

## Lesson 16

# The Penitential Psalms or Songs of the Sinner

Generally speaking, seven psalms are identified as “penitential” psalms, though an even larger number have a predominantly penitential character. The seven most often cited are 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. However, Psalms 51 and 130 are the most clearly prayers of penitence (repentance).

These may be viewed as a subcategory of the psalms of lament, which we already have studied. It is difficult to totally separate physical illness, spiritual anguish, and sin. Yet, in this lesson, we will look at psalms where the writer clearly understands sin to be his major issue and the cause of his suffering.

The complaints in other laments most often are against enemies or, occasionally, against God. The laments in the penitential psalms are focused on the writer’s own transgressions. The majority of laments involve claims of *innocence*, but these, significantly, admit *guilt*. They also generally include a petition for God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Often entailed in these psalms is a confession of sins. Yet, it is not confession alone that is deemed important, but confession accompanied by divine mercy and forgiveness resulting in healing and wholeness.

### Value to Today’s Reader

Observable in the penitential psalms is the great difference

between biblical model and modern therapies for misbehavior and its consequences.

The psalms we are studying clearly show the need for full, honest admission of one’s own misdeeds, coming from a heart convicted and now repentant. They show that such a response, when met by the grace and mercy of God can result in forgiveness and the lifting of the burden of sin.

Modern psychological therapy is more prone to disassociate the responsibility for misbehavior from the sufferer and to attempt to relieve guilt by denial, transference of responsibility, or some other technique.

Psalms 51, a psalm of David after the prophet Nathan confronted him concerning his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, is a powerful example of what repentance entails. It also demonstrates how to verbalize repentance, in contrast to modern *mea culpas*, which often entail equivocations and ambivalences such as “if I have

sinned” or “if I have done anything to hurt another.”

God’s way is the only truly therapeutic means to spiritual and physical recovery and health.

### Psalm 51: David’s Psalm of Penitence

This psalm, perhaps the most soul-searching of all the penitential psalms, is very instructive concerning the nature of true repentance. Notice in the first four verses how completely David admits his failures and sins, describing them as transgressions (going beyond God’s law), iniquities (evil), and sin (missing the mark). He acknowledges or admits his sin and reports how that recognition weighs upon him all the time.

David also sees sin for what it truly is—an offense against God. Thus, it is only God who can “wash him” clean and forgive him of the offense.

This psalm also shows us that repentance entails both sorrow over the transgression and a commit-



A sixth century mosaic depicting King David preserved from a synagogue in Gaza.

ment to going a different direction in the future, with God's help. Thus, repentance is both a turning away from sin and a turning toward God.

In verses 5-6 the psalmist is not asserting he was born genetically infected with "original sin," but that he is part of and influenced by a world filled with sin. This is not excuse-making, but recognition of the depth and seriousness of the sin problem in human existence. And David realizes God's truth in the heart of man, in contrast to the usual sinful heart.

If this psalm teaches us about repentance, it also instructs us about the nature of forgiveness. In verses 7-14 the psalmist cries out for God to:

- "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean."
- "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."
- "Hide Your face from my sins."
- "Blot out all my iniquities."
- "Do not cast me away from Your presence."
- "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed."

Thus, we see forgiveness seeks a washing or cleansing away of what has dirtied or defiled one's life (sin). It also is seeking God's approval or having Him say, "It'll be OK now." Forgiveness entails a wiping of the slate clean, an expunging of our sin record.

And, as verses 10-12, in particular, show, forgiveness yearns for a new start, a second chance. Regret about the past is by its nature a desire for change in the future. Thus, David asks God to:

- "Create in me a new heart."
- "Renew a steadfast spirit within me."
- "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation."

A part of repentance perhaps often overlooked is highlighted in this psalm as well. David speaks of looking forward to giving public testimony and account of God's righteousness in forgiving him. And he offers his future obedience as well as another evidence of his gratitude.

### **Psalm 32: David's Expression of Joy in Forgiveness**

This psalm qualifies as one of penitence, but it also bears the marks of a thanksgiving song. We

**Sing "Redeemed"**  
Notice how the emotions of this song parallel those expressed in Psalm 32.

**Sing "Soul, a Savior Thou Art Needing"**  
Here, the need for a Savior is poetically expressed in song.

select it for attention because of its contrast with Psalm 51, which describes David's feelings and condition *before* forgiveness is bestowed. Here, we hear David describe his condition *after* being forgiven.

If we learn a great deal about penitence from Psalm 51, we shall likewise learn much about the nature of forgiveness from this song.

The importance of confessing one's sins stands out, as the psalmist describes how he felt prior to doing so and the gladness or joy he felt when he made his confession and was forgiven. Guilt is here seen as a powerful, debilitating influence that isn't assuaged by denial. It can literally make a person physically sick, as well as (obviously) spiritually ill.

The concepts of the psalm are principles in the New Testament also, as in 1 John 1:8-9, "If we say that we

have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

### **Psalm 130: Awaiting the Lord's Redemption**

Here, again, the psalmist is in deep distress because of his sins. He cries out to God, who alone can address and solve his problem. As David did in the psalms previously studied, this song writer describes his condition in sin as overwhelming, as though he were drowning in the depths of the sea (read Jon. 2). But, from this condition of fear, he rises to hope, because of God's willingness to forgive.

The psalm can be outlined as follows:

1. The psalmist's plea—vv. 1-2
2. Assertion that forgiveness is a gift of God—vv. 3-4
3. Description of how the psalmist "waits" on the Lord for redemption—vv. 5-6
4. Declaration that Israel's hope of mercy and redemption is in the Lord—vv. 7-8

The concept of "waiting" upon the Lord is common in Scripture and particularly in the Psalms. It is not so much the idea of letting time pass until the Lord responds as it is expectation, seeing that God is the only source of the remedy sought.

### **National or Congregational Psalms of Penitence**

Most of the laments of penitence in the psalms appear to be from the point of view of an individual, such as David. However, there are at least portions of psalms that depict national penitence and prayer for forgiveness.

A portion of Psalm 79 illustrates such.

*Oh, do not remember former iniquities against us! Let Your tender mercies come speedily to meet us, for we have been brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; and deliver us, and provide atonement for our sins, for Your name's sake! Why should the nations say, "where*

*is their God?" Let there be known among the nations in our sight the avenging of the blood of Your servants which has been shed (8-10).*

**Other Expressions of Penitence**

Some of the psalms that can be described as penitential psalms do not so much bear words of confession, remorse, or repentance as reflecting symbolic actions that

bespeak penitence. These actions are designed to make the individual out to be small, insignificant, or miserable (as in describing oneself as being like a worm, etc.). Such a humbling act comes in advance of a plea for God's mercy.

Most Bible students are familiar with the Jewish custom of donning sackcloth and ashes in times of mourning.

**Homework and Questions**

*Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.*

1. List some things you learned about penitence (feeling of pain, sorrow, and guilt over sin) from your study of Psalm 51. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. How would you explain the fact that David declares his sins (including adultery and murder) to be against God, as opposed to against Uriah or other humans injured by his actions? What do you learn about sin from this? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What is required, according to Psalm 51, for a restoration of the man who sins? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Make two lists. In the first, list how David said his sins made him feel (Psa. 32). \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
In the second, describe how a serious sin you committed made you feel. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Looking at Psalm 130, what phrase demonstrates how awful man's condition would be if God were only a God of justice and not also a God of mercy? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Write your own four-line psalm, describing your feelings before and after your salvation, or before and after forgiveness of a particular sin. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_