

THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS

1. Psalm 51

“Lord Have Mercy”

ASH WEDNESDAY

March 6, 2019

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

In preparation for Lent and a sermon series on the Penitential Psalms, I picked up and read Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s last published book before his imprisonment by the Nazis, The Psalms: Prayerbook of the Bible.

For me, Bonhoeffer is a true descendant pastorally and theologically of Martin Luther.

Like Luther, Bonhoeffer loved the Psalms, and saw them as a model for prayer.

Bonhoeffer begins his pocket-sized book by reflecting on how the Psalms are prayers that God has given us in His Word to pray back to Him, just as Jesus taught us the Lord’s Prayer.

I was particularly drawn to Bonhoeffer’s chapter simply titled “Guilt,” featuring the so-called “Seven Penitential or Repentance Psalms,” numbers 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

This Lenten Season, we will sing, and I will preach on six of these psalms, starting with Psalm 51, and the plea, *“Lord, have mercy on me”* (v. 1).

Bonhoeffer also calls these seven penitential psalms “the Pauline Psalms” for the way in which they **“lead us to the confession of guilt and direct our complete confidence to the forgiving grace of God.”**

The Reformation theology of Martin Luther affirms that God’s gracious love, through Jesus Christ, removes our sins and creates us anew.

Thus, for us Lutherans, the confession of sin and the assurance of pardon are weekly rituals in most of our churches.

Yet rarely do we lift up these elements to be contemplated and celebrated.

Such a contemplation and celebration can provide a practice for spiritual growth for all of us, whether we be new or lifelong Church members.

One way of highlighting confession and forgiveness is through preaching and teaching the penitential psalms, texts that have helped form the Church's understanding and use of these rituals.

Early on, Western Christian tradition identified seven psalms as the "penitential psalms."

The aforementioned group of psalms has been named 'penitential,' even though only two of them specifically speak of confession and forgiveness — Psalms 32 and 51.

One scholar I read observed that in the medieval Church, these seven psalms were closely associated with the popular penitential system of the time — a system of indulgences.

As a monk, Luther prayed these seven psalms daily on his knees during Lent.

If there is a crown in the set of penitential psalms, that would be Psalm 51.

The Psalm serves as a template for our weekly prayers of confession, and can teach us much about this important worship ritual.

This prayer teaches the importance of naming sin as sin, standing up and taking responsibility for one's own actions, and learning from one's iniquity.

But, more importantly, it demonstrates the power of God's steadfast love and grace on which the pray-er is so dependent.

This connection is further enhanced by the superscription that cites this Psalm as a prayer for cleansing and pardon.

It also gives a direction to the leader.

This is a psalm of David, written when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.

It, of course, alludes to the shameful incident in David's life, when he took Bathsheba, and had her husband, Uriah the Hittite, set up to be killed in battle in order to cover up his actions (II Sam. 11).

The superscription tells all who read this Psalm that there is no sin, no matter how vile, that cannot be blotted out by God's steadfast love and mercy.

This prayer is unique in all of the Bible.

The form is a prayer for help, but the petitions are turned inward.

There is no external threat to the life of the one praying.

Indeed, something more precious is at stake — the relationship between the pray-er and God has been broken by sin.

The point is clear from the first words of the prayer.

The person of prayer asks for an act of grace, not because the person deserves it, but on account of God's steadfast love and compassion (v. 1).

These are the same attributes the people of God have always depended upon ever since their exodus from Egypt.

Only God can restore this relationship.

The first nine verses are dominated by pleas to God to act by removing the sins of the one praying in verses 1-2 and 7 and 9, with a confession in the center, in verses 3-5.

The word for "**blot out**" has the meaning of annihilation, as in the flood water of Noah.

The pleas that frame the confession declare that God can cleanse from sin and guilt permanently, and that sins can be annihilated only by a God of grace and steadfast love.

The confession in verses 3 through 7 is strong and clear.

The one praying makes no excuses for his or her actions.

As with other prayers of help, the exact situation is not specified.

Instead, the multiple words for 'sin' allow the readers or hearers to name their own specifics.

The confession in verse 4 declares to God, "***Against You and You alone have I sinned.***"

The one praying admits that he or she has sinned against God, so that God is completely blameless in exacting punishment for the sinful act.

The center of this confession is, then, not the human and against whom he or she has sinned, but the depth of grace and love that God will demonstrate as forgiveness, even though God stands blameless in exacting punishment for the sins of the one praying.

Likewise, verse 5 is not so much a comment about ‘original sin’ as it is a comment about the depth of human sin, and the stain that can remain for life without the intervening grace of God.

Psalm 51 is the assigned text for Ash Wednesday, and this is an important place to begin the Lenten journey.

It reminds us that Lenten practices must not be simply window dressing, or done because they are tradition.

As we have seen through Luther and Bonhoeffer, the thoughts expressed in this prayer lay at the heart of the Reformation tradition.

In this powerful prayer, we can hear both law and gospel, conviction and good news.

Psalm 51 demands that we look at ourselves and our relationships with God in the harsh light of the real ways we live.

Psalm 51 also invites us to hear God’s renewing grace in a deeper way.

It resonates with our life in Jesus Christ where, Paul says, ***“there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”*** (II Cor:5:17).

AMEN