

THE MESSENGER



“... How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!” Romans 10:15

A Weekly Publication of the Christians Meeting at
2291 Highway Z, Wentzville, Missouri
Website: westlakechurchofchrist.org

Dedicated to the Proclamation of the Truth in the Spirit of Love (Ephesians 4:15)

Volume 12, Issue 41

Evangelist and Editor:

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Oct. 30, 2011

Listen to PROVE ALL THINGS on 730 AM WKRE, Sunday mornings from 8:15 to 8:30

Create in Me a Clean Heart

By Kenny Chumbley

A few years ago, during a visit to Glasgow, Scotland, I was given a tape of songs that traced Scottish history. One that particularly caught my attention recounted the 1692 massacre of the MacDonalDs of Glencoe by a force of Campbells (my maternal grandmother was a Campbell). Macaulay, in his telling of the event, says that one of the chief planners behind the atrocity was John Campbell, Earl of Breadalbane. Though he tried, after the deed, to act unaffected by what he had ordered, those who knew him best, knew better. Wrote Macaulay, “He was not the man that he had been before that night. The form of his countenance was changed. In all places, at all hours, whether he waked or slept, *Glencoe was ever before him.*”

According to Psalm 51:3, David knew exactly how he felt.

Of the seventy-three psalms that bear the name of David, fourteen have titles connecting them to historical incidents in his life. The superscription to Psalm 51 says it was composed “when Nathan the prophet came unto (David), after he had gone in to Bathsheba” – the incident, says I Kings 15:5, that was the singular failure of David’s life.

Most Bible students consider Psalm 51 the chief of the seven songs (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) categorized as “Penitential Psalms” (in which sin is confessed and forgiveness sought). But even more, Psalm 51 is misery incarnate in its description of the unnerving agony of a man brought face to face with the enormity of his sin. These are the thoughts that seized David’s soul in his darkest hour.

One of the main reasons why I love the Psalms is that they tell of men tempted in all points like as I . . . who sinned. I find myself in this book. All my sins and situations are here. But even more, the Psalms tell me how I ought to respond in all my sins and situations. No matter where I am spiritually, emotionally, or physically – whether in the best of times or the worst of times – they tell me what my next step ought to be. Their perfect applicability to my life derives from the fact that they are both divine, coming from the Holy Spirit (II Peter 1:21), and human, coming from those of flesh and blood who were in everything like me.

Psalm 51 is difficult to outline, for it reflects the “disorderliness” that characterizes the book as a whole (see Yancey’s comments on this in *The Bible Jesus Read* 117, 119; his observations on the Psalms are some of the best I have read). I think it possible, however, to arrange this song under two broad headings that I’ll label: David’s appeal and David’s assurance.

David’s Appeal

In nine of the Psalm’s nineteen verses, David musters every word and figure he can think of to say one thing: “Lord, forgive me.” He pleads that what he has done be blotted out, washed, cleansed, and purged. Recognize the justness of God’s judgment against him (v. 4), he nevertheless begs for mercy, loving kindness, fellowship, restoration, and deliverance. In a voice wracked by sobs, he asks to again know the joy and gladness of a clear conscience.

The “passing the buck” irresponsibility commonly relied upon to rationalize sin is not found here (see I Samuel 13:11, 15:15). Yes, David bemoans the sinful environment in which he lived, moved, and had his being (v. 5; I Peter 1:18), but he accepts full responsibility for his crimes, without arguing any extenuating circumstance (vv. 3-4). The three words he uses in Psalm 32 to describe his behavior, reappear. In language that is elemental, not advanced, “honest, true,

and personal” (E. Peterson in his paraphrase of the Psalms), David affirms that he has “transgressed” (rebelled, v. 1), been “iniquitous” (perverse, depraved, v. 2), and “sinned” (missed God’s holy mark, v. 2).

Surprisingly, there are some who discount a confession like David’s, on the ground that it is too general to be genuine. But to judge the validity of a confession solely on the basis of its specificity, is to misunderstand confession. Confession is not a religious ritual (compare “going forward”). It is not an apology. It is not morbid self-introspection. And it is not even to be equated with saying, “I have sinned” (I Samuel 15:24). What it is, is a broken heart (v. 17; I Samuel 16:7), an awareness of one’s sinfulness that rends the soul (Joel 2:13). What God seeks is a heart wherein pride, rebellion, and self-centeredness have been replaced by humility that sees beyond what one has done, to what one is (Genesis 32:27). In Psalm 51, David agrees (confesses, *homologeo*) with God on what he – David – is at his core (see Matt. 15:18): a perverse, erring rebel. What he saw in himself shattered him, but it was a shattering necessary for his saving (II Cor. 7:10).

David’s Assurance

Sir James Simpson, the Scottish physician who discovered chloroform and ushered in the era of painless surgery, was once asked to name the greatest discovery of his life. He answered, “The discovery that I have a Savior.” In the hour of his greatest need, David discovered the same (II Samuel 12:13).

When he cried for mercy, he found (in a way he hadn’t known before) that he cried to One who delights in mercy (Micah 7:18). When he pled for loving kindness, he learned that he was heard by One of great kindness (Jonah 4:2). And when he asked that his transgressions be blotted out (vv. 1, 9), he discovered that he spoke to One who said, “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions . . . and will not remember thy sins” (Isaiah 43:25). This figure of “blotting out” is especially interesting. In Numbers 5:23, the term is used to describe a ceremony wherein a priest wrote curses on a scroll, and then washed (blotted) them off. It was a shadow, or course, of what was to come – when the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, and contrary to us, was taken out of the way, and nailed to a cross. Only Blood can wipe out blood; only Grace can erase guilt.

It seems too good to be true, doesn’t it – for one inexcusably and heinously guilty to be told, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (John 8:11)? But it’s that message that makes the gospel good news! If ever there was a reason for praising another, the redemption found in the gospel of the grace of God is it. “My sin – O the bliss of this glorious tho’t! – 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!” (vv. 14-15).

Conclusion

Let me close with three brief comments.

First, there is no sin of which a Christian is incapable. The best of men have been guilty of the worst of sins. If you doubt this, simply read about the Patriarchs, Moses, David, Peter, etc. and see for yourself that their stories constitute an unabridged catalogue of sin.

Second, when we refuse to deal with our sin, we force others to deal with it. It’s hard to blame David for engaging in a cover-up (Prov. 28:13), for his sins were capital crimes! But in refusing to come clean, he forced the Lord’s hand (II Samuel 12:1ff). “If we judge ourselves, we should not be judged” (I Cor. 11:31); but if we don’t deal with our sins, rest assured that another will.

Third, Calvary solved the sin problem. A man once told Dwight Moody a tale of moral disaster. After relating the horrible facts, he asked, “Mr. Moody, what would you do if you got into such a situation?” Moody replied, “Man, I would never get into it.”

I wish it were that easy. But the reality is that we all have gotten into situations we should have stayed out of (Rom. 3:23). So now what? Answer: the Cross. Because of Calvary, there are no insoluble problems. There may be hopeless cases due to persistent pride and unbroken hearts (II Chron. 36:16), but for those shattered in their soul, God’s grace is more than enough to blot out any sin or quantity of sin charged to our account (Rom. 5:20).

That’s what Psalm 51 is really about – a mercy that is “exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). If we can’t see God’s mercy for our mess, we’re going to get to know wretchedness really well (Rom. 7:24-25).

(Note on Psalm 51:1: There are some hints in scripture that the circumstances of David’s birth might have had an air of scandal about them. By comparing I Chronicles 2:13-16 with II Samuel 17:25, it appears David’s mother was married to a Nahash, before she was Jesse’s wife. Though further details are lacking, David’s statement in Psalm 51:5 may literally refer to some sort of moral cloud involving his mother at the time of his birth, due to a previous marriage.)

NOTES & NEWS: Remember to check the prayer list for those with ongoing spiritual weaknesses and physical illnesses. “...Pray for one another...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” James 5:16