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Pentecost 3 – Psalm 51:1-12 – Serious Sin Needs a Serious Savior

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I still remember the woman's words. "I can't believe some Christians nowadays. They think they can be a part of the church, but they get arrested for murder, child abuse, fraud, whatever, and nobody cares about anyone but themselves anymore. Why can't we all be more like the people in the Bible?"

There was a certain condescension there that her pastor picked up on. "You mean the big names like Moses and David and Paul, right? The heroes of faith?" Wholeheartedly, she agreed. And then the pastor added, "But you know all those guys were murderers, don't you?" Of course, she had no idea, and she didn't know what to say. See, it's ironic that some of the famous people we know from the Bible are called heroes of faith, and yet their moral lives as believers in this world weren't always very heroic at all. In fact, if some of those men lived nowadays and what they did was front page news, I suspect they'd be considered closer to villains than heroes.

Take for example, King David. For much of his life, he really was an exemplary king and child of God. But it was awfully hard to tell that right before he wrote this psalm. Yet, as serious as his sin was, he had an even more serious Savior, who never gave up on him. David learned then that the depths of his sinfulness could never be so extreme as to outdo the heights of God's forgiveness, and that's why David is a perfect example to teach all of God's people that serious sin needs a serious Savior, and so that's exactly what our God gave us.

Now what you didn't hear when I read the psalm before was the title King David gave it. "A *psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.*" Do you remember that episode? It reads like a laundry list of wrongs that don't ever make a right. First, King David abandoned his army when he sent them off to war and he kicked back, took it easy, and stayed home. Next, one evening he saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba. Though she was not his wife, he lusted after her, slept with her, and got her pregnant. When he found out she was pregnant, he sent for her husband Uriah, who was one of David's mighty men – one of his most loyal companions and best soldiers! – to try to cover his tracks. When his plans didn't work out, he had Uriah killed and took Bathsheba for himself. This disgusted the people of Israel and it was a laughingstock to Israel's enemies. And to top it all off, for maybe as much as a year, David mocked God by refusing to admit that he had done anything wrong.

But then one day, after David and Bathsheba's baby was born, the prophet Nathan came to tell David a tragic story about a poor man and his beloved lamb. Though that lamb was the only thing that poor man had in this world, it was taken and slaughtered for dinner by a heartless, merciless rich man who had plenty of his own that he could have taken from. Well, David was furious. "How could this injustice happen in Israel? Whoever did this must die!" Even David admitted that the rich man's condemnation was deserved. So Nathan told him, "David, *you* are the man." That stuck like a knife plunged straight through his chest, and that shattered any bit of stubbornness and pride he still clung to. All David could manage to choke out right then was "*I have sinned against the LORD,*" but this psalm says the rest.

For a man who didn't want to admit anything before, David left nothing unsaid here about his sin and what he deserved. In different pictures he described how badly he failed before God: he talked about what he did as *transgression* that crossed the line God told him to stay away from. He said he had *iniquity* like a deep stain that you just can't get out, or like he was a straightedge that got twisted and warped. And he talked about his *sin* like he was a marksman missing the mark God told him to hit. David knew he messed up in every way possible, worse than he could ever make right again. He committed adultery, betrayal, murder, and hypocrisy. He sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, the people of Israel, and most of all God himself. He had so destroyed their trust that how could he ever honestly look any of them in the face again? What David did isn't the kind of thing you just shrug off. It's the kind of thing that follows you around for the rest of your life and never gives you peace. It burns up relationships, keeps you up at night, ruins lives, and always seems to come back and haunt you. And you know in your heart of hearts that not even a mountain of make-up works can ever pick up the pieces. That's guilt, and for David it was so thick, it was suffocating.

But even as David looked at the outward things he did, he knew that wasn't the real problem. Those were just symptoms of something much deeper and much worse. Our thoughts, our words, our actions – they're all corrupt because our hearts are corrupt. The terrible truth David teaches us here is that the root of every sin is in every human heart, and we don't sin because we're duped or forced or it's convenient. We sin because we can. It's who we are. We're not inherently good; we're not by nature truly loving and compassionate as God created us and really wants us to be, and any idea otherwise shows the same kind of blindness and stubbornness that David had when he refused to admit for all those months who he really was inside. Excuses and comparisons and downplaying wrongs mean nothing to a holy God before whom our hearts lay open and exposed. No, we may not think we're as bad as the Hitlers and Bin-Ladens of this world, but in God's eyes, that's beside the point. Sin is sin, and it offends a righteous, just, infinite God all the same.

That's what sin is, plain as day. It's sad, it's ugly, and it's inescapable. It's a total corruption, through and through, from inside out, and there's no doubt that it's serious – serious enough to bring down God's just judgment and eternal condemnation on every one of us. It's who we are, like we confessed earlier – by nature sinful, by nature objects of wrath. But that's never meant to excuse us or to drive us to despair. No, for David and for us too, it's meant to show us in no uncertain terms: I need help. I'm in a hole so deep that I can never dig myself out, and all I seem to do is make it worse. I need a Savior, because I can't save myself.

But people of God, when you come to that point, as David did, your Lord says to you also in no uncertain terms: your sin may be serious, deathly serious. But so is your Savior. Yes, it hurts to look your sin straight in the eye. But we all need to do it if we're going to truly appreciate everything our Lord Jesus did for us and for our salvation.

King David knew what he'd done, and he knew what he deserved. But he also knew where to go to find mercy and hope. *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.”* They say time heals all wounds, but truthfully, it's *love* that heals all wounds. David knew that only God's love could make him right again and fix what he had broken. And that's what makes our God and our faith so different from anyone or anything else: our God *is* love, and where there is sin, he buries it. Where there are sinners, he cleanses them. Where there is punishment deserved, he takes it off our backs and puts it on the back of his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, who takes it away from us, carries it to the cross, and crucifies it. He does all this because he is our good and gracious Father in heaven who loves us far too much to ever leave us or give up on us. He does all this because he knows better than anyone: serious sin needs a serious Savior – so serious, in fact, that he loved us enough that he was even willing to die for us.

So David knew exactly what he had to do. He came to his merciful and compassionate God – the only place he could go to find real hope – he dropped to his knees, and he prayed, *“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.”* David looked in the mirror of God's Law and saw himself as he really was – stained, dirty, filthy, ugly. But like the best laundry detergent there ever was, God washed those stains away. Only it wasn't soap God used – it was the blood of Jesus, his Son, which purifies us from all sin. When David put his faith in Christ, his blood cleansed his every fault and left him perfectly pure. Better than new! And still today, that promise goes for you, too. Now God doesn't use hyssop anymore like he did in Old Testament times to sprinkle the blood of animal sacrifices on people at the Temple, but he does make us whiter than snow through the washing of Holy Baptism, and he does sprinkle us with his own holy, precious blood when we come to the Lord's Table for Holy Communion. Every time we come into God's house to hear his powerful Gospel promises

and every time we partake in the privilege of his special sacraments, he reassures us that our sins are forever forgiven, heaven is now open to us, and eternal salvation is ours for Jesus' sake.

And so that gave David confidence and it gives us confidence to pray, *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me... Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”* You know, adultery, betrayal, murder, and hypocrisy are probably some of the worst sins we can think of – and yet this *hero of faith* David committed every single one of them! But none were so bad that Christ couldn't overcome them. My friends, whether you've never done anything like that, or whether you've done all those things and more, know that your Savior's blood purifies your heart and takes away your sin forever, never to return. There is no sin in your life so great and powerful that Jesus can't stomp it underfoot. You may remember it; maybe you can't ever forget it – but just know that your God certainly has, and so he wants you to let it go, too. Your sin may be serious, but so much more is your Savior. Through him, you have a pure heart and a steadfast spirit. Through him you have the joy of salvation, along with peace and hope that you could never get anywhere else. Through him you have the promise of the Holy Spirit to forgive you, motivate you, and empower you to fight against sin now and live as God's holy people in this world. And through him you have the unfading and unshakable promise that no matter what you've done or what you do, Jesus is stronger and he will keep you strong in the faith until he finally brings you to your heavenly home.

Yes, God is serious about his Word – in the Law that condemns us, and especially also in the Gospel that saves us. David found that out when God took away his sin right there on the spot, and when he promised to restore his place as the father of King Solomon and even one day, of the Savior Jesus. And my friends, those same assurances are also yours. In this life, it seems like we all too often walk around day by day with our heads down and shoulders slumped under the weight of our guilt and failures. But people of God, let Jesus take that weight off of your neck and put it on his own; let him lift you back up in his arms, and let him give you instead the joy of his forgiveness and salvation. Because then you will know once and for all, serious sin needs a serious Savior, and so by grace that's exactly what your heavenly Father gave you in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.