



THESE THINGS I PRAY

This five-week series will be an exploration of the power of prayer, using the book of Psalms as a guide. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms the “Prayerbook of the Bible.” While we don’t necessarily pray for everything the Psalms pray for, we do learn from the Psalms the mode of prayer – how to come to God in prayer. Through this series we’ll explore the simple acronym for prayer – ACTS – which stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Prayer changes things and every prayer has power. Our hope is through this series you’ll be better connected to the power of prayer.

CONFESSION • Psalm 51 • Tim McConnell • November 6, 2016

Confession. Forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who sin against me. We do it every week in worship, but maybe we should do it every time we pray. I think one of the chief points of resistance to the Christian faith is sin and confession. People say, "Why would I want to live my life under some set of rules that always make me feel guilty? Why would I want to live such a narrow life?" Actually, confession widens your life. It's living with unforgiven sin that restricts things. Imagine a friend who has a hard time paying his bills (don't look at anyone in the room). You go visit this friend and walk around town trying to find a place to have lunch. "We can't go in there. I haven't paid my bar tab." Okay. "No, not that place. I got in a fight with a waiter. Not there, I owe them too much. Not that one, not that one either." Life is getting pretty narrow. "Is there anywhere in town we can go to lunch?" If you never pay your bill at the cleaners, eventually you run out of places to take your laundry! Confession is actually freedom. Confession frees the soul; it's good for the soul. It's about keeping short accounts—short accounts with God, short accounts with others. Honest confession nourishes the soul, and makes the landscape of your life broad and open and free.

We are learning a pattern of prayer to include confession. ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Someone asked me after church a few weeks ago, "Why do we pray for forgiveness?" At first I thought, "Well, because it's in the Lord's Prayer! That's why! When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them what to pray, He included 'forgive me my debts/sins.' I mean, you can't blame me!" She wasn't blaming me or mad at all, and actually it was well after I had answered her question that I started to think about how good a question it is. Why do we confess? Why do we ask forgiveness for our sins? We believe that our sins are forgiven when we are in Christ. Do you know that? "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace," says Ephesians 1:7. In Christ, your sins are forgiven. They are gone. There is new life in Christ, and His sacrifice on the cross was enough to pay for all your sins, past, present, and future. If you are in Christ—Alleluia! You are forgiven. That's it! End of story. It is finished. Amen! So, if all my sins are already forgiven, why am I asking for my sins to

be forgiven? See? It's a great question. The answer is found in our ongoing work of growing more and more into the free child of God we were always meant to be. Even when we are justified by faith in Christ, even when we can say "my sins have been forgiven, my life is hidden with God in Christ, I am covered by Christ's righteousness, I am a child of God, my destination is the eternal kingdom in heaven, I'm saved!"—we are saved, but we are not done. We still sin. And God does not want us walking around with a guilty conscience. He wants us to keep our accounts short.

Experts on forgiveness talk about a breach caused when one person wrongs another in a relationship. There is a distance between what I ought to have done, and what I did—and that distance hurts you. If we stick together, we can try to shorten the distance. I can try to make up for it. You can try to understand my mistake. But that can only go so far. The breach remains, and it sits there like a gaping empty chasm, like a black hole or a vacuum, it sucks the energy out of our relationship. Until...until something moves in to fill it. What can move in? Forgiveness. "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." (Colossians 3:12-13 ESV) Forgiveness founded in the grace of Jesus Christ, who has forgiven you. *FOR*-give. I'm pushing the etymology here, but I think of it as "fore-give," as in "to give before." It really means to completely give. But in any case, I'm giving before you deserve it. You see? I'm giving, completely, fully, of myself. I'm giving to pour into that gap, that gaping maw of what should have been and what actually was—I'm giving completely into that, before you deserve it or earn it or do anything to merit what I am going to sacrificially do to make up this breach. Forgive. This is not weakness. This is great power. Lewis Smedes wrote, "The most creative power given to the human spirit is the power to heal the wounds of a past it cannot change. Forgiving is the only way to heal the wounds of a past we cannot change and cannot forget." (*The Art of Forgiving*) Anyway, God does not want your relationship with Him to limp along, hurting, feeling the pain of the distance between what you ought to have done

and what you actually did. God wants you to know the freedom and joy of total forgiveness.

Psalm 51 is David's open confession. Do you ever doubt the veracity of the Bible? What book, written by men to glorify men would ever include such ugly, real, brokenness from one of its most important figures? David is the great King of Israel. And here he is, broken. David made a grave mistake. He ought to have been out fighting the war against the Ammonites, but instead he was home lounging around on his rooftop balcony when he saw Bathsheba bathing and he desired her. He had her brought to his quarters, and she became pregnant. But she was another man's wife. Her husband, Uriah, was out fighting the war. To cover his crime, David had Uriah brought back into town, but Uriah refused to take comfort at home with his wife out of fidelity to his fellow soldiers out in the field. So the cover up failed. David then had Uriah sent out to the worst part of the battle to guarantee Uriah died in battle—which he did. And David took Bathsheba as his own (seventh or eighth) wife. How many sins can we count? David knocked off a number of the Ten Commandments in one episode. Envy, he coveted his neighbor's wife. Stealing, he effectively took over Uriah's estate. Adultery. False witness. Murder. I'd even say he broached number one—have no gods above me. He made his own desires a god and sacrificed to it with blood.

For a while, David thought he got away with it. Everything worked out! But, hear me now, you don't break God's law; God's law breaks you. David's life started falling apart. Eventually a friend confronted him and David saw just where he was with God. And it was not a good place. This is not broad, open, expansive living. This is narrow, heavy, regret-filled living. David wasn't experiencing the freedom of using his power and influence to gain his desires and shape the world around him to meet his pleasures. He thought that's what he was doing. But when you break God's law, your world shrinks. His world got narrow and tight and dark, until David asked his friend Nathan, "How do I get out of here? How do I get back to the open space, and the light, and the joy? Oh, I have sinned." That's where Psalm 51 shows up.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your un-failing love; according to your great compassion blot

out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." (Psalm 51:1-3) Let me tell the truth; let me come clean, Lord. God already knows everything. You're not telling God anything He doesn't know when you confess your sins. But up and into the light in comes. Let me tell the truth. In verse 4, David says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." We may have wronged others, but confession is primarily to recognize where we have wronged God—where we have broken His law. David wronged Bathsheba. David wronged the nation Israel. David wronged Uriah. But, you know what? We can wriggle our way out of our commitments to one another sometimes. David could have thought of a dozen ways to defend his mistake, or justify his error, or blame others for what happened. But not with God. God, I've wronged you. I confess.

Then David moves into contrition and self-examination. Man, O man! Why did I do this? I must have sin in my very bones. What is the origin of this disobedient spirit, this indulgent selfishness? "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet You desired faithfulness even in the womb; You taught me wisdom in that secret place." (Psalm 51:5-6) David is aware of both original sin, and the gift of conscience. "I must have sin deeply ingrained, but I also have a conscience teaching me wisdom. I alone am to blame for my sinful deeds. No one else. What is to be done? There is nothing I can do," David thinks. "I can't bring a sacrifice enough to make up for my mistake. I can't go back in time and undo what I've done. I'm helpless from this point. I'm dead in the water; I'm dead in my trespasses and sins." What can be done? Where will you turn? Cry out to the Lord for mercy. The only hope is that God helps, God saves, God rescues, God forgives. "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." (Psalm 51:7) "Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." (Psalm 51:9-10) David knew he had nothing to offer to make up for what he had done. The only hope, the only possibility is that God is a God who saves. That God is a God who forgives. "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, You who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of Your righteousness." (Psalm 51:14).

Good news. That's exactly who God is. God makes up the gap. God covers the breach. He sent His Son: "He himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24) What do we get? What do we get when we confess our sins before God? What do we get when we claim the forgiveness made possible in Jesus Christ? We get to sing of the joy of our salvation. That's what we get. Why would you be slow to confess?

I don't know if any of you have ever done anything wrong. I imagine not. But I have. Once, when I was young. No, all the time. And it isn't fun. It isn't open, spacious, living. It's heavy and dark and sickening... until I confess. Do you know today that unforgiven sin is not a burden Christ wants you to bear? Do you know it grieves God that you will not accept forgiveness? It grieves God that you will not forgive yourself for that which He has already forgiven and already paid the price to remove from you. Is this a place of burden, or release from burdens? "I came to church with burdens, and I left with twenty more." No! Oh, I hope not. Please no! "I came to church with burdens...and I left them on the floor." I came to church with burdens, but I left them at the cross. "My sin oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more; praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!" (*When Peace, Like a River*) Don't linger long in the grief of your mistakes and sins. Keep your account short with God. In fact, ask the Lord to let you know if there is anything amiss you haven't laid bare before Him in confession. And know the peace, the bliss, the joy, the Good News—in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

© 2016 Timothy Parker McConnell

STUDY GUIDE "Confession" • Psalm 51

Start It

- "A mentor of mine describes the Psalms as 'the sewage treatment plant for the soul': we can bring any emotion we have to the Psalter and find it somehow purified on the other side. The Psalms give us language to express ourselves honestly to God—something vital to the growth of any relationship." —Ken Shigematsu, *God in My Everything*.

An elder and close friend at my previous church has spent the bulk of his career engineering large components of water treatment plants. He said to me once, "No one likes to think of what happens after we flush, but we all agree it's important!" There is a need for purity in our souls, a real need to get past the sins and errors of our history. It is a need for confession and the forgiveness that follows.

Study It

- Read Psalm 51. This Psalm is by David after the episode with Bathsheba recounted in 2 Samuel 11-12. What was the cause of David's error?
- David says he knows his sin (verse 3), but did it take time for David to recognize he was wrong? Why does it take us time to realize our errors?
- What does David mean when he says "surely I was sinful at birth" (verse 5)? Do you understand the doctrine of Original Sin?
- What can David offer to please God and make up for his sins? What other options does David have? What options do we have?

Pray It

Almighty and Holy God, I stand before you a sinner in need of grace and salvation. David knew You are a God of compassion and mercy, but did not know how You would bring forgiveness about. We now know forgiveness is made possible in the life, death, and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Have mercy on me and forgive my sins, as I openly confess them and humbly repent. And grant that I may have mercy on others as You have had mercy on me. In Jesus name, Amen.

Live It

Ignatius of Loyola exercised a discipline he called the Prayer of Examen, going slowly over the events of the day and asking where he thrived and where he struggled. Try playing your day over in your head, and be quick to confess when the Spirit prompts.