:5 David admitted, "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." [Psalm 32:5]

When I was a very little girl, and newly saved, I was playing one day with my brother's cars. I was speaking for the "nice family" and then for the "mean family," as I played. I was inviting the "neighbors" in my scenario to come to church. Then I said, "I don't believe in God, I don't want to go to church!"

I suddenly stopped what I was doing. "Oh no!" I thought. "What if God didn't know I was playing? What if he thinks I really meant what I just said?? I felt very guilty for quite a while and couldn't stop worrying that God might think I had now rejected Him in my life!

Finally, I went to Sunday school, and the opportunity came to go forward and accept Christ. I readily stepped up. The wonderful lady, Mrs. West, who had prayed with me the first time I accepted the Lord also talked with me this time. I confessed what I had done and how God must think I didn't love Him.

But instead of leading me to pray asking again for Jesus to come into my heart, she showed me I John 1:9. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." I learned that God is ready to forgive the repentant heart.

He even faithfully forgives the sins I didn't know I had done. He doesn't shame me saying, "What! You've done that same sin again???" He has already forgiven that past sin and eagerly waited to forgive each sin. And yes, He knew I was playing.

God had not turned far away from me because of my sins. He had always been waiting for me to "repent"; for me to turn away from my sins and turn toward God. He had never moved away from me. I had moved away from Him. I just needed to confess my sins to break down the wall of unrepentance and turn back toward His waiting arms, into His compassionate forgiveness.

The Psalmist understood God's forgiveness. "The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer." [Psalm 6:9] "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." [Psalm 51:7]

The reference to hyssop is particularly powerful. Leprosy in Biblical days was an awful disease. It was so contagious that anyone who had leprosy was banned from the temple and their community. They had to cover their faces and call out "unclean, unclean!" whenever anyone else came around them, to avoid contact or spreading the disease.

Scripture uses leprosy as a picture of sin. We are all unclean in our sin and separated from God because He is holy. But God forgives sins and sometimes God healed lepers.

Leviticus 14:4 records that when a person who had leprosy had been healed, the person must show themselves to the priest. Hyssop was used with the blood of a sacrificed bird, to cleanse the spot so that the person would be now called "clean," by the priest, and could return home safely and reenter worship at the temple.

Sin separates us from God and breaks fellowship between believers. Just like leprosy, it must be totally purified before fellowship with God and the church can be restored as it should be.

The process of repentance and confession of sins brings that purification to us. David described this process in Psalm 103: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." [Psalm 103:11,12]

The Lord God Almighty is ready to show His love and compassion to us. When we confess our sins, He will forgive and forget them – He puts them that far away from his presence! He forgives that little girl who didn't understand confession, or the nature of her all-knowing, all-loving God. He forgives that boy who turned to his own way and got into drugs trying to mask out the pain in his heart. He forgives the men and women who riot and rampage. He forgives adultery and lies. He forgives anyone who will repent and ask for His mercy.

His forgiveness will remove all of our sin, but He sometimes will allow us to go through the earthly consequences of our sins. David had to live with the consequence of losing the baby Bathsheba bore. The pain and destruction our sin causes may have legal or financial consequences that must be paid. It may be hard for injured parties to forgive us. God teaches us through those consequences more about His love and compassion. "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him." [Psalm 103:13]

However, He will never abandon us in our sin. He will teach us to live in His ways instead. "Turn, Lord, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love." [Psalm 6:4] "In you, Lord my God, I put my trust. I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me." [Psalm 25:1,2]

God uses the consequences in our lives to teach us and in turn to teach others of His ways. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you." [Psalm 51:12,13]

David recognized that his experience of God's forgiveness could be a tool used to help the next generation understand God's mercy too. In Psalm 103:17 and 18 David proclaimed: "But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their

children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his bidding.” [Psalm 103:17,18]

God in His amazing love and compassion has offered forgiveness from the sins our repentant hearts confess. Our memory verse announces the Psalmist's conviction: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord’ – and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

I would like to give you one more illustration about God's forgiveness, that has helped me understand it better.

Imagine with me that you find yourself standing before the Judge, with your Advocate beside you. You hear the gavel smack down as the Judge says, “I find the defendant guilty as charged.”

You know this is true. The trial is over. Everything has been said. You have been found out; you did it. You hang your head as your sentence is read.

You cringe as the Judge says, “You are to be sentenced to death, the due penalty of the law.” You are in shock, even though you knew this was a death penalty case!

The guard steps toward you with hand-cuffs, ready to take you out to be executed ...but your Advocate raises his hand and stops the guard a step away. He asks, “May I approach the bench?” The Judge allows this, and your Advocate walks around the desk to speak softly to the Judge.

It takes only a few moments, until your Advocate returns. But instead of talking to you, he approaches the guard. Your Advocate is then cuffed, and led through that door to the executioner, instead of you!

You stand dumbfounded! What just happened? But the Judge speaks, “Your penalty has been paid. You are free to go.” The gavel snaps down once more and the court begins to clear.

But you still can't believe what has happened! You call out to the Judge and ask carefully, “I'm free? What about the things I have done?” But the Judge shows you your file.

He explains, “Your Advocate had volunteered to take your penalty for you. Look here. All of the charges against you have been paid for.”

When you look you notice the dates. Not only today's date is listed, and all the wrong things you have done in your past, but also future dates of things you have yet to do – all of them are crossed out, each with a red line; and marked “Paid in Full.”

Now you have a choice to make. Would you call out, “No! I don't accept this!” Could you walk out of the court into your life, unchanged by this experience, still in rebellion? Or would you leave, changed forever by such an act of mercy?

Could you demand a retrial of each sin you have yet to commit even though each future sin is already marked as forgiven? No, each one is already “Paid in Full.”

Christ our Advocate has died for every sin we have committed, do commit, and will ever commit. They are “Paid in Full.” God has accepted that payment and marked our list of sins out by the red blood Jesus shed on the cross. His justice is satisfied.

Accept His forgiveness, won't you? He desires to give you a clean, pure heart. We each only need to “confess my transgression to the Lord” – and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” That is God's Forgiveness.

Let's pray

Let's stand together as we sing the Doxology

Doxology

Praise God from whom all blessing flow;
Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above the heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!
Amen