

Psalm 51 The mercy of God

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Have you heard the expression 'doubling down'?

It's a new one.

It would surprise me if it were not new to some of you.

It's a phrase that comes from the world of investing.

You've put some money in a stock and the SP falls.

What are you going to do?

You could say, "That was a bad idea, I'll cut my losses and sell?"

Or you could say, "I thought it was cheap before,

it's even cheaper now,

I'm buying more."

That is doubling down.

The SP is down and I'm doubling my exposure.

But the expression has crept out of investing into ordinary life.

Someone is said to be doubling down

if they say something that people find offensive

and instead of apologising,

they try to defend the claim they've made.

Why has this phrase appeared?

Because on social media,

it has become impossible to apologise.

Any apology is seen as a weakness to be piled on by those who disagree,

and as capitulation by those who agree with you.

Humbly saying, "I got something wrong,"

has become a thing of the past.

Instead people 'double down'.

We protest our correctness.

We tell those who were offended that they are snowflakes.

We find something worse that the other guys has said or done.

We double down.

Well Psalm 51 is a challenge to our practice of doubling down.
King David is caught out about as badly as you can be caught out.
And he gives us the Biblical model
of how to respond when you've done the wrong thing.
It's not doubling down.
It's humble confession.
Doubling down is not the Christian response to getting caught out.
Confession is.

Well Psalm 51 is one of the few psalms
that tells you what events prompted its composition.
So what exactly did David do?
He was out walking on the roof of his palace.
You might think he was just stretching his legs.
But I'm guessing not.
The palace was the tallest building in Jerusalem,
and everyone took their baths on the roof,
which David happened to have a perfect view of.
Odds on, David was on the roof specifically to admire the view.
He saw a woman bathing who he took a fancy to.
He didn't stop with admiring the view.
He inquired as to who she was.
He found out she was a married woman.
He sent for her.
He slept with her.
He made her pregnant.
He tried to cover up his crime
by getting her husband to come back from the war and sleep with his wife.
He was unsuccessful in covering up his crime.
So he organised for her husband to be killed in the war.
The summary adultery and murder doesn't tell the whole story.
Abuse of power and all around bad bloke.

But he got busted.
God revealed to the prophet Nathan what David had done.
And Nathan confronted King David.
And David could easily have doubled down.
"Guess what?
I'm the King.
I do what I like.
Executioner, remove Nathan's head from the top of his neck."
It would have been easy.
Henry VIII wouldn't have thought twice about it.
But David didn't double down.
He confessed his sin.
And he wrote a song about it.

So what's in the song?
It starts with a request for mercy.
That's 1-2)
"Have mercy on me O God,
according to your unfolding love;
according to your compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin."
Is it even fair to ask for mercy in this situation?
Uriah is not going to see his kids grow up
because David had him killed.
Why should David get mercy?
The answer is that there is no reason.
You can't give a good reason why God should show mercy.
None of us deserve mercy.
But God is merciful and he gives mercy
to those who come before him humbly and request it.

In the second part of the song, David says,
51:4 "Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight."

He's not here trying to minimise the reality of his offenses against people.

He certainly sinned against Uriah,

he knew it and he wasn't trying to discount it.

His point is that sin is first and foremost against God.

Yes you can sin by failing to love your neighbour.

But even when you do that,

you are primarily sinning against God.

Your neighbour was made in the image of God.

And your neighbour was made by God.

So if you sin against your neighbour,

you are sinning against someone

who God has designated as his image bearer.

And against someone who God took the trouble to create.

And so because a sin against the almighty creator of the universe
is far more serious than a sin against his creation,

you could even say,

"Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight."

It's not to lessen the seriousness of the sin against people
but to underline how dreadful it is to sin against God.

In the third part of the song,

David once again pleads for mercy.

51:7 "Cleans me with hyssop and I will be clean,
wash me and I will be whiter than snow."

This time the plea for mercy

gives an understanding of where mercy comes from.

Hyssop is a plant that the priests of the OT used
to dip in the blood of the sacrifices

and then flick some blood on places that needed to be purified.
Mercy can only come because a sacrifice has paid the price.
And those sacrifices pointed forward to the sacrifice of Jesus.
Without Jesus and his death,
any appeal to God's mercy will go unheeded.
But with Jesus,
every appeal to God's mercy in Jesus name will be answered.
David recognises that what he needs
is not some therapy so he can forgive himself.
He needs actual forgiveness that comes from God.

In the fourth part of the song,
David requests more than mercy.
He wants transformation.
He wants a heart that won't desire to sin against God.
51:10 "Create in me a pure heart O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me."
There's a big difference between wanting to be rescued
from the consequences of your sin
and actually wanting God to change you so you don't sin again.
Real repentance is wanting God to change you.
But sometimes we harbour enough love for our sin
that even though we feel a temporary sadness at it,
we don't really want it to go away.
Or we don't want to face the upheaval of our lives
that would take place if our sin actually did go away.
We've got to learn not just to hate the consequences of our sin,
but to hate the actual sin itself.
We need to hate the pain we cause our loving heavenly father.
We need to hate the harm we do to other people made in God's image.

In the fifth and final part of the song,

David turns to what will happen if God grants his requests.
What's going to happen if David receives mercy and transformation?
Well he will be able to praise God.

51:15 "Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise."

This is not random words of praise.

Sometimes you run into Christian songs
that seem to just string random Christian words together.

Glory, honour, power, love, mercy, grace,
compassion, kindness, justice.

And that's the song.

That's not what David is longing for.

He is going to praise God in full sentences.

Specifically, he's going to praise God by telling the world his story.

I was a murderer and an adulterer.

I cried out to God for mercy.

And he granted me mercy.

And you too can cry out to God for mercy.

He will forgive you and transform you too.

That's what praise is.

And praise becomes ministry.

Because when you praise God

by telling the story of how he has dealt wonderfully with you,
it automatically becomes an invitation for others to join you.

And that's the song David sings,
after the prophet Nathan busts him for what he did.

Not doubling down,
but real repentance.

Now not everyone likes David's song.

Some people ask this question.

Why are Christians so focused on sin?

And we would have to agree that they are undoubtedly correct.

We are focused on sin.

The Bible goes on and on about sin.

From Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden,

to the removal of sin in the New Creation in Revelation,

the Bible goes on and on about sin,

its causes and its cure.

The word sin is mentioned in the Bible 474 times.

And that's without counting transgression,

iniquity, evil, idolatry and all of the other sin words in the Bible.

Sin and dealing with sin is the dominant theme of the whole Bible.

Why is that?

Why can't Christians just spend a bit less time

thinking about sin and forgiveness and all that,

and spend a bit more time thinking about making the world a better place.

Spend more time celebrating acts of love and kindness.

Put more energy into rejoicing in the creativity and inspiration

that God has endowed the human species with.

What are you so focused on sin, sin, sin all the time?

Let me give you a few reasons.

1. It's reality.

The Bible focuses on sin

because it is actually the source of all the problems in the world.

Without sin there would have been no shooting

in the primary school in Texas this week.

There would have been no guns being sold to make it possible.

There would be no war in the Ukraine,

or anywhere else.

There would be no famine in Yemen.

There would be no pandemic.

The Bible focuses on sin
because sin really is the root of every other problem.
And unless you deal with sin,
your efforts at solving other problems will be
like bailing a sinking ship with a colander.

2. The Bible focuses on sin
because dealing with sin is the path to forgiveness.
You can go and join in on clean up Australia Day
or contribute to whatever your favourite good cause.
But none of them actually will get someone forgiven by God.
David knew it.

"Against you, you only, have I sinned".
Fixing our relationship with God is the most important thing.
Not only is it the most important thing,
if we try to fix other things without fixing our relationship with God,
then we are doomed to fail.
It would be like putting a coat of fresh paint on a sinking ship.

3. The Bible focuses on sin
because dealing with sin is the path to transformation.
People get frustrated with us,
because we aren't spending more energy making the world a better place.
But if we are rooting sin out of our lives,
then we are making the world a better place.
It might not look as impressive as dealing with a climate emergency.
But what is David's great desire?
"Create in me a pure heart, O God."
If we work towards that goal.
And pray that bit by bit, God would achieve that goal in us,
then the world is going to be a better place.
But what happens if you solve the climate emergency

without a pure heart?

Well without a pure heart,
there will be something self serving about your solution.
It will advantage you and your group above other groups.
You might stop the sea levels rising,
but there will still be fights and acrimony.

A case in point is the existence of political parties.
Every single political party was formed to make the world a better place.
The one you voted for and the one you put last.
The Liberal party was formed so that those who aspire to a better life
would be enabled to achieve their goal.
The Labor party was formed
so that workers would be treated fairly in their workplaces.
The Greens were formed
so that the planet would be taken care of.
The National party was formed
so that country Australians wouldn't be forgotten in the corridors of power
which are overwhelmingly populated by city slickers.
And you can go on.
The point is they were all formed with a noble goal.
But is it possible that those noble goals can be corrupted?
Too right it is.
It's so easy for political parties to focus on clambering over each other
to get power and prestige for myself.
It's so easy for that to happen,
that many Australians have come to believe
that's all political parties actually do.
The only solution to the problem is pure hearts.
Unless we deal with the problem on human sin,
that is what political parties will always do.
They can only make the world a better place

if they are populated by people with transformed hearts.

4. The Bible focuses on sin because dealing with sin is the path to service. You know the people complaining about how much the Bible talks about sin aren't doing that because they like complaining. They might not even be doing it out of sinful rebellion against God. Though I would want to caution anyone about complaining about the Bible. It is God's book, you know. But to be as charitable as possible, they complain about how much the Bible talks about sin because they want the world to be a better place. And they just can't see how Psalm 51 is helping with that. But Psalm 51 is about making the world a better place because David is enabled to serve God by dealing with his sin. 51:13 "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you." You see if David finds forgiveness, and his heart is transformed, it doesn't stop with David. David is going to tell others about where they can find forgiveness and have their hearts transformed. And that changes the world.

Institutions are not very popular at the moment. Everyone wants to be in a movement. Institutions are calcified into rigid structures. Movements are gloriously flexible and adaptive. Institutions are full of people clambering for power. Movements are full of people

working together harmoniously to change the world.
The teal independents are very keen to define themselves
as a movement not a party.
People who are working together to change the world.
Well we don't want to believe all the marketing.
All movements become institutions.
You can't stay cohesive without organisation.
But there's one movement that really does change the world.
It's the movement of people who have had their hearts transformed
telling others about how they too can have their hearts transformed.

Why are Christians obsessive about sin?

Because it the reality that sin is the cause of all the problems of the world.
Because dealing with sin is how you get forgiven by God.
Because dealing with sin is how God transforms your heart
and because when you've dealt with sin
you can actually serve God and make the world a better place.