

## THE PSALMS' GREATEST HITS

### Volume 4: Confession

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We've been thinking in this current series on the Psalms about the way that still speak to us in the music and the message of some of our contemporary artists. Thus far, we have considered the link between Psalm 22 and its lament over the absence of God and Van Morrison's version of, "Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child." Luke lifted up the connection between Psalm 121 and its message of trust and The Pretenders' song, "I'll Stand By You." Last week I suggested that there is a clear link between Psalm 40 and its expression of gratitude for deliverance and U2's song entitled, "40."

Writing in the Guardian, a British magazine, Bono, lead singer of U2 shares the following personal perspective on the importance of the Psalms: *"Psalms and hymns were my first taste of inspirational music. I liked the words, but I wasn't sure about the tunes...They prepared me for the honesty of John Lennon, the baroque language of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, the open throat of Al Green and Stevie Wonder. When I hear these singers, I am reconnected to a part of me that I have no explanation for—my "soul" I guess.*

*Words and music did for me what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do—they introduced me to God, not belief in God, but more an experiential sense of God...As a result, the Book of Psalms always felt open to me and led me to the poetry of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon and the Book of John. My religion could not be fiction, but it had to transcend facts. It could be mystical, but not mythical."*

There is something powerful about the language of music, something that can speak to us in ways that, sometimes, transcend words and intellectual argument.

This morning, we continue in our series by turning our attention to Psalm 51 and its message of confession. Among all of the 150 Psalms, Psalm 51 stands out for its powerful witness to the beauty and power of confession. We've all hear the saying that, "Confession is good for the soul" and, indeed, in Psalm 51, we can experience for ourselves the positive power of making our confession to God.

As you may know, tradition has ascribed the authorship of this Psalm to King David in the aftermath of his affair with Bathsheba that also resulted in the murder of her husband, Uriah. While contemporary scholarship suggests that this Psalm was actually written after the time of David, it nevertheless, can be read with David's personal saga in mind. For if there was ever one who might serve as a primary example of the need for confession, it would be King David and his wanton misuse and abuse of his power and privilege. As King, David felt as if there were no restrictions or limits to his power and authority.

It was true that he instigated the death of Uriah and it was true that he committed adultery with Bathsheba, but his greater sin, according to **Walter Brueggemann**, was the sin of pride against God, of thinking that he could be autonomous from God and live his life without

reference to God and God's commandments. In David's not so humble opinion, his kingly glory exempted him from the responsibility of keeping the commandments and being accountable to God. He believed that, in essence, he was bigger than the law.

*("The Message of the Psalms" p. 102 / Walter Brueggemann. Augsburg Press)*

Well, as it turned out, that wasn't exactly the case as David's personal life spiraled out of control. His pride and arrogance led him to the place in which he was forced to come to grips with his own brokenness as a human being before God. Whether or not Psalm 51 was actually written by David, its' humble confession certainly reflects the appropriate response to the tragic circumstances that he encountered. David was forced to recognize that "pride does indeed, go before the fall."

The Psalm begins with a memorable and succinct opening plea: ***"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."***

Moving from this introduction, the Psalmist then gets down to the business of making his confession before God. In verses 3-5 we read: ***"For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone I have sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you were justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment."***

The focus then shifts to the Psalmist's plea to God to **create a clean heart** within the psalmist, to **restore the joy of salvation** and to provide **deliverance from bloodshed**. The focus here is not on the past and the sin that took place, but upon the future and the need for God's redemptive grace.

While time simply does not permit a more detailed examination of this classic Psalm of Confession, I trust that even in this very brief sketch, you can see the obvious parallel between the experience of David and our own present day experience. Brueggemann writes that this Psalm, ***"Comes dangerously close to our own situation. For we imagine that we are, like David, come of age. We order our common life, make public policy, build our institutions on such a premise."*** In other words, we are so full of ourselves, so enamored with ourselves that we tend to ignore God altogether.

And, inevitably, it is in doing so that we discover not the life that we aspired to live—a life of beauty and grace, meaning and fulfillment—but a life in which we learn what it means to be empty and we learn what it means to be broken. Psalm 51 gives voice to this feeling of emptiness and brokenness. But it is important to note that it is in the expression of naming his brokenness that the Psalmist experiences a holiness that leads to hope. His sin will not have the last word. Confession, you see, opens the door to a new and revitalized relationship with God.

It is for this reason that I have decided to pair Psalm 51 with the song, "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen. If you have listened to this song, you have likely realized that it references King David and his fall from grace. Where once he could do no wrong in the eyes of God

and in the hearts of his people, David has become a “baffled king” whose once joyful hallelujah has now become a cold and a broken hallelujah.

Yet, there is, Cohen seems to suggest, a holiness that can be found even in the broken hallelujah. Rev. Nick Baines, speaking on a BBC radio documentary about this song observed: **“We’re broken human beings, all of us, so stop pretending. We can all use the word, “hallelujah” because what comes from it is being open and transparent before God and the world.”** It is our openness, our transparency with others, with God and ourselves that opens the door to a new expression of praise—one that may be broken, but one that is also holy.

As you listen to this intriguing song, I invite you to reflect upon the power of the “holy and the broken hallelujah” in your own life. There is healing and there is hope in the simple act of recognizing that we are broken and in need of God’s forgiving grace. Confession is, indeed, good for the soul. I’ve discovered that there are many verses and versions of this song which seem to vary from performance to performance. The closing verse that I especially find meaningful is the one in which David says,

**I did my best, it wasn’t much  
I couldn’t feel, so I tried to touch  
I’ve told the truth, I didn’t come to fool you.  
And even though it all went wrong  
I’ll stand before the Lord of Song  
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.**

Out of our confession comes the connection with God that enables us to offer our praise, broken as it may be. Listen, if you will, as Greg shares this beautiful and haunting tribute to the power of the broken Hallelujah...