

6) HAVE MERCY ON ME, O GOD (PSALM 51)

INTRODUCTION

Confession and penitence are an integral part of prayer and of the Christian life as a whole. Many believers have been introduced to the life of prayer through the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Most believers learn the story of the prodigal son, among others, which models the path to repentance, confession and restoration. Every worship service includes prayers of confession.

But, only a few psalms have confession as a focus. Most of them are a cry for help or a complaint about the prosperity or success of the wicked over the righteous, or else, there is even argument for the innocence of the psalmist. Only 7 psalms stand out as "penitential." They are: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143, and some of these contain little that one would recognize as confession. Psalm 51 is an exception. It is the sharpest and most complete expression of the penitential spirit. Traditionally, it is read at the beginning of Lent and it has been influential in shaping many prayers of confession.

PRAYER OF HELP

Prayers of confession fall within the category of prayers for help of an individual. But the "enemy" in this case is the psalmist's sin. The opening line sets the tone: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love (*hesed*). The remainder of the psalm expands the request for help and assumes that the Lord is merciful.

The context for the psalm is given us in the heading. David has an affair with Bathsheba and engineers the death of her husband, Uriah, in battle. The prophet Nathan confronts David with his wrong doing (2 Samuel 11:1 – 12:13). Upon recognizing his sin, David falls to his knees in repentance and accepts whatever consequence must befall him. Taking David as a model, this psalm is a prayer for deliverance.

A PRAYER FOR THE COMMUNITY

Vs. 18-19 assume the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, which took place in 587BC by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Psalm 51 echoes passages in Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah which express prayerful hope of the restoration of Jerusalem.

v.10 echoes Jeremiah 24:7, 31:33, 32:39-40; Ezekiel 36:25-26, which speak of a new heart being given by God to faithless Israel. In Ezekiel, it is God's cleansing that will produce this new heart. The ritual of sacrifice should arise out of this pure heart and cleansed spirit.

Psalm 51 is also consistent with the New Testament claim that salvation depends on God's grace alone, through faith. Outward ritual must bear witness to inward purity and sincerity of heart.

A PRAYER OF PETITIONS

Vs. 1-2 – make 4 requests:

- Have mercy
- Blot out my transgressions
- Wash me (same word used as washing laundry)
- Cleanse me

The Purification is coming from outside to inside:

- Blot out – like outwardly wiping a dish
- Wash – Launder
- Cleanse – purify my inner self

Terms of wrongdoing include:

- Rebellion – another word for transgressions
- Shameful acts – iniquity (which causes guilt)
- Mistakes – or “sin” (missing the mark)

The emphasis is intended to express the severity of the Psalmist's disobedience and his intensity of desire not only for forgiveness, but for purification from sin and its effects.

Vs. 3-6 – offers 1 petition with a recognition of guilt. Awareness of sin produces the realization that God's sentence is justified. Sinning against God adds weight and accountability to the sin. The emphasis of sinfulness at birth and parallelism of sinfulness at conception adds further weight to the judgment. The emphasis is on sinfulness not just sins. There is a corruption of spirit not just a series of mistakes without deeper root. This is a very “protestant” view of sin.

A PRAYER FOR RENEWAL

Vs. 6-12 – The petition for forgiveness and cleansing continues but with added emphasis on the possibilities for renewal. “I’m sorry,” is not enough. Real change must follow. A request for renewal is as important as an acknowledgment of wrong. The request is for a “clean heart” and a “new and right spirit” as well as a restored “joy.” The Hebrew word “bara” for “create” is a word reserved for God in the Old Testament. In Genesis 1:1 God “bara” the heaven and the earth, and so on. God alone can create a clean heart and establish a right spirit.

Such a spirit is one that trusts God in difficult times and submits to God in times of trouble and guilt. This was Israel's experience in the wilderness as well as in exile. The “joy” and “gladness” of the psalmist is also paralleled in the people as a whole in their hoped for return from exile. Just as God initiated and carried out their experiences of deliverance, so God must restore the sinful heart.

THE SACRIFICE OF A BROKEN SPIRIT

Vs. 13-19 concludes the psalm with reference to: proper sacrifices, a heart turned toward God, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. All three are interrelated. Only sacrificial rituals from those with broken spirits will be accepted. A broken spirit is a spirit surrendered to God's will which is the opposite of arrogant self-reliance and self-assurance. Like the prodigal son who returns, this psalm teaches that the broken spirit alone can experience intimacy with God.

The restoration of Jerusalem = the renewal of the nation. Restoration of Jerusalem, however, requires the restoration of the peoples' right relationship with God. This psalm is both personal and communal.

What we learn from this psalm is that sin is not so much an act but a state of being common to us all. Moreover, the consequences of individual sin has an affect beyond us. Indeed, it can affect the whole community. Downplaying it or isolating it weakens its impact. The deeper and wider the repentance, the deeper will be the peace and freedom we experience, and our intimacy with God.

Next week read Psalms 95-99