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A STUDY OF PSALM 51

David, whether as shepherd, warrior, king or psalmist, presents a life in keeping with his name. Christian appraisal affirms that he who was "ever a lover of David" had a well-placed affection. We love him as we see him first, ruddy and of open countenance, stand wonderingly amidst his brethren as the holy anointing oil proclaimed him God's chosen king. We love him as we hear his confession of faith to Saul. "The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of the Philistine." We love him as we listen to his battle hymn of triumph as king, for he has fought a good fight, his arm ever strengthened and his heart ever encouraged by the Lord. Something in this song particularly attracts our attention. It is the claim that his rise to absolute power has been accomplished without the loss of his integrity. "The Lord rewardeth me according to my righteousness: according to the cleanness of my hands does he recompense me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his judgments are before me, and as for his statutes, I do not depart from them. And I have been perfect toward him, and I have kept myself from my iniquity. And the Lord hath recompensed me according to my righteousness; according to my cleanness before his eyes" (II Sam. 22 :21-25) . Will he retain his integrity?

History has demonstrated that it is easier for men, whether as individuals or nations, to fight their way to eminence than to retain this position. David the king, now possessing absolute power over the realm, faced a test more severe than the sorest battle. In a day of rest and relaxation, it became easy to act for sinful and selfish pleasure and

thereby undo the example of a lifetime. The act with its succeeding complications calls for no defence: it has none. But when, after a time, Nathan the prophet came in and skilfully aroused David's indignation by the story of the rich man who robbed his poor neighbor of his cherished pet, and then openly accused the king—who is not amazed at David's attitude and awed into profounder respect for Jesse's son? Here is true greatness, the more so when we reflect that for the lowly as well as the high, confession of wrong-doing crosses the grain of pride and wounds it. Whereas the lowly man has no escape and must swallow his pride, the high has his devices and he will employ them to the limit to extricate himself. Behold a man, a king, an absolute monarch, pushing aside all defense and saying simply, "I have sinned." The classic statement of Margoliouth sets the uniqueness of the act in fine relief. "When David is rebuked for the crime, he yields the point without argument; he is told that he has done wrong, and he receives the prophet in a prophet's name. When has this been done—before or since? Mary Queen of Scots would declare that she was above the law; Charles I would have thrown over Bathsheba; James II would have hired witnesses to swear away her character; Mohammed would have produced a revelation authorizing both crimes; Charles II would have publicly abrogated the seventh commandment; Queen Elizabeth would have suspended Nathan. Who has ever acknowledged an error of any magnitude, if it has been in his power to maintain that he was right? . . . Cain's plan—that of silencing the accuser, and Adam's plan—that of shifting the responsibility, seem to exhaust the range of human expedients when an error is brought home. He who escaped from both, though *semustulatus*, was a 'man after God's own heart.'"¹

Sin, though it be a universal malady, never ceases to be intensely personal. Certainly the psalm which torrented forth from David's stricken heart is as intimate a disclosure

¹ D. S. Margoliouth, *Lines of Defence of the Biblical Revelation*, pp. 209, 210.

as any known to man. We should not have expected to be auditors while the penitent breathed out his soul to God. It is but one more token of a frank and lovable spirit that he gave it without reservation into the custody of the chief Musician, so that it might bless the world and become the vehicle of confession for erring saints in all ages. Is this not in line with the economy of God's providence? He must allow evil its deadly effect on the race, once it has entered the world, yet out of it he makes good to grow. On the dark side, the wrath of men is made to praise Him, and on the bright side His people come to know the power and fullness of the divine salvation. As we look back over our own lives, do we not see how wonderfully the perfecting mystery of grace has reached out to incorporate our very sins, making them contribute something to our spiritual development and usefulness?

David's sense of justice, too, dictated the publishing of the psalm. His sin, though carried out with a measure of secrecy (II Sam 12:13), had become known and furnished occasion for the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme (vs. 14). It is reasonable that confession should be as public as the sin.

The heading indicates the occasion which gave rise to the psalm: "When Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in unto Bathsheba." The word **כִּאֲשֶׁר** is occasionally used to express time, in which case it might be rendered "as soon as" more accurately than "after." An example is found in II Sam. 12:21. But there is a certain awkwardness in so translating it in the verse under consideration, since approximately a year intervened between David's sin and Nathan's appearance. The existence of the child proves this. So we prefer the more common meaning of the word in question—"as" or "according as," which shifts the center of thought from time to manner. Nathan came in to David as he had gone in to Bathsheba, unrequested and with a mission that brought serious consequences. It is true that this interpretation is hardly in line with the analogy of other headings which describe the cir-

cumstances of composition, but it may well be that the word was chosen so as to suggest both thoughts to the reader.

We cannot fail to note that the prophet long delayed his coming. His courage when he did come suggests that the delay was in no wise due to timidity. Scripture sets the matter at rest for us by stating that the Lord sent Nathan (II Sam. 12:1). Why was he not sent at once? The answer must be that the interval was needed to teach David the depths of misery that underlie sin which is not confessed and put away. He himself tells us what wrack he suffered. "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer" (Ps. 32:3, 4). David learned eventually that it is a false notion of manliness which leads a sinner to bear his conscience-load defiantly rather than cast it upon his Savior. But there is more. The Lord deliberately waited until the child was born, then sent His servant to announce its death. David loved the child, but God would not allow him to look longer upon and so root his life more deeply in that which reminded him of his sin. God's chastening must remove all the profit and pleasure derived from sin. Then and then alone will the soul be chaste. How marvelous is the sequel! When the lessons were learned and the tears dried away, God gave another son; once again he sent his prophet, this time to tell of the Lord's love for the babe and to give him a name memorializing that love, a name that contained David's own and so served to memorialize him also (II Sam. 12:25).

A rigid analysis of the psalm is difficult, because under the stress of great emotional upheaval, David intermingled and repeated the petitions which clamored for utterance. However, we may discern four leading thoughts that constitute the framework. These are his desire for forgiveness, for cleansing, for restoration of joy, and for the spiritual welfare of the nation.

It is natural that the more deeply one has sinned, the

more fervent and persistent will be his prayer for pardon. At first sight, David appears to give but limited attention to this phase of his need. Only three verses, one, nine, and fourteen, have strictly to do with it. The explanation lies in the fact that God had already spoken the sweet word of forgiveness. The moment David confessed his guilt to Nathan, he received the comforting assurance, "The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die" (II Sam. 12:13). Then why should he pray at all for something that the Lord had already granted? Every child of God knows. Sin is such a grievous thing that even when we have the clear word of forgiveness, our deliverance seems beyond credence. "My sin is ever before me." The omission of any plea for forgiveness in Psalm 32 is a clear indication that its composition came after that of Psalm 51. There is an atmosphere of calm and peace which is in contrast with the disturbed state that belonged to the early stage of confession. So completely was David able to enter into the enjoyment of pardoning grace that he could describe the forgiven man with the same term he had once used of the un-contaminated. Both are blessed (Ps. 32:1; 1:1).

The particular manner in which David besought the Lord to deal with his sins—"blot out my transgressions," shows his consciousness of the polluting power of sin. There was an awful awareness of a stain that nothing under heaven could remove. The plea for riddance of this stain is the great burden of his cry. "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." This word "wash" is used to denote the washing of soiled garments rather than for bodily ablution. It occurs again in the seventh verse. "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." Since the hyssop was used in the ceremony of cleansing the leper (Lev. 14:49, 52), it may be that David was thinking of himself in terms of such a creature, spotted and unclean, unfit for the society of his fellow-men. If God will do this great thing, His erring child will be clean, that is, bright and clear. The word is used

in Ex. 24:10 of the clear, unsullied expanse of heaven. David's high faith in the power of God to renew him is seen in the declaration that he will come out whiter than the snow. A remarkable parallel to David's experience is found in Dan. 11:35, relative to a trying time in the history of the nation. "And some of them of understanding shall fall, to try them, and to purge, and to make them white, even to the time of the end: because it is yet for a time appointed." Whiter than snow! How it speaks to us of divine purity. The story is told of a pastor who loved to visit one of the poor of his flock, a woman who took in washing for a living. One day he passed along and noticed her hanging out the washing, so he stepped into the yard for a moment's chat. Knowing her well, he ventured to remark that the clothes did not seem as white as usual. She gave him a reproving look, then said, "My clothes are always white, but today you see them against a background of new-fallen snow and they look dirty; nothing can stand against the whiteness of the Almighty." The writer once listened to a native evangelist in the heart of China as he explained how infinitely superior was God's standard of holiness to man's. He said that the foreigners who come to China from Europe and America claimed to be white men, but that they were wrong, since the white man lived in Peiping, his native city. Everyone in the audience grew solemn with mystery and expectation. Then he said, "In Peiping we have the snow man. Put one of our foreign friends alongside him and see for yourself which is the white man."

Between the second and seventh verses, which we have considered, lies a section in which the psalmist turns to introspection in a thorough-going manner. "For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me." This was the abnormal thing, to have sin, as a thick cloud, thrusting itself between the soul and God, so that when he looked away to God, there it was, ever before him, where the Lord should have been (Ps. 16:8). Yet he must win his way through to God, for there alone can his case be tried.

"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest." Here we have the only adequate doctrine of the final bearing of sin. It transcends the human relation; it strikes at the throne of God. Nathan charged David on this same high plane when he delivered his rebuke. "Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in His sight? thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife, and hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house; *because thou hast despised me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife*" (II Sam. 12:9, 10). There would be less sinning if men realized fully that their offences would reach to the very heavens. Hengstenberg comments, "This manner of considering sin, which everywhere discovers itself where there is true knowledge of sin, must infinitely heighten the pain connected with it."² How great is the anguish wrung out of the soul when one understands that he has grieved the Highest and Best, the One who is dearer than life itself, the One who has reposed confidence in His earthly child for a life testimony in harmony with his high calling. Yet even this grief is not without its balm, as the aforementioned writer observes. "What besides immediately serves to deepen the pain connected with sin, has also at the same time a consolatory aspect. If David had sinned against God alone, it is with him also alone that he has to do in regard to forgiveness, and therefore he must not consume himself in inconsolable grief that he cannot make restitution to Uriah, who has been long sleeping in his grave, or seek forgiveness from hire."³

Some uncertainty gathers around the connection in thought between David's having sinned against God alone and the subsequent statement—"that thou mightest be justi-

² E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. II, p. 194.

³ *Ibid.*

fied when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest." The conjunction לְמַעַן means "in order that" or "to the end that." It seems that David intends to link his sin to the divine purpose in such a way as to make it the occasion for the manifestation of the righteous judgment of God. To quote Hengstenberg once more, "If we will only grant to the declarations of Scripture, and the facts of experience, their due weight, we shall be obliged to lay aside the aversion of imputing to God every kind of participation in sin, which has also in many other passages given rise to manifestly false expositions. The sin, indeed, belongs to man. At any moment he may become free from it by repentance. But if he does not repent, the forms in which it is to appear are no longer in his power, they are subject to God's disposal, and God determines them as it pleases him, as it suits the plan of his government of the world, for his own glory, and at the same time also, so long as the sinner is not absolutely hopeless, with a view to his salvation."⁴

Whatever interpretation be put upon these words, they cannot possibly be thought of as an effort on David's part to excuse himself by shifting the responsibility to God and making himself a puppet in His hands. The same must surely be said of the following statement, for when David declared, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me," he is not casting about for a human scapegoat in case his effort to lay the blame on God miscarries. That would be totally unlike the David we know. The writer recalls a Sunday morning twelve to fifteen years ago, when in a Bible class for young men, the teacher dwelt at some length upon this verse; at the end of the period, a young man who was visiting the class came forward and took serious exception to this passage of Scripture. Loving his own mother dearly, he could not bear to think that in bringing him into the world she had been implicated in sin. His fears were groundless. No sin attaches to the mother in the sense of wrong-doing. But the nature of sin which

⁴ Ibid.

is in her, common to all the race, is communicated to the child in the very beginning of his existence.

The connection with the sixth verse is on the following order. God insists on truth in the inward parts. Outward conduct means something, but of far greater import is the well-spring of conduct—the inner life. He is not pleased, of course, with the man who openly turns aside to sin, but He is also not satisfied with one who claims to be living the victorious life and is yet smothering wrong desires to keep them from finding expression. God must have truth in the inward parts; but David cannot produce it. At the very fountain-head of life, when as yet it was altogether hidden from the sight of men in his mother's womb, there was the taint of sin. He can no more alter that than he can undo the wrong he has committed. Where, then, can he turn? Where is there hope? "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

Out of this gloom of utter hopelessness there rises a magnificent appeal. "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." What is impossible with man is possible with God. The Hebrews reserved the word "create" for a divine operation, whether in the realm of matter or spirit. The English version hardly does justice to the original. David did not ask for a creation that should take place within him, where the hidden depths could never furnish material for such a change. The Hebrew expression **ברא לי** is literally, "create for me." It carries the thought of a divinely ordered and prepared gift brought to David and bestowed on him, a special bounty provided for his need.

The companion prayer is for the renewal of a right (fixed or steadfast) spirit within him. In the days of his youth, David had consistently stayed himself upon His God. But recent failure had shaken all confidence, and he feels the need of a fixing of his life purpose so that he will never again turn out of the way.

The prayer continues. "Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me." We need

care in expounding this verse, for both the context and the historical background must contribute to the understanding of it. The petition follows one which has in view the stabilizing of his character. It was a serious matter for a king, normally revered and followed by his people, to be undependable. And with that thought, there rises before his mind, like a spectre, the figure of Saul sitting uneasily on this throne, his fingers tightened about his javelin, his face clouded and morose as the evil spirit swept in to take command where once the Spirit of God had ruled. David knew something of the horror of rejection, for time and again he had summoned all the soothing charms of song and lyre in order to quiet the restless and unhappy Saul. Must he share Saul's fate? Must he lose his favored position as the anointed of the Lord? It is an error to think of the removal of the Spirit as equivalent to the loss of salvation. The Spirit came upon David when he was anointed by Samuel (I Sam. 16:13); but he knew the Lord before that, as a mere lad among the sheep. The taking away of the Spirit would indicate that God's choice had fallen upon another.

That David had no fear of losing his salvation is evidenced in the succeeding verse. "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation." This can hardly be a pleonasm for salvation itself. The word for joy— יִשְׂשׁוֹן , speaks of exultation and exuberant feeling. It is sometimes translated "mirth." The verb is found in Ps. 19:5, where the sun is likened to a bridegroom coming forth from his canopied couch, rejoicing as a strong man to run a race. David would fain dance once more before the Lord for sheer joy. In fact, he has already prayed that such gladness may be his portion that the bones which the Lord has broken may rejoice (vs. 8). Bone is the strength of the human body. When the bone structure is crushed, the body is crippled and helpless. So real has been the chastening through which David had passed that he cannot rise up to praise and adore his God. But he has hope that when the Lord has freed him from the dreadful sense of guilt, the higher powers of the soul

will be released for their wonted service. The sinner has reached the end of his own resources when he cries, "O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise." When one is under a cloud, it is far better to be still than to venture upon a praise that must be only half-hearted. But let God release the prisoner from the toils of his groaning, and there will be a new song ascending to heaven. And this song of praise is pleasing to God, for it glorifies Him (Ps. 50:23).

Such praise, rising up out of a contrite heart, means more than any amount of sacrifice which is offered in cold detachment as a formal religious duty. Note that in the seventeenth verse it is said, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit"—not "broken spirits." The one heart that makes itself an altar is the equivalent of all sacrifice. Yet even this fact does not void the sacrifices, as the nineteenth verse demonstrates, for the reason that they must continue until their work is done, until they have culminated in the death of the Lamb of God.

"A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." In modern usage, "contrite" has come to mean "repentant" or "full of regret for sin." But the word, like that in the original, contains the thought of bruising or crushing. It is God's own task, frequently resented at first but cherished afterward, to take in hand that hard and unprofitable lump that sin has formed and pound it small as the dust, that from this lowly vantage point, where He began with man, He may again by the Potter's touch produce a man—a man remade.

So wonderful are the ways of God that in the process of cleansing and renewing His saints He not only brings out of the fires that refine a nobler specimen than that which entered in; He makes capital of it and uses it to extend His kingdom. David the restored is anxious to teach transgressors the ways of God, so that sinners may return to Him. David can tell them more than he ever knew before of the destructive power of sin and of the richness of God's mercy.

A glance at the life of Simon Peter confirms this truth. Through failure at the very time which self-confidence had sought for itself to prove its loyalty to the Christ, Simon went down to the dust. But he came up again, sobered and strengthened, now a dependable instrument for spiritual work. Who can fail to see the wisdom back of Simon's fall? Out of it came Peter the rock, upon which the early church in its human organization could safely rest. Whether they were aware of it or not, it meant something to the thousands who heard him at Pentecost and were pricked in their hearts at having denied the Lord of life and glory, that the man who addressed them had passed that way himself.

God knew that David would sin and fail Him, yet in advance of it He made a covenant with David and bound Himself to continue David's seed and throne until, as later prophecy revealed, His own Son should come as that Seed and as King to sit upon that throne. This is the same God of all grace who has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world, before the advent of sin, before our own complete and utter failure to obey His holy will became apparent.

The great difference between the natural and the supernatural lies in their contrasted ability to handle destructive forces. It is said that nature loses nothing, that when catastrophe pelts her bosom, she merely concedes a loss in form, not in matter. That may be so, but she cannot restore: she can only revise. When a tree falls, nature may turn it into peat or fertilize the soil, but the process involves decay. She cannot set the tree in place again and give it a more abundant life than it had before. David was as a tree, a mighty cedar of Lebanon, the greater its height the more impressive its fall, the more thunderous its reverberations, the more impossible its restoration. But what is impossible with nature and with man is possible with God.

Let all the household of faith take heart, whether or no they have sinned after the similitude of David's transgression. It may be that one powerful factor which is hindering

the revival of the church and the spread of the gospel is the presence within her of multitudes of people who have stumbled and fallen and are a dead weight in any forward movement. Has the church been aware that her first obligation is to minister to these? Let them be told that their wound is not incurable. Let them learn that "before honor is humility" and that if they will confess their sins, God will be faithful and righteous to forgive their sins, and to cleanse them from all unrighteousness.

It is a strange thing how we can rejoice in the reclamation of degraded sinners so that the deeper one has gone down the more glorious is his salvation, and at the same time treat our erring brethren in Christ as though they no longer belonged to the company of the elect. Is not restoring grace as much a part of the gospel as redeeming grace? Let us not fear that the door will be opened to license. David the beloved, in spite of the bitter lessons learned through his first disobedience, sinned yet again, for he sought to number the people and thus delight himself in the greatness of his domain. He knew full well that there would have to be some judgment upon his sin, but he has learned one thing. He need not waste days and months before coming to God. His cry deserves to be written upon our hearts, for it is at once a magnifying of divine grace and a condemnation of human prudishness—"Let us fall now in the hands of the Lord; for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hands of man."

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