



Texts in Context

Preaching the Penitential Psalms

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Reformation theology affirms that God's gracious love through Jesus Christ removes our sins and creates us anew. Thus, the confession of sin and the assurance of pardon are weekly rituals in most of our churches. Yet, rarely are these elements particularly lifted up to be contemplated and celebrated. Such contemplation and celebration can provide a path of growth for all, be they new to the church or lifelong member.

PENITENTIAL PSALMS: THEN AND NOW

One way of highlighting confession and forgiveness is through preaching and teaching the penitential psalms, texts that have helped form the church's understanding of these rituals. Early on, Western Christian tradition identified seven psalms as the "penitential psalms." This group of psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143) has been named by the church as a distinct genre even though only two of them speak specifically of confession and forgiveness (Pss 32 and 51). In his comprehensive study of penitential psalms, Harry Nasuti observes that in the medieval period these seven psalms were closely associated with the popular penitential system of the time—a system of indulgences that is no longer part of the church's function.¹

But what are the penitential psalms for today? Do we maintain the seven even though three of them (6, 38, and 102) never appear in the lectionary and another only appears as a response in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil (143)? While a study of all seven would provide interesting insights into how suffering and sin were and are

¹Harry Nasuti, *Defining the Sacred Songs: Genre, Tradition, and the Post-Critical Interpretation of the Psalms* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1999) 39.

In a day when confession of sins is often seen as out of step with culture, preaching and teaching the penitential psalms can awaken people to the power of this central aspect of the good news of Christian faith.

now understood, I will explore here only the three psalms that appear in the lectionary: Ps 32 (Year A, Lent 1; Year C, Lent 4 and Pentecost 3 and 23), Ps 51 (Ash Wednesday; Year B, Lent 5; and Year C, Pentecost 16), and Ps 130 (Year A, Lent 5). These psalms might provide an opportunity to lift up this central ritual throughout the liturgical calendar; they could be also used together for a short series on confession, grace, and forgiveness.

PSALM 51: A BLUEPRINT FOR THE CONFESSION OF SIN

If there is a crown in the set of penitential psalms, that would be Ps 51. The psalm serves as the blueprint for our weekly prayers of confession and can teach us about this important ritual.² 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 later addition of the superscription that connects the prayer to the shameful incident in David's life when he took Bathsheba and had her husband murdered to cover up his actions (2 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 (Ps 51:1).

This prayer is unique in all of biblical literature. The form is a prayer for help, but the typical elements of these prayers are turned inward. There is no external threat to the life of the one praying; indeed, something even more precious is at stake: the relationship between the pray-er and God has been fractured by sin. This point is clear from the first words of the prayer. The person praying asks for an act of grace, not because the human 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 on (Exod 34:6–7). Only God can restore this relationship. Indeed, throughout the prayer the one praying can be honest in confessing sin because the things asked for are already assured by God's great love and mercy.

The first nine verses are dominated by pleas to God to act by removing the sins of the one praying (vv. 1–2 and 7–9), with a confession in the center (vv. 3–5). The centrality of this confession is seen clearly in the chiasmic structure of vv. 2 and 7 where the same Hebrew verbs are used in reverse order: כָּבַשׁ in vv. 2a and 7b and טָהַר in vv. 2b and 7a. In addition to the structure, the two words also serve as a chiasm of meaning: כָּבַשׁ means to clean physically as in washing clothes (Exod 19:10) and טָהַר has the sense of purifying for a ritual or holy purpose, as in the pronouncement of a leper as "clean" (Lev 13:6). Using these two words together demonstrates the completeness of God's act of forgiveness. The one praying is asking to be cleaned both outside and in (v. 2) and inside and out (v. 7) so that no trace of sin remains. This completeness is further enhanced by the use of the word מָחָה in vv. 1 and 9. The meaning of the word is stronger than the NRSV's "blot out," for in other

²Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 506–507.

contexts the word has the meaning of annihilation, such as in Gen 7:6.³ 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.

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The confession in vv. 3–5 is strong and clear. The one praying makes no excuses for his or her actions. As with other prayers for 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 v. 4 declares to God, “Against you and you alone I have sinned” (v. 4). This does not mean that sins against humanity are excluded, especially in light of the superscription. Indeed, the repetition in v. 4 is probably meant as emphasis, stressing that God is the only god—as in, for example, 2 Kings 19:15 and Ps 86:10. In addition, this statement is connected to the next by the use of “so that.” 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. The center is 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, v. 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.”⁴

The one praying declares his or her unworthiness and sinfulness while at the same time declaring God’s goodness and grace. This confession of one’s sins, iniquities, and transgressions is nestled within pleas to God to remove the sin and cleanse the sinner. It seems that the human can only confess the dirt of sin, whereas God alone, who is blameless in judgment, will offer grace and a good soaking bath that will restore the one praying to a state of clean health.

The second part of the psalm is also dominated by pleas, but here the focus is on restoration of the sinner and the relationship between God and the human. This section begins with pleas of restoration (vv. 10–12), opening with a request for a “clean” heart, using the same Hebrew root as vv. 2 and 7. This repetition serves to join these two sections of the prayer. Another thematic joiner is the role of God. In the first section, the pleas are for God to clean the person from sin. In v. 10, the plea is to **ברא**, “create,” a clean heart, an act that is attributed only to God.

The main focus of this section is on the Hebrew concept of **רוּחַ**. **רוּחַ** is a difficult concept to put into one English word. It means “wind,” “breath,” and “life

³In modern-day vernacular, we might plead for God to “nuke” our sins.

⁴James K. Zink, “Uncleanness and Sin: A Study of Job 14:4 and Psalm 51:7,” *Vetus Testamentum* 17/3 (1967) 355.

force.” This multiple meaning is helpful here. In v. 10, the idea is for God to restore a firm רִיחַ. This could refer to the actual breath of life or to a more metaphorical “spirit” or life force. The Hebrew word allows for multiple meanings; whether the meaning here is physical breath or life force, what is clear is that the human’s רִיחַ is dependent on God’s holy רִיחַ (v. 11).⁵ The center of these verses is the same as the center above: God and God’s grace are the only things that can sustain life. The one praying is clear that his or her very life is dependent on God’s act of creation and God’s breath, just as in Gen 1.

Finally, we learn from this prayer that restoration requires a response. The “cleansing” of the one will produce visible results. The redeemed and restored will “teach,” “sing aloud,” and “praise” God (vv. 13–15). The one praying knows that this great God is more than a celestial vending machine where sins are submitted and a bill of pardon is issued. Real redemption requires real response. What a concept to contemplate in our culture of blame and shame. Let the sinners teach! Let the transgressors praise! Could it be that restoration by God means that the community of the faithful should also “annihilate” the sins of the past? It is a risky, some would say a foolish, thing to do. Our culture says “once a sinner always a sinner”; a debt to society is never really paid when it follows you to each job interview. What the one praying knows, and what we need to be reminded of again and again, is that we have all sinned against God. Removing the human element (v. 4) disallows our human desire to grade sins from little to massive. It removes our temptation to look at another and say to ourselves, “See, I am not *that* bad.” On the other hand, it is good news to the broken ones who think that because of their past sins and transgressions both God and humans have condemned them forever.

In case the message of genuine redemption is not yet understood, the poem adds one last thought. Outside appearances of religious piety will not fool God (vv. 16–17); the cleansing must be from the inside out.⁶ What God “delights in” is a person who is not “broken” in the way we may understand it in the modern world, but is “broken” of the pretense that outward acts can atone for sin without a change in the inward ways of thinking and being. The final two verses (vv. 18–19) are an addition of a later editor, but they should not be discounted because of this fact. The verses are a prayer that the community be rebuilt, just like the sinner praying the prayer; then God can delight in “right sacrifices.” Relationship and life are restored and recreated as God intended them to be.

Psalms 51 is assigned as the text for Ash Wednesday, and this is an important place to begin the journey of Lent. It reminds us that Lenten practices must not be simply window dressings or done because they are “tradition.” Yet, Ps 51 should also transcend this one day, for the ideas expressed in this prayer are the very heart

⁵The temptation here is to equate this term of “holy spirit” with the NT and Christian theological understanding of the third person of the Trinity. This expression is unusual in the OT, appearing here and in Isa 63:10–11, and is most probably related to the creative and life-giving activity of God.

⁶This idea is well represented in Scripture in both testaments. See, for example, Isa 1:12–20; Mic 6:6–8; Amos 5:18–27; Matt 6:1–6; Mark 12:38–40; and Luke 11:37–54.

of Reformation tradition. In these powerful words, we can hear both conviction and good news. It is the barometer by which we are called to live our lives. It can speak to the unpopular topics of sin and evil in our world without the dreaded and often ineffective sin lecture from the pulpit. 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 "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17).

PSALM 32: A CELEBRATION OF FORGIVENESS

Psalm 32 is both celebratory and reflective, offering all an opportunity to celebrate God's forgiveness. Truly, the pray-er is "happy" because God has transformed the person from a place of sin and sorrow to a place of happiness and grace.

The psalm begins by declaring, "Happy is the one whose transgression is lifted and whose sin is covered; happy (indeed) is the one for whom God does not count iniquity and in whom there is no deceit" (vv. 1–2). The opening word of these verses, **אַשֶׁר**, is also the opening word of the entire Psalter. This word, usually translated as "blessed" (NIV) or "happy" (NRSV), indicates a life that is lived fully before God, a true state of *shalom*. The psalm celebrates the life the forgiven sinner is to live as a redeemed member of the community. The one praying is celebrating his or her condition. Yet at the same time, he or she is confessing that this restored state results only from God's gracious acts of "lifting" and "covering" and of "not counting" all of the "transgressions" and "sins" and "iniquities" of the past. This repetition of point and counterpoint here drives home the central theme: no matter what and no matter for how long and no matter how many and no matter by what name our sins, God has a counterpoint that will restore the human so that "there is no deceit" within the one praying (v. 2). These opening verses celebrate not only the state of being a forgiven child of God, but also celebrate God's gracious acts that provide the way for renewed relationship. This perspective is, of course, the heart and soul of Reformation theology and expands the words "in Jesus Christ you are forgiven" into a celebration of "the good news of the gospel" that is central to our lives and our worship.

Persons of Christian faith may be surprised to find this plea for forgiveness in the Old Testament, but what it demonstrates is the true and consistent character of God. These verses reflect the same understanding of God as do the more familiar words of 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The next section of the psalm (vv. 3–5) is reflective of what brought the one praying to the Lord. In ancient cultures sin and physical sickness were understood as much more closely related than we understand them to be today, yet we also know that carrying sin and guilt can literally make us sick both in mind and body. We all know the pain of carrying our sins around with us. We know that the injury

we have done to others cannot always be repaired. We know that a large part of a therapist's work is to enable a person to arrive at the place of confession, for without it there will be no healing of a broken spirit. The poem aptly describes the physical pain we feel when we have sinned: the groaning; the heaviness that refuses to depart, be it day or night; and the oppressive force exerted on one's life. Verse 5 reflects the act of acknowledgment using the same three words of sin as vv. 1–2 and the confidence in God's "lifting" the guilt of sin from the psalmist. The "lifting" by God here is the countermove from the oppression of the sin and guilt of v. 4.

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The next stanza (vv. 6–7) returns to the celebration, this time not just of the one praying but of all of the faithful. James Limburg points out the importance of the first word here, translated as "therefore": *therefore* we are to pray because God is faithful and forgives.⁷ We are to pray because even "at the time of distress, the rush of the waters will not reach the faithful" (v. 6). Our sins may feel like the dangerous force of powerful waters, but God will not allow us to drown in despair. Verse 7 returns to the individual, using traditional words that usually refer to God's protection from the enemies; used here these words remind us that sometimes the enemy is found within, not without. The previous stanza began in the silence of oppressive sin (v. 3), and this one ends with the "glad cries of deliverance" (v. 7). The one praying has been moved from a place of pain to a place of celebratory cries of salvation.

Like Ps 51, the response is not only grateful prayer but also proclamation and teaching of what has been learned (see Ps 51:13–14). Teaching is proclamation of the life lesson of forgiveness. The teaching is not said to condemn others, but to lead them in the path of happiness. The psalmist suffered because he or she refused to come to God and the warning is much like the warnings in Proverbs:⁸ do not be like one without understanding, for pain will be the result. The psalmist is instructing others from his or her own experience of unconfessed sin and guilt.

Like Ps 1, the final stanza (vv. 10–11) contrasts the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. In Ps 1, the contrast is between the blowing chaff and the well-watered tree. Here the wicked experience the torments such as those expressed in vv. 3–4, but the righteous ones are surrounded by God's steadfast and constant love. As with all of the wisdom psalms, the choice seems simple. Why would one continue to suffer when God's grace is waiting to surround and protect? The psalm ends with thanksgiving for the gifts of God to God's people.

⁷James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 104.

⁸The book of Proverbs begins by asserting, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7).

PSALM 130: THERE IS NO QUICK FIX

This psalm stands as a testimony against a quick-fix culture. We live under the illusion that everything in life that is broken can be repaired in the blink of an eye. Yet we know this is not the case. Sometimes, or maybe even many times, we are left without sure answers to life's complex issues. This psalm affirms that in such times all we can do is "wait" and "hope" in the Lord.

The psalm opens with a demand to be heard: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD" (v. 1). The "depths" are literally at the bottom of the sea. Water or floods or seas are often used metaphorically in the psalms to represent pressing trouble or enemies. Psalm 130 contains no platitudes or enticements for God to listen; instead the words demand that God turn God's ears and hear the cries of the pray-er. Christians can read this as improper or even blasphemous speech. Yet, looked at in another way, it denotes the depth of relationship between God and the one praying. This God does not have to be soothed with platitudes before the pain is voiced. The relationship is so strong that the pray-er can be honest about his or her condition. The one praying not only dares to make demands of God but fully expects God to hear and reciprocate. This is bold, non-apologetic faith.⁹ It teaches us that we can come to God with a scream or cry when we too are to be found in our own depths. We belong to God even when we are so broken that praise cannot be found on our lips.

*"the one praying can be bold in his or her demands
because of the character of God and God's relationship
with us"*

After these desperate cries, the second stanza (vv. 3–4) demonstrates that the one praying clearly understands that God is truly God. Humans could not stand if God were to "guard" or "keep" iniquities; with God is forgiveness and, for this, God is to be "respectfully feared." The one praying does not explain his or her troubles further than the "depths" of v. 1. This stanza, which in typical lament form would contain an expansion of the complaint, here speaks of a specific attribute of God, that of forgiveness. This naming of a specific attribute has caused several scholars to assume that the psalmist's problem is his or her own sinfulness, and while this is possible, it is not certain. It is just as likely that this psalm is dedicated to naming and lifting up God's forgiveness as central to the relationship.¹⁰ The one praying can be bold in his or her demands because of the character of God and God's relationship with us.

⁹This bold faith is seen in several of the narrative texts. For example: Abram's confrontational words to God when the promise of many children is delayed (Gen 15); Moses facing God in Exod 32 and Num 11; or Jeremiah and his cries against God and the people in Jer 20:7–18. Jesus, himself, cries out using the words of Ps 22 from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

¹⁰In contrast to Pss 32 and 51, where the psalmist's sin is explicitly named as the problem.

The next stanza is a surprise to those accustomed to these prayers for help. The cry and address to God is finished almost as soon as it started. In these next verses, the one praying first declares his or her intention of “waiting and hoping” and then implores Israel to do the same (v. 7). As readers and hearers of this prayer, we do not know what happened between the plaintive cry of vv. 1–2 and the declaration here of waiting for the Lord. Earlier scholarship asserted the intervention of a priest who provided the one praying with an assurance of being heard.¹¹ That may be the case, but when there is no evidence of this occurrence within the psalm itself we cannot be certain. What exists here and in other prayers for help is what might be called a “literary gap.”¹² A gap happens when readers or hearers are forced to make their own connection between the two stanzas in order to make sense of the prayer. Whatever happens between vv. 4 and 5, the one praying is now content to wait for the situation to resolve. It may be intervention by another. It could be that the very words in vv. 3–4 reminded him or her that God is indeed faithful. It may be that just as we are a mixed bag of faith and doubt, the one praying can doubt one moment and find the strength to believe the next. The gap here is not designed to be fixed, but rather contemplated. How are we to move from doubt to belief? It is here in this silent space that we as hearers and readers have the chance to grow in faith by contemplation of our own answers. There will be no quick fixes for the one praying, for the people of Israel, or for us. We, like the writer, must wait and hope for God to show us the way.

The final stanza (vv. 7–8) expands God’s forgiveness to include other attributes that can always be counted on in times of trouble: God’s steadfast love (חסד) and God’s great power to redeem or ransom (פדה) us.¹³ This last thought of the psalm brings it clearly in line with the much later atonement concepts of the New Testament and could be used as a connection from the psalms to early Christian doctrine (see Rom 5:18–21; 6:5–11). God redeems the people of Israel from slavery, both from Egypt and from their own corporate and personal sin—certainly an attribute that deserves our patience and praise.

A LESSON THAT WE NEED TO LEARN OVER AND OVER

In the past few years, the church has been enmeshed in worship wars. Debates

¹¹E.g., Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 467.

¹²Meir Sternberg notes that “gaps” appear in all literature, including some significant enough to cause the hearer or reader to perform the task of gap-filling. The reader must work “consciously, laboriously, hesitantly and with constant modifications,” based on further reading and processing, to bridge the gap. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 187. The change from cry to assurance in the prayers for help is one example of a major gap.

¹³God’s *hesed* or never-ending love is an attribute commonly referred to in the psalms and throughout the entire Hebrew Bible and is often associated with God’s forgiving of Israel’s many sins (for example, see Hos 11). The last concept in this psalm is unique. First it names God’s great power of redemption (v. 7), and then it proclaims that God will “redeem” Israel from all of its iniquities (v. 8). The word “redeem” is associated directly with the people’s sins only here. It is usually used for people or individuals with the idea of “buying” them out of slavery (see Deut 7:8). Here in Ps 130 we see the same concept as in the New Testament, that of an atonement or price that God paid for the sins of the people.

rage about what to keep and what to change for a changing population of church members. The prayer of confession and the assurance of pardon is often one of those rituals that is up for discussion. Yet in my experience, the members who wish to dispose of it because it is seen as depressing or a “downer” have little understanding of what the ritual represents and why it is not a “downer” at all but indeed the very definition of the good news of the gospel. Much of their ignorance can be laid at the feet of church leaders, not as an intentional act, but as omission. Because of our training and our own spiritual journey, we understand the importance of this ritual, yet we have apparently not adequately translated this guiding principle into teaching and proclamation. Many members were not raised in the church; others do not attend the same denomination in which they were confirmed. Preaching today needs both to proclaim the gospel and to teach about the central beliefs of Christian faith. These psalms give an opportunity to do just that: to lift up our thoughts about sin and pardon to the mirror of Scripture instead of the mirror of modern culture. This is a lesson that all of us need in order to nurture our growth and to retune our hearts to God’s radical grace and love. ⊕

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