

The Wisdom Literature

Lesson #7

Psalms Of Repentance

Introduction

- David is referred to in the scriptures as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; 16:7; Acts 13:22). In a previous study we examined the traits of heart he possessed that moved God to compliment him in such a wonderful way. Truly, David was a good man.
- However, even though God considered the shepherd king to share His own heart characteristics, David was well-acquainted with sin and its consequences. Many of David's psalms demonstrate his penitent spirit but there are seven of which repentance is the dominate characteristic (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). These are thus called the psalms of repentance.
- These songs give us unique insight into the heart of a man broken by his sin, who acknowledged that sin before God, and who begged for forgiveness from the One he had truly offended. Looking carefully into the life of David, and analyzing his attitude toward his own sin and what it did to his relationship with God, will certainly benefit us as we grope for a closer relationship with our Creator and the Sustainer of the Universe.

Historical Background

- Though David may have been a man of many sins, it is his adulterous tryst with Bathsheba that became a defining moment in his life. This one event was an ugly blemish on an otherwise faithful life (1 Kings 15:5). A study of the psalms of repentance would be of little value without first reviewing the circumstances surrounding this event. It particularly serves as the background for Psalms 32 and 51. The story is recorded in 2 Samuel 11-12.
- David had sent his armies to besiege the Ammonite city of Rabbah while he remained idle in Jerusalem. One evening as he was walking on his rooftop he observed a beautiful woman bathing in a courtyard below. It was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. David's look turned to lust and his lust to covetousness. To have her was his obsession. So he sent for her and, when she came, he committed adultery with her. A few months later she reported to David that she was pregnant.
- Because her husband was away in battle there was no doubt that the child belonged to David. In an effort to cover his sin, David sought to bring Uriah home from battle. When his best efforts to hide his sin failed, David had Uriah killed. After a period of mourning, David took Bathsheba to be his wife.

- David lived with his sin for about a year -- perhaps trying to deny it, perhaps excusing it, perhaps trying to justify what he did -- until God sent Nathan the prophet to confront him. "You are the man!" were Nathan's words. They pierced the king to the heart and he confessed, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13). The penalty for David's sin was threefold (2 Samuel 12:10-14):
 - The sword would never depart from his house.
 - Evil would be raised up against David from his own household.
 - The child that Bathsheba bore to David would die.
- The child became very sick. "David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground" (2 Samuel 12:15-16). This continued for seven days until finally the child died (2 Samuel 12:18). These facts particularly need to be remembered as one reads David's songs of repentance. David's subsequent behavior and a reading of his psalms leaves no doubt in the mind of the honest inquirer that his repentance was genuine. Psalms 32 and 51 were written, most likely, shortly after this event. Psalm 6, 38, 102, 130 and 143 were perhaps written at other times but their words show how keenly the king remembered his iniquities and placed his trust in God to forgive.
- In this study we will only look at four of the psalms of repentance in this order: Psalm 32 and 51 (because they appear directly related to David's sin with Bathsheba), then Psalm 6 and 38.

Psalm 32

- As we study the psalms of repentance it helps us to remember David's background. Being a man after God's own heart David had been, from his youth, a person of knowledge. David knew well the commandments God had given to Moses, but in his sin with Bathsheba he had violated at least four of them.
 - "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife" (Exodus 20:17).
 - "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14).
 - "Thou shalt not steal" (Exodus 20:15).
 - "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13).
- David's sin was not a sin of ignorance where he did not know what God's will was in the matter and for which we might be tempted to excuse him. The words David uses to describe his actions are revealing.
 - "Transgression" means "rebellion." David knew that God said, "Thou shalt not commit adultery" and in defiance against God's authority he did so anyway.
 - "Sin" means "to miss the way, go wrong, incur guilt." David knew the difference between right and wrong and he intentionally chose the wrong path.

- "Iniquity" means "perversity or depravity; that which is twisted and crooked." David's actions in the matter of Bathsheba was anything but straight. Every step in his downward spiral involved perverse, twisted thinking; the very opposite of pure and sincere service to God.
- It is against this background that Psalm 32 is written. We are impressed, not by David the man of sin, but David the man of genuine repentance. There are three points in the psalm worthy of our consideration.
 - The blessed state of forgiveness (vss. 1-2). Though it did not excuse his actions, David knew that "there is none that doeth good" (Psalm 14:1; 53:1; cf. Romans 3:10, 23). He understood that all men stand before God as sinners in need of forgiveness. O, how blessed is the man who experiences God's forgiveness, from whom God removes the guilt and the burden of sin and remembers them no more. In another psalm David said, "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). The prophet captured the spirit of forgiveness well when he affirmed that God would "cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19). True happiness cannot be found aside from forgiveness.
 - The anguish of sin (vss. 3-4). In contrast to forgiveness is the matter of the guilt of sin. Guilt is a heavy burden and a hard taskmaster. Sin not only effects one spiritually, it can and often does have physical consequences as well; consequences which David experienced. David groaned over his sin, lost his appetite and had little strength with which to go about his daily tasks of ruling. He had done wrong, he knew it and it hurt! David brought this pain upon himself and perhaps the realization of this was the worse part of his pain. Furthermore, the longer he kept silent about his sin, the worse his pain grew.
 - The sweetness of confession (vs. 5). Finally, David could bear his sin no longer and confessed, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13). Note that no less than four times David uses the little word "my" in Psalm 32:5 -- my sin, my iniquity, my transgressions, my sin. He acknowledged to God that it was he who had sinned; he did not try to blame anyone else or attempt to excuse what he had done. Up to this point he had been trying to hide his sin, but now he brought it out in the open and confessed it.
- Warren Wiersbe made this excellent observation, "What is 'confession of sin?'" It is much more than simply admitting we have sinned. The Hebrew word means 'to acknowledge,' while the Greek word (as in 1 John 1:9) means 'to say the same thing' ... True confession of sin is not just with the lips, for there must also be a broken heart (Psalm 51:16-17)

and a surrendered will. When we confess our sins, we acknowledge that what God says about them is true. We also judge our sins and turn from them (1 Corinthians 11:31). What many people think is confession of sin is really only excusing sin and looking for a way to escape from the consequences!" (*Meet Yourself In The Psalms*, p. 58).

Psalm 51

- It is difficult to know whether Psalm 32 or Psalm 51 was written first. It probably does not matter because both seem to have been written near the same time and the motivation for each derived from the same event, i.e. David's sin with Bathsheba. Even though these are psalms of confession and repentance of sin, perhaps because they are psalms of confession and repentance, the more we read these psalms the more we understand why God called David, "a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfill all my will" (Acts 13:22).
- It is in the reading and study of these psalms that we see the heart of a man who longs for a pure, unfettered, unencumbered relationship with God more than anything else. The effects of sin are clearly seen in this psalm.
 - Sin affects the eyes (vs. 3). All David could see were his sins. "My sin is ever before me." He could not forget about them. Every decision he made, every judgment he rendered was made more difficult because his thoughts were burdened by his sins. One might ask, "Why? Why be so concerned about mistakes?" The reason is simple -- David realized that his own foolish behavior damaged his relationship with God.
 - Sin affects the ears (vs. 8). The grief over his own sinful behavior and the realization that he had disappointed his God made David lose the sound of joy and gladness. How can a man be happy, how can he make merriment, when by his own actions he is alienated from the One he loves most?
 - Sin affects the heart (vss. 10-12). David prayed that God would, "Create in me a clean heart" (vs. 10) indicating that he understood how corrupt his heart had become. He realized that lust, covetousness, adultery, stealing, deceit and murder came from perverse thinking and corruption of heart (cf. Matthew 15:18-20).
 - Sin affects the lips (vss. 13-15). When one is guilty of stealing it is difficult to teach others that they should not. David felt that he could not teach until his relationship with God was restored (vss. 12-13). Furthermore, the sweet singer of Israel was rendered incapable of doing what he loved (singing praises) until he obtained God's deliverance (vs. 14).

- As we emphasized the words David used to describe his sins, look now at the words and phrases he uses to ask for forgiveness. Phrases like “wash me” (vss. 2, 7), “cleanse me” (vs. 2), “purify me” (vs. 7), “restore me” (vs. 12), “uphold me” (vs. 12), “deliver me” (vs. 14). It is quite clear that David saw the true nature of sin: filthy, defiling and alienating. David affirmed, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 51:17).
- Broken by the realization of what he had done, David begged, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” (Psalms 51:1-2).

Psalm 6

- As we study the psalms, particularly the psalms of repentance, we find ourselves wanting to know more about the exact conditions under which each was written and the precise time of their writing. In most cases we are left to a careful examination of the text for these clues which often are the key to understanding what was written.
- Psalm 6 was written at a time in David’s life when he faced many adversaries (vs. 7), workers of iniquity (vs. 8) and men whom he considered to be his enemies (vs. 10). In these adversarial relationships David felt the rebuke and chastening of the Lord (vs. 1). Perhaps David felt that his problems were of his own making and are now compounded by the sins of others. There are four noteworthy points in this psalm.
 - David’s condition. The king is “pining away” (vs. 2), wasting away in mourning, because of painful circumstances created by his own misdeeds. Sleepless nights and countless tears are the rewards of his behavior (vs. 6). Have you ever been there? David felt sick to his bones (vs. 2). He felt alienated from God and lost (vs. 4). Do you know the feeling?
 - David’s request. David needed healing for his sickness (vs. 2). He needed to feel again the presence of the Lord so he begged, “Return, O Lord, deliver my soul” (vs. 4). Feeling lost, without guidance, he plead with the Lord, “Save me” (vs. 4). Have you prayed David’s prayer?
 - David’s God. If, as David believed, his problems were the result of his own sins and compounded by enemies, the king had only one place to turn -- to his God. Perhaps one of the most impressive points one can see in David’s character is his concept of God. David saw God as a God of righteous judgment who could and did get angry when His subjects sinned (vs. 1; cf. 51:4). Yet, in his repentance,

David believed in a God who would heal the sick, restore fellowship and offer guidance (vss. 2, 4).

- Notice the balance in David's view of God. God is just and righteous, but He is also a God of forgiveness and guidance.
- Too often, our view of God is distorted. We often fail to see God as so holy that He cannot abide with sin and thus exercises His wrath upon the guilty.
- David's confidence. If David felt the sting of God's wrath, he never did waiver in his confidence in God to forgive his sin. Remember that we are talking about the shepherd boy who faced the lion and the bear with faith in God (1 Samuel 17:34-35). This is David who faced the giant of the Philistines, Goliath of Gath, with only a sling and five small stones (1 Samuel 17:45). Now he is facing perhaps the biggest obstacle of his life, his own failure, but his confidence is in God. David had confidence that God beheld his pain and heard his prayer (vss. 8-9).

Psalm 38

- A psalm is a song; poetry set to the motion of rhythm. Song writers, or psalmists, are by their nature reflective people. They write about real life and their emotions. Sometimes their songs are songs of joy and happiness but sometimes those songs are about heartache and pain. Most people have a preference to particular songs, even spiritual songs, because they associate with their message. As we study this particular psalm we want to notice six points.
 - Suffering. Psalm 38 is a song about suffering, real suffering. This suffering covered a wide spectrum. David suffered physically (vss. 3, 5-7). He suffered emotionally (vss. 8, 18). He suffered socially as friends rejected him (vs. 11). Much of this suffering came at the hand of his enemies (vss. 12, 16, 19).
 - Suffering because of sin. Suffering is not always the result of one's own sin. Sometimes innocent people suffer because of the sin of others and sometimes that suffering takes place because "time and chance happeneth to them all" (Ecclesiastes 9:11). There are a number of different reasons why people suffer. However, there is no doubt in this psalm that David felt his suffering to be the result of his own sinful behavior. He refers to "my sin ... my iniquities ... my foolishness" (vss. 3-5, cf. vs. 18). Earlier in this lesson we studied the words "sin" and "iniquity" and what they imply. Interestingly, the psalmist here adds the word "foolishness" to his list of synonyms for sin. "Foolishness" means to ignore wisdom and implies irrational conduct that can only end in disaster.

- Suffering as discipline from God. Not only did he see his suffering caused by his own foolishness, David saw his suffering as divine discipline. Later Solomon would observe, "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth" (Proverbs 3:11-12). David felt the sting of God's chastisement for he said, "thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore" (vs. 2). David's pain was inflicted to teach him a valuable lesson.
- Suffering justly. When we face suffering one of the first questions asked is, "Why me?" Perhaps it would be better to ask, "Why NOT me?" What makes me different than other sufferers, particularly when that suffering can be viewed as chastisement? Should I be immune to divine discipline? What would such immunity say about God's love for me (cf. Hebrews 12:5-6)? David said, "I was as a man that heareth not, and in whose mouth are no reproofs" (vss. 13-14). Sometimes we deserve the pain we receive and should rejoice that we have the opportunity to learn the lessons that such discipline brings (cf. James 1:2-4).
- Suffering on the precipice of destruction. David felt threatened both from without (vs. 12) and within (vs. 17). He did not know whether or not he had the strength to be able to endure. Perhaps it is only when one gets this low, so low he finds no place within his own resources to turn, that he is forced to reevaluate his basic motivations.
- Suffering only confession could heal. Under the sting of divine discipline and the press of the divine hand, David said, "I declare mine iniquity ... Forsake me not, O Lord ... Make haste to help me ..." (vss. 18, 21, 22). David's hope was in God and the king had confidence that God would answer his prayer (vs. 15).
- He is overwhelmed with guilt, abandonment and a desire for renewed fellowship with God. By the end of the psalm, he commits his cause to God, his Father.

Conclusion

- Ralph Walker wrote, "reading the diary entries of David which describe his wrestlings with sin, I discovered ... an attitude about sin unfamiliar to me." Perhaps we all do when we read the Psalms.
- The psalms of repentance touch our heart in a very special way. They show us more about our sin than we sometimes want to know. Moreover, they reveal a God worth getting to know in an intimate way, worth giving up everything this world has to offer, just to bask in His love. Do you know the God of David?