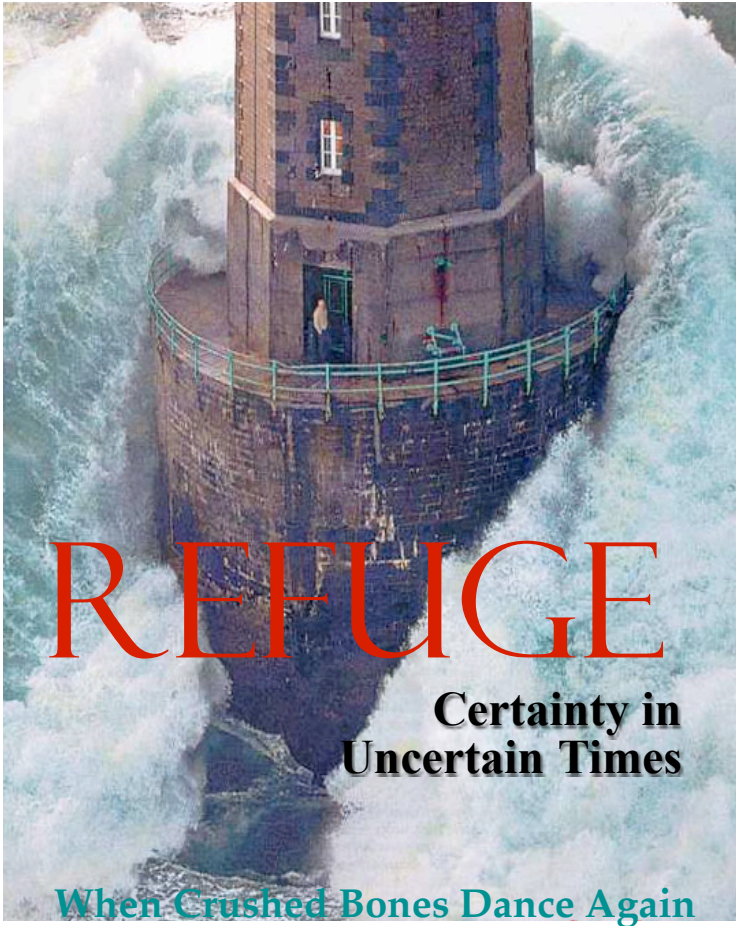


The Covenant Pulpit



Psalm 51

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As the final meeting of the Continental Congress concluded, a crowd gathered outside the hall in Philadelphia. A woman shouted to Benjamin Franklin, "What have you given us?" The old statesman peered over half-moon glasses and responded,

"A republic, madam...if you can keep it!"

Our founding fathers understood that freedom is not a guaranteed legacy. Freedom is purchased on the installment plan, one generation at a time. These architects of America also understood that our future was tied to our morality. John Adams wrote,

"Our constitution was made only for moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."

In the early 19th Century French social thinker and politician, Alexis de Tocqueville visited America to discover the secret of our democracy. After several months touring the new republic he wrote, "America is great because she is good. If she ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

The architects of America grasped an immutable principle of government: the public good is dependent on personal virtues. What we do in private as individuals *will* have a public impact. Thomas Jefferson said, "What happens behind closed doors, when no one else is looking, will eventually worm its way into the public square."

Postmodern American thinking is the polar opposite of that of our founding fathers. Socrates may have said, "...the wealth of a nation is found in her citizen's virtues..." but Hollywood bad girl, Mae West better captures today's thinking: "Virtue has its own reward, but it doesn't get you much at the box office." As few years later, Marilyn Monroe said, "In Hollywood, a girl's virtue is less important than her hairdo." I think that it was Paris Hilton who recently quipped, "Being a good girl won't get you very far."

Thomas Jefferson said that what we do in private will worm its way into the public square, but today's citizens are more apt to say, "As long as I don't hurt anyone else, what I do in private is my own business." This kind of logic took a huge leap forward after President Bill Clinton's affair with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. He argued that what he did in his private office was not the public's business. His defenders argued that, as long as he balanced the federal budget, what did it matter if he was an adulterer in private?

A few years later, presidential candidate George Bush made a disparaging comment about a news reporter. It was meant only for the ears of vice-presidential candidate, Dick Cheney. But George Bush's private profanities

were accidentally picked up by a news microphone. Bush's handlers later argued that his comment didn't matter because it wasn't meant to be public.

A member of the United States women's soccer team made this statement to a reporter: "It isn't cheating if you aren't caught." From U.S. Presidents to Olympic soccer players, we seem to think that we can behave anyway we want as long as do it in private. Our culture has labeled a whole category of immoral acts as "private" or "victimless." Millions addicted to pornography sit alone in front of their computer screens, thinking that they may be corrupting themselves but they aren't hurting anyone else. What did it matter if President JFK was a serial adulterer as long as he kept his affairs to himself (and kept the Soviet missiles out of Cuba)?

But Thomas Jefferson was right: what we do in private will worm its way into the public square. Remember the warning of Alexis de Tocqueville: "If she ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great." Nothing done in private stays hidden. Numbers 32:33 says, "Be sure your sins will find you out." In Luke 8:17 Jesus put it this way: "For there is nothing hidden that shall not be disclosed..." Private sins always corrupt public health.

No one discovered that with more devastation than King David. His army was off fighting wars while he stayed home to enjoy the luxuries of his palace. He was a bored, middle-aged man with too much time on his hands the night he watched another man's wife taking a bath on her rooftop. Imagine the Psalmist playing the "Peeping Tom." He used his power to lure Bathsheba into having sex with him. When reporter, Dan Rather asked President Clinton why he had committed adultery with his White House intern he replied, "I did it because I could." King David might have given the same answer to Dan Rather. But what does it matter what kings or presidents (or ordinary citizens) do in the privacy of the bedrooms (or in front of their computers) as long as they are consenting adults?

But Bathsheba got pregnant. When David couldn't cover it up, he secretly had her war hero husband murdered and then married the grieving widow. He thought he had pulled off the perfect cover-up, but it blew up into a major scandal. You might call it *Bathsheba-Gate*. Thomas Jefferson was right: what we do in private will worm its way into the public square. Our sins will always find us out. In the end, David's *private* sin with Bathsheba led the death of his son and the unraveling of his family. His children hated him for his sin, and grew increasingly rebellious. David, paralyzed by personal guilt, was powerless to confront the growing anarchy in his own household. His oldest son led a palace coup and plunged the nation in civil war. Though David recovered his throne, Israel was fatally wounded. Fifty years later the nation divided, never to recover her glory again.

If we are to remain great as a nation, we must stay good as individuals. After his sin with Bathsheba, David wrote the 51st Psalm as his great prayer of confession and repentance. It is a perfect Psalm for this Fourth of July weekend because it teaches us this critical lesson for keeping our freedom:

**If a key to national health care is forgiveness,
it's critical to know how to repent.**

If anyone ever knew about what sin could do to a nation, it was Solomon the son of David and Bathsheba. When Solomon dedicated his great temple, God warned him that the sins of the people would lead to his judgment being poured out on the nation. Again, we are reminded of Thomas Jefferson's dictum: what we do in private will worm its way into the public square. But God gives this promise to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:14,

"If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

If sin is the curse of a nation, then repentance and forgiveness is its only hope. It was David's only hope in Psalm 51. God told Solomon that it was the only hope of Israel. And I believe that it is the only hope for America. Tonight 2.4 million America kids will go to sleep in a home without a dad. Imagine what would happen to our families if moms and dads could learn to ask for and receive forgiveness? Imagine the impact that Christianity would have on our culture if Christians learned how to repent? What would happen to our crime rate if people learned to give and receive forgiveness? Imagine what the world would be like if people could forgive? Let's look at Psalm 51 and learn how to ask for, and receive forgiveness for our sins:

The Art of Repentance

David was desperate to restore his friendship with God. There was never a person who had a more intimate or passionate relationship with God. He wrote in Psalm 42:2, "My soul thirsts for God." But now he is spiritually dry and insecure. In Psalm 32:3&4 he writes about those days when he tried to hide his sin from God and others: "...my bones wasted away through my groaning all the day long..." He is so desperately insecure that he cries out in Psalm 51:11, "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." Is there anything more painful than a broken relationship? How do we restore such a damaged relationship? Let me share with you seven steps. It is absolutely critical that you don't neglect a single one of them:

1) Confess with Clarity

Notice how clear David is 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.”

Often people say, “If I did something to hurt you, I’m sorry...” or “I’m sorry for whatever I might have done...” or “I’m sorry, *but...*” It is always inappropriate to use the word “if” or “but” in asking for forgiveness. The person you have hurt wants to know that you understand *exactly* what you have done wrong. Moral fuzziness is a poor way to rebuilt trust.

David knows exactly what he has done wrong. “*I know* my transgressions, and my sins are always *before* me.” He doesn’t sugarcoat his sins. Instead, he uses the most graphic words to describe them. You never have a right to ask for forgiveness unless you are willing to declare the brutal facts about yourself. Get it all out on the table. Don’t hold anything back. Partial repentance is no repentance at all.

2) Own it, Don’t Excuse it

Having declared what you did to hurt the other person, you need to say, “I did wrong...” or “I sinned against you.” David says in verse four, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when speak and justified when you judge.” David makes no excuses. It seems like almost everyone who gets caught in some sin has an excuse today. A few years ago, a Florida congressman was caught writing dirty emails to underage boys. Immediately his lawyer issued a statement saying that the poor politician had a problem with alcoholism and had been mistreated as a boy. Most of us make too many excuses for our bad behavior. David didn’t do that. He calls his behavior “sin” and “evil.” He says in verse five, “Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” In other words, “I am a sinner by nature and birth. I have no one to blame but myself.” He goes on in verse six: “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts.” David won’t play games, make excuses, or tell lies. We will never receive total forgiveness until we have taken the blame for our wrongdoing without any excuses.

3) Comprehend the Consequences

Having admitted your sins specifically, and owned our culpability in it, let the other person know how much you have hurt him or her. David says to

God in verse four, "Against you, and only you, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." David wants God to know that he knows how much he has offended him. People need to know that you understand how much you have hurt them. You also appreciate the consequences of your actions. David says in verse 11, "Do not cast me from your presence." In verse 12 he adds, "Restore to me the joy of my salvation..." David knows that he has offended his God. He has broken the intimacy of their relationship. He has robbed it of its joy. In verse 14 he adds, "Save me from bloodguilt, O God." He knows that he has murdered an innocent man. He's filled with guilt—even "bloodguilt." Those you have offended want to know that you are affected by what you did to them. They want to hear you say that you understand how much you have hurt them, and have comprehended the seriousness of the consequences. Making light of something never brings about true reconciliation.

4) Show your Sorrow

David says in verse eight, "Let me hear joy and gladness..." In verse 12 he adds, "Restore to me the joy of my salvation..." David is expressing deep sorrow. The people we have hurt want to know that we are really sorry. Unless your heart is truly broken by what you have done, you are not ready to beg for forgiveness. Instead, go back to God and ask him to reveal the depth of your sin until your heart is truly broken. Only God can work true and deep repentance in the heart of a sinner.

5) Commit to Change

If I'm the person you've hurt, I want to hear more from you than, "I'm sorry." I want to know that you are going to take remedial actions to change your behavior. That's exactly what David does. Verse twelve: "...grant me a willing spirit to sustain me." David wants to be different. But he knows that he's been a sinner since birth. It's not going to be easy to change. But he is pleading with God to give him a willing spirit that will sustain him through to the changes he has to make. Verse thirteen: "Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will turn back to you." David is saying that his life will be so radically changed that it will inspire others to turn from their sins. Verse fifteen " "...my mouth will declare your praise." The very mouth that seduced Bathsheba, and then ordered the murder of her husband and told lies to cover it up, will now praise God. He then says in verse seventeen: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God you will not despise." This king was once proud and arrogant. Power corrupted David. But now he is broken. He has been

radically transformed. In the end, repentance is not complete unless the sinner has turned his life around and is going in the opposite direction.

6) Never say "I'm Sorry"

If you say that to me, "I'm sorry," you are simply making a declarative statement that requires no response from me. "Okay, so you're sorry?" But if you ask me, "Will you forgive me?" I have to do something. Either I say, "Yes" or "No" or "Not now, maybe later." But I can't ignore it. David is doing the same thing to God in verse one: "Have mercy on me, O God...blot out my transgressions..." He is demanding some response from God.

7) Accept the Response with Humility

In verses 15-17 David comes to the altar with absolute humility. He doesn't deserve, nor can he demand God's forgiveness. He is a "broken and contrite" man. He can only cry out in verse one, "Have mercy on me, O God." We have to come to the person we have wounded with the same humility. That person may say, "No, I can't forgive you." Or, "I forgive you, but I can't forget." Or, "I'll forgive you but we can never be friends again (or married again)." Or, "I'll forgive you, but I'm not sure I can ever trust you again." Your natural tendency is to get offended. You might even blurt out, "But, I said I was sorry. What more do you want?" Let me warn you: If you do that, you will only prove that you aren't really repentant and that your apology is ultimately self-serving. All you can say is, "I'm sorry you feel that way. But I understand. What I did to you was terrible. Maybe someday you can forgive me." And you walk away, putting the ultimate reconciliation in God's hand, still committed to make the changes you have to make for your own healing and holiness.

Repentance is not a haphazard affair. It is at the very heart of freedom. Many of us are addicted to sins and habits that have enslaved us and are destroying our families. In the end, they are endangering our nation. Only one out of five men in the prison systems of America had a father in the home. 2.4 million kids will go to bed without a father in their home. Violence stalks our streets and invades our school grounds. I'm not sure that we have ever seen an election where there is so much bitterness, hatred, and incivility in the air. Families are falling apart. We are Balkanized into racial divisions because we refuse to come together and forget old wrongs.

Around the world, there is war and terrorism at unprecedented levels. What is our hope? David understood it: it is in repentance. Thomas

Jefferson was right: what we do in private—those things that are only seen by us—will worm their way into the public square. There are no victimless sins because no men are islands unto themselves.

Is there some sin in your life today? The fact that it is private makes it no less dangerous to you, or your children, or your church, or your nation. Today, God is telling you that if you will “repent, and turn from your wicked way” he will heal your land.

During the darkest days of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln called the nation to for the sin of slavery. We have so many more things to repent for in our day. Repentance is never easy, but its fruits are liberty for us and our nation. Gandhi knew that our private morality was critical to our public health when he said, “We must first become the change that we want to see in the world.” Maybe that change start with those of us who are called by God’s name!

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