

A Confession of Sin

How can a community come to a place of repentance?

One of the first things a parent usually teaches a child is to say that they are sorry when they misbehave. That's because apologizing is one of the most difficult but also one of the most crucial things a person can do to have healthy, productive relationships. Apologies are a sign of respect and show a desire to heal broken bonds. They make a place to start anew, acknowledging a wrong and expressing a desire to do better in the future.

But before we apologize, we must realize that we have done wrong. If we do not recognize and take responsibility for our mistakes, then even if we apologize, it will be hollow and meaningless.

Just as with our relationships with people, repentance or apologizing to God is a crucial step in healing our relationship with our Creator. Repentance is a sign of self-examination before God and shows that we value that relationship. It's also crucial for our spiritual development. Only when we reach the point of repentance can we open ourselves to listen to God for guidance.

Today's passage is a prayer of confession, repentance, and then a plea for mercy. Daniel prayed on behalf of his entire nation, Israel, when they sinned against God so horribly that they were conquered and the people exiled. Daniel recognized and voiced the sin of the people of Israel, offering no excuses or

justifications for their actions. He took complete responsibility. They were wrong. God was right and was completely warranted in punishing Israel.

The practices of the nation of Israel went against God's laws and desires, so the entire nation of Israel suffered the consequences. While God deals with each of us on an individual basis, the passage reminds us again that there are corporate sins for which communities and even nations must answer. Verse 8 speaks of the shame of the entire nation—the people, the kings, the leaders, and their parents.

Individual repentance is difficult. Corporate repentance is even more difficult. Historically, prophets such as Jeremiah or Elijah who have spoken of community or national sin have been reviled and persecuted. The steps of confession, repentance, and asking for forgiveness take self-examination and insight that can cause divisiveness and even anger in a community until everyone can reach an awareness of their sin.

Daniel's prayer on behalf of Israel was the result of painful discernment and a sincere desire to heal her rift with God.

Lord, bless my community and nation with a self-knowledge and desire to repent of any sins they have before you. Amen.

A Plea for Mercy

What have been your motives when you've asked God for forgiveness?

Healing a relationship involves at least three steps—recognizing mistakes, regretting mistakes, and asking for forgiveness. Yesterday, we read Daniel's prayer where he recognized and regretted Israel's sins. But I suspect that few ask for forgiveness as Daniel did in this situation.

The huge difference between the way people usually ask for forgiveness and Daniel's prayer is that Daniel's request for forgiveness was completely God-centered. While God's grace and mercy would be a great gift to Israel, Daniel asked for forgiveness for God's sake. Israel belonged to God, and although the people ruined that relationship, if they had the strength of God behind them once again, the nation could rise up in praise and glory for God.

Daniel did not take the view that God was there for the people of Israel and that God could take away their pain. Rather, he pleaded that they were there to praise and worship God. They failed miserably, but with God's grace, they could once again fulfill the covenant and give God the glory God deserves.

When we pray for forgiveness, how many times do we pray for God to heal our hurt, to fix our brokenness, or to release us from our guilt? The great and glorious thing is that God does all these things, with great love and compassion. God even does this joyfully, not wishing us to suffer. But God does not exist to serve us and to make us feel better when

we fail. Rather, we were created by God to serve God.

Daniel did not ask God to forgive Israel for Israel's sake. Daniel was concerned about the people of Israel being more effective and powerful servants for God. He wanted Israel to be better equipped to glorify God's name. He pleaded with God to make Israel whole, not because Israel wanted to go home and certainly not because Israel deserved forgiveness, but because her people longed to demonstrate a newfound righteousness to the rest of the world.

This is not a request for a simple "reset" of the relationship, asking to go back to the way it was before. This was a soul-searching, humble request for the honor of serving God as the people of God. It was a heartfelt plea to the demonstrated character of God. The great and glorious thing is that even though our sin, time and time again, damages our ability to serve and praise God as we were created to do, God listens and responds to our pleas, just as God did to Daniel centuries ago. God continues to use flawed creatures in service. Thanks be to God!

Lord, may my pleas for forgiveness always focus on what I can do for your holy name and not what you can do for me. Amen.

The Right Way

If sin is so insidious, how can we avoid it?

I've been on a lot of airplanes recently. During the safety briefings before take-off, the flight attendants point out the floor lighting along the aisles that lead to the exits. In case of emergency, the pathways light up, ushering the travelers to safety.

The psalmist in this passage was on a bit of a bumpy flight. He had enemies who hated him and were out to destroy him. He was alone and suffering. He was even afraid for his life. But his biggest concern was how he could avoid sin.

Like every one of us, he had sinned before. He was deeply concerned about how that sin affected his relationship with God and begged God to forgive and forget his past. But he had hope. Like the floor lights on the airplane aisles, he trusted God's guidance to keep him out of the danger of sin. God's instruction was his lifeline. He understood that if he kept his eyes on God's light, he would remain safe from the snares of sin.

Read verses 4-5 and 8-9 again. See how hungry the psalmist was to learn God's ways? This was a person who knew who he was without God's guidance, and it wasn't pretty. He had come through the realization and repentance stages of healing from sin and now was absolutely determined to do better. He was aware that it was only through God's direction that he could achieve this. And he was totally open to learning

all he could about living within the will of his Lord.

This seems like a daunting task, but God's character is the ultimate encouragement. Even though the psalmist had been a poor example of faithfulness before, God was compassionate and patient. The way was laid out, and God was ready to guide him. As long as he was open to God's words and guidance, even when his life was challenging or difficult, he would be able to avoid the pitfalls of sin.

How do we follow God's guidance? Two of the most important ways are through study and prayer. Verse 9 in the NIV and NRSV translate the Hebrew word *anav* as "humble" (translated as "weak" in the CEB). The word suggests an openness to instruction and an awareness of one's own limitations. There is no hint of arrogance here.

The way to live a life pleasing to God is to recognize one's inability to live sin-free without a strong and secure lifeline to God, made stronger by constant prayer and meditation on God's Word. Then, despite the troubles of the world, we can truly live in a state of peace and happiness, secure in the protection and love of our Creator God.

Lord, guide and instruct me, and forgive me for when I've failed you. Amen.

Divine Power Brings Release

What is your reaction to the power of the Holy Spirit?

What a strange story! For the third time in Acts, Jesus' followers were put in jail. And for the third time, God miraculously rescued them. There's obviously a theme here.

In preparing to write based on this text, I came across a lot of suggestions by different commentators about what the jail might symbolize. Could it be about encountering roadblocks? Maybe it's about the effects of sin? Perhaps these stories are included to teach us about persecution. But it seems to me that it's not about the jails but about the releases from the jails. The exuberant story of Acts is overflowing with instances where the Holy Spirit simply cannot be contained. The force of the Spirit pulses through every page. What is a man-made prison when compared to this divine power?

It was this power that had Paul and Silas within its grasp. It was why, even in a dungeon, beaten and in shackles, they sang hymns of praise. And it was why the earth shook and the doors flew open! Earthquakes are common in that region, but this was no ordinary earthquake. Despite them being deep in a dungeon, nothing fell to trap them. Instead, chains and locks were broken. This was a release, but they didn't leave.

Why not? Add to the mystery the jailer's immediate attempt at suicide. Certainly, even the strictest overseer wouldn't blame the jailer for an earthquake! So what was going on?

The jailer had heard Paul and Silas singing. He must have felt the force of the Spirit there in the jail, and when the miraculous earthquake shook open the gates, it only confirmed his fears. This was a holy power, a force he had never encountered before, and he was on the wrong side of it. It's terrifying to see divine power when you've been working against God!

In Luke 5:8, Peter begged Jesus to leave when he realized that he was the Messiah, "for I'm a sinner." Just like Peter, the jailer saw the power of God, realized his sins, and was terrified.

But Paul stopped his suicide. Still not convinced, the jailer cried out, "What must I do to be rescued?" The jailer knew that Paul knew the source of this mighty and terrifying power. When Paul revealed that he could have the gift of the Holy Spirit, too, the jailer was overjoyed. His entire family was baptized, and they ate a meal together, most likely the Eucharist.

Paul and Silas demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit and then invited the jailer and his family to join this mighty force. The prisoners gave the gift of ultimate freedom: salvation through Jesus Christ.

Lord, may others see the Holy Spirit within me, so that I may be a rescuer, too. Amen.

How can we please God, according to Jesus?

Do you recognize this scenario? Imagine that you've asked your son to take out the trash. "Sure thing!" he calls, as he continues to play his video game. Meanwhile, the trash truck comes and goes. Maybe he meant to take out the trash and just got distracted. Maybe his answer was brushing you off. But either way, there were more important things for him than your request. His cheery willingness to help was just a sham.

It's also probably a familiar scenario to request help and be confronted with a sullen, resentful teen. Why should she have to do everything for you? But then, looking out the window, you see her pulling the trash can down the driveway. She thought about it, relented, and did what was asked of her.

Jesus asked the chief priests and elders what they thought of the two sons in his story. He knew that these religious leaders had said the right things, but they didn't do them. Tax collectors and prostitutes, on the other hand, had responded to John's message. They had not said the right words, but they ended up doing the right thing. Jesus' point was that while the chief priests reviled those who had been living sinful lives, it was the people who responded to Jesus' call who were pleasing to God.

It doesn't matter where you start out, if you were raised in the church or were a respected citizen. What matters is where you end up, if you're in the vineyards doing God's work or not.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, was clear that we are not saved by our works. But we're also not saved by appearances or empty words. Luther's frustration was with a check-the-box Christianity that didn't demand the heart change that is the mark of someone devoted to Jesus Christ.

The priests had spoken the words but not made life commitments that demonstrated their dedication to God. Jesus warned that they would be overshadowed by those they scorned—tax collectors and prostitutes—because despite their past, those who were reviled as sinners recognized Christ and actually did his work in the world.

Actions do speak louder than words, especially when it comes to serving God. We can talk about our faith all we want, but if we're not doing the hard work of living faithful lives, none of it matters. Micah 6:8 tells us what that work is. It is to "do justice, embrace faithful love [some translations say "love mercy"], and walk humbly with your God."

Are you in God's vineyard now, harvesting the fruits of this command? Or are you waving God off, engrossed in fulfilling your own aspirations, allowing the honor of serving God to pass you by?

Lord, may my actions speak of my devotion for you. Amen.

Are grace and forgiveness fair?

Some years back, a family member estranged himself from us. He was deeply loved, and the pain of the broken relationship was profound. I wrote letter after letter to him. I waited in places I knew he sometimes frequented. I hoped and prayed for reconciliation. When we finally reunited, we were overjoyed. It didn't matter what had caused the breach. What mattered was that the family was whole once more.

In the beloved story of the prodigal son, the younger son's actions were deeply disrespectful of his father. He claimed his inheritance while his father was yet alive, saying in effect that he wished him dead. Then he abandoned his family and wasted all his money. His situation became so dire that he was feeding pigs (the height of shame for a Jewish man) and was wishing for the food they ate.

Finally, the son's moment of clarity came. He saw how he was wasting his life and decided to return to his father's house in shame as a servant. He knew he was guilty of causing his family great pain and that he didn't deserve even to be hired as a servant, but he swallowed his pride and returned.

But his father was waiting. He saw him a long way off and ran to him, presenting him with a robe, sandals, and a signet ring, symbolizing his welcome back into the family. All was forgiven before the son could even open his mouth and apologize.

This is a beautiful story, but there's something that nags at us when we read

it. It's not fair. The son profoundly hurt his family and wasted a large part of the family fortune. Shouldn't he face consequences for his sin? Shouldn't he have to answer for his mistakes? This was the viewpoint of the eldest brother. His younger brother, who had caused so much pain, was getting away with it all.

But this is the nature of grace and forgiveness. It's not fair. Grace is valuing relationship more than equity. Forgiveness is letting go of pain in the joy of reconciliation. It's saying you can move past the hurt someone else caused you because the bond you have with one another is worth so much more. It demands a willingness to lose your own rights. Grace forgets about debts for the sake of love.

This is how God greets us when we meet, broken and shamed, on the road back home. It's not fair. It's requesting much more than is deserved. It's asking our Lord to accept an unfair deal. But the power of love does away with fairness and welcomes us with joy.

O Lord, thank you for the sacrifice of grace and forgiveness. Help me to see past fairness to offer the richness of grace when I'm hurt by others. Amen.

Create a Clean Heart for Me

How does God heal a repentant heart?

“Wait ’til your father gets home.” When I was growing up, those were some of the scariest words in the English language. If my mother postponed discipline for my father to handle, it meant my guilt was clear, and it was something bad.

This psalm is traditionally attributed to King David, after his conversation with the prophet Nathan. He had sinned by appropriating another man’s wife and then having the man killed. It was bad. In fact, he systematically disobeyed at least half of the Ten Commandments in one fell swoop. In this prayer, David stood before God with the full force of his sin weighing down on him. There was nothing else to do but beg for mercy.

This psalm is a window on human sin. Sin is inescapable. David claimed in verse 5 that it had followed him since birth. It’s deeply offensive to God. David knew that God would be perfectly justified in cutting him off completely. And it was a crushing, painful, destructive load on his soul. David cried out to be released from his terrible burden.

But this psalm also tells us about God’s character. First, it tells us that God takes sin seriously. David’s sin destroyed many around him, but David knew that he had sinned against God. This doesn’t mean that he didn’t owe others for his crimes but that sin is a failure to honor and obey God.

David pleaded for mercy, citing God’s compassion and unfailing love. He knew that God has the ability to remove that guilt and pain and allow him to stand

unstained before his Creator again. His well-known plea for God to create a clean heart for him means much more than a simple washing away of the dirt of sin. The Hebrew word in verse 10 used for create, *bara*, is only used for creations by God. David was asking for a divinely-crafted conscience, an ever-present guidance from God that protected him from the pitfalls of sin.

The amazing thing is that while sin is real and pervasive, the grace of God is more powerful. God willingly forgives the insults of sin and recreates disobedient people into partners in God’s covenant. Verse 12 explains what God does for those who ask for forgiveness. Once again, they feel the joy of God’s saving grace, free of sin’s guilt. But along with that, God nurtures a desire to obey and live a pleasing life. God forgives the insult of sin but then rebuilds the hearts of his faithful to guide them toward righteousness.

“Return the joy of your salvation to me and sustain me with a willing spirit” (Psalm 51:12). Amen.