



***"Penitential Prayers"***

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From the time I was a little child in church, he was my hero. Though he never noticed me, I watched his every move. He was the sort of role model every kid should have. When he prayed, it took my breath away. He even wrote some of the songs we sang in the church where I grew up.

No one loved God more passionately than he did. In return, God blessed him with rugged good looks and popularity. Nobody in our town had ever amassed more money or influence.

But pride comes before a fall. At the pinnacle of his career, my boyhood hero got lazy. He always had an eye for other women, but this time it got the best of him. If he hadn't gotten her pregnant, he might have kept his affair a secret. Instead, his reputation was ruined, and he was branded a hypocrite for leading worship on the Sabbath while committing adultery during the week.

At the height of the scandal, he stood in front of a packed church and confessed his sin. His wife and children were sitting up front where everyone could see them. He spared few details about his adultery and the dirty tricks he used to cover it up. You could hear a pin drop when he broke down and wept over how his sin had crushed his heart.

Years later, people in our church still talk about that public confession. I wish that I could tell you that there was a happy ending to his story, but his family fell apart and he lost almost everything.

Maybe I shouldn't air out his dirty laundry. But it's a matter of public record where I come from. Everyone remembers Dave Shepherd. More precisely, David *the* Shepherd. By now you may have guessed that I'm talking about my childhood hero, King David.

After he confessed his adulterous affair with Bathsheba, his embittered family fell apart. The tide of public opinion turned against him, and his political career took a nosedive. Within a few years, the people rallied behind his estranged son, Absalom and Israel was plunged into civil war. In quick succession, David lost his family, nation, and throne. Thomas Jefferson was right when he wrote, "What happens behind closed doors, when no one is looking, will eventually worm its way into the public square."

If you are David, how do you get your life back on track when you are being sucked under by the deadly quicksand of sin's consequences while paralyzed by regret and self-loathing? In the words of a tabloid newspaper, "Inquiring minds want to know." Many of us are pulling a load of guilt and consequences from past mistakes and sins. How do we shake free from past regrets and move on to future hope?

Paralyzing guilt and regret were the biggest giants David ever faced. Compared to them, Goliath was a sissy. But there came a point when he got victory over these giants. His life had hit rock bottom after his son Absalom seized his throne. David was now a fugitive with a price on his head, hiding out in the desolate Judean wilderness. Absalom's hatred was so implacable that he would not rest until the old man was dead.

During that dark season David wrote his immortal 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm about a sheep whose only hope was to follow his Good Shepherd. He ended his 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in verse six: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

*Goodness* and *mercy* are attributes of God. More than that, in Hebrew poetry they are used as the names for God. David is saying that when he looks back over his shoulder, he doesn't see the sins and stupidities that drove him into this mess, but the God who covers his back. That allows him to focus forward to his forever home in "the house of the Lord."

Past failures are among our greatest foes, especially as we get older. An Irish proverb says, "A man is not old until his regrets take the place of his dreams." Charles Dickens wrote, "Regrets are the natural property of grey hairs." As the years roll on and our past mistakes pile higher, we fixate on wasted years and missed opportunities. The truth is: the Enemy of our soul wants us: looking over our shoulders at past misdeeds rather than moving boldly forward to win victories ahead. That's why our 6<sup>th</sup> principle in effective warfare prayer is so critical:

**The weapon of repentance stops yesterday's regrets  
from stealing today's opportunities or tomorrow's hope.**

David looked back over his shoulders in the final line of his 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and saw *goodness* and *mercy*. He doesn't let his past sins keep him from "the house of the Lord" up ahead. Rick Warren writes, "We are products of our past, but we don't have to be prisoners of it." Please allow me to state this as strongly as I possibly can: to regret something to the point of obsession is to fashion your own noose and to commit suicide by slow strangulation. How did David get rid of the noose? We have to go to another of his immortal works: the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm. He wrote it as a public confession, to be read in the temple. 3,000 years later, it still stands as the quintessential model for penitential prayers. Do you want to know how to find forgiveness and release through repentance? Come with me to this magnificent 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm and learn these truths:

**1. Using the Weapon of Repentance**

David was desperate to restore his broken relationship with God. In Psalm 32:3&4 he wrote 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 to God in verse eleven of the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm: "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." Is there greater pain than a broken relationship? After a failed romance, composer Peter Tchaikovsky lamented, "Only the lonely knows the anguish of my heart." How do we move beyond regret to healing? Here are seven steps of repentance:

### 1) Confess with Clarity

Notice David's clarity 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."

Too 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's always inappropriate and unproductive to use the words "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 or self-serving defensiveness is a poor way to rebuild trust.

David knows *exactly* what he has done wrong, and states it clearly in verse three: "For I *know* my transgressions and my sin is always *before* me." He doesn't sugarcoat his sins. Instead, he describes them in the most graphic language. Never ask forgiveness from someone else until you are willing to declare the most brutal facts about yourself. Partial repentance is *no* repentance at all.

### 2) Own it, don't excuse it

Having declared your sin clearly, you need to say to the one you hurt, "I did wrong..." or "I sinned against *you*!" David goes on in verse four to confess, "Against you, you *only*, have I sinned and done what is evil in *your* sight, so that you are proved right and justified when you judge." David makes no excuses or self-justifications. Over the past few years there has been an epidemic of politicians caught in immoral acts. Without fail, their first line of defense has been denial. When the evidence finally backs them into a corner, they then turn to excuses and rationalizations. David was more forthright when he calls his adultery "sin" and "evil." Postmodern politicians, from John Edwards to Mark Sanford, call their adulteries "mistakes." A mistake is 2+2=5. Adultery is a sin. Our culture needs to dust off Karl Menninger's classic book, *Whatever Happened to Sin?* And read it from cover to cover.

David adds in verse five, "Surely, I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." David is confessing what we all need to admit: we are sinners by nature, and we have no right to shift the blame to others when we mess up. He goes on in verse six, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts." The truth is often brutally ugly, but until we face it square on, we will never get the noose off our neck.

### **3) Comprehend the Consequences**

Having admitted our sins, and then owning full responsibility for them, we need to let the wounded know that we understand how much we've hurt them. David says to God in verse 4, "Against you, only you, have I sinned and done what is evil in *your* sight." When we mess up, we are often quick to wallow in self-pity, focusing on the consequences we are facing rather than the pain we have caused the other person. Trust will never be rebuilt until the wounded know that we have emotionally grasped how much grief we caused them. David wants God to know that he is beginning to grasp the pain God is experiencing.

He knows there are *real* consequences in breaking the heart of someone you love. He pleads in verse 11, "Do not cast me from your presence." In verse 12 he adds, "Restore to me the joy of my salvation..." Relationships are broken, and trust is shattered, by betrayal. In verse 14 he adds, "Save me from bloodguilt, O God." Those you have offended want to know that you are viscerally-moved by their wounds suffered at your hands. Trivializing their hurt never brings true reconciliation.

### **4) Show your Sorrow**

David cries out in verse 8, "Let me hear joy and gladness..." In verse 12, he adds, "Restore to me the joy of my salvation..." David wants God to know that he is deeply sorrowful. Unless your heart is truly broken by the pain you have caused someone else, you are not ready to ask for forgiveness. To go "just to make things right" so we can move on from your own pain, is a self-serving, cheap substitute for true repentance. People can smell such disingenuousness a mile away. If your spirit isn't crushed by the pain you caused someone else, go to God and ask him to reveal sin's ugly depths until your heart is truly broken. In the end, only God can work true and deep repentance in the heart of a sinner.

### **5) Commit to Change**

The one you hurt wants to hear more from you than, "I'm sorry." If trust is to be restored, they have to know that you are going to take remedial actions to change your behavior in the future. In verse 12 David says, "...grant me a willing spirit to sustain me." David wants to

be different. But he knows he's been a sinner since birth. It's not going to be easy to change (it never is). But David is pleading with God to give him a "willing" spirit to change, and a "sustaining" spirit to persevere until changes are made. He believes that he really *can* change. He says in verse 13, "Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will turn back to you." He adds in verse 15, "...my mouth will declare your praise." The very mouth that seduced Bathsheba, ordered the death of her husband, and then told repeated lies to cover it up, will now praise God and share his gospel of grace with sinners.

He adds in verse 17, "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. Bill Clinton confessed to CBS newsman Dan Rather why he had seduced Monica Lewinski: "I did it because I could." David could have said the same thing about Bathsheba. Power corrupts. But true repentance is a sword that cuts deep into our pride. It is a grace of God that relentlessly drives us to turn and go in the opposite direction.

#### **6) Never say, "I'm Sorry..."**

If I say to you, "I'm sorry," I am simply making a declarative statement that requires no response from you. You shrug your shoulders and say, "Okay, so you're sorry." I've made a declarative statement that requires no response from you. But if I ask, "Will you forgive me?" you have to do something. You have three choices: you can say, "Yes" or "No" or "Not now, maybe later." But you can't ignore my question. David is pressing God in verse one: "Have mercy on me, O God...blot out my transgressions..." He is appealing to God for a specific response. To only say, "I'm sorry..." is an ineffective way to affect restoration.

#### **7) Accept the Response with Humility**

In verses 15-17 David comes to the altar of repentance with absolute humility. He doesn't deserve, nor can 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 anyone that we have wounded with the same humility. Forgiveness is always an act of grace on the other person's part, never something we deserve. That person may say, "No, I can't forgive you." Or, "I forgive you, but I'll never forget." Or, "I'll forgive you, but we can never be friends again." Or, "I'll let it go, but I can't trust you anymore."

Your natural tendency is to get offended, frustrated, or overwhelmed by despair. You might even blurt out, "But I said I was sorry! What more do you want!" Let me warn you: if you respond that way, you will only prove that you aren't really repentant, and that your apology is self-serving after all. All you can say is, "I'm so sorry that you feel this way."

But I understand. What I did to you was terrible. Maybe some day you will be able to forgive me.” Then you walk away gracefully, putting the ultimate reconciliation in God’s hands, still committed to working on the changes necessary for your own health and holiness.

Using the weapon of repentance is not a haphazard deal. This sword must be used with the skill of a surgeon’s scalpel. Not one of these seven steps outlined in the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm can be neglected if you want to be released from the regrets of the past.

## **2. Repentance is a one-time transaction; changing life patterns is an ongoing process.**

David understand this when he pleads with God in verse 12, “...grant me a willing to sustain me.” One of the devil’s subtle tools is to discourage us after our repentance. The fact that we repent doesn’t do away with the consequences of the sin. David was able to move on from the regrets of the past, but not the consequences. Sometimes, we will bear the visible scars the rest of our lives. After Jacob wrestled all night with the angel of the Lord, he limped for the rest of his life. After we wrestle with our demons, we may limp for the rest of our lives. The consequences of past mistakes and misdeeds can linger for years.

Though we repent and commit to living differently, bad habits don’t change overnight. Addictions don’t go away without sustaining effort. At times our spirits give out and we aren’t willing to go on. So we cry out again and again, “grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.” This fact also creates problems for the person we have offended. If the key to rebuilding broken relationships is restoring trust, people will watch us to see if we have really changed. The minute we mess up again, they will be tempted to say, “You didn’t really repent after all. You still haven’t changed.” The Enemy of our souls loves to see us lose patience with ourselves and each other. He operates in the arena of hopelessness. That’s why we can’t give up on ourselves or one another. Remember, those patterns which took a lifetime to develop won’t be undone in a few days, weeks, or even months. Grace means that we will have to forgive ourselves and others again and again.

## **3) Repentance allows the past to be past.**

The hardest thing we will ever do is let the past be past. David finally came to that point in Psalm 23:6—“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I *will* dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” What is the goodness and mercy that follows David? It is the realization that God has made blood atonement for his sins. Remember, whenever we sin against someone else, we are first and foremost sinning against God. Only he has the right to deal out the punishment. He

poured out his holy wrath on his Son, who took our place by being crucified on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem. Theologians call this wrath, being poured out on Jesus, *propitiation*. When Jesus cried out, "It is finished!" he had paid for all of your and my past, present, and future sins. That means, I have no business beating up on myself for past sins. Jesus was already beat up for me. I have no right to punish those who have sinned against me. God already punished his Son for what they did to offend God and wound me. When I punish someone who hurt me by verbally abusing them, or getting even, or ruining their reputation, or shutting them out of my life, or reminding them continually about the way they hurt me in the past, I am playing God. That's a dangerous thing to do. Besides, it is redundant to continue to try to do what God has already done at the Cross.

When I come with you to this Communion Table this morning, I know that the past is past. All my regrets have been placed on Jesus, punished in his crucifixion, and buried in his grave. They have been cast in the deepest sea of God's forgetfulness, and I have to forget too. It's not easy, when the consequences continue to remind me of past failures. It's even harder to forget when the person who hurt me continues to display some of the same behavior patterns that lead to past disappointments and wounds. But, at the Cross I simply pray for forgiveness for my own sins, and the grace to forgive those who have sinned against me. Then, I walk away realizing that "goodness and mercy" will follow me all the days of my life. Better than that, the wounded and those who have wounded them, through God's grace, will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.