

Godly Sorrow

By Al Felder

(Psalm 51)

Psalm 51 is an eloquent record of a convicted conscience burdened by sin before God. The inspired author of this psalm is David, the great king of Israel. This psalm was written after God sent Nathan the prophet to rebuke David for his sin. He desired another man's wife. David lusted after and committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. In an attempt to cover up his sin he had Uriah killed, and he took Bathsheba as his bride. David could not hide his sin from God.

It is clear as we read this psalm that David had sorrow for the sin he had committed. It's important to point out, however, that David had a certain type of sorrow. He had Godly sorrow.

Some may think that sorrow is sorrow, but the Bible makes a distinction. *"For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death."* (2 Corinthians 7:10) You see there is a Godly sorrow and there is a worldly sorrow.

What is worldly sorrow? Well, the Bible tells us that it works death. A good example of this would be Judas Iscariot.

"³Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? See thou to that. ⁵And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and he departed, and went and hanged himself." (Matthew 27:3-5)

This really is a tragic event, unfortunately, it's one that occurs time and time again. Judas, like so many before and after, had sorrow; but it was not a godly sorrow. It was worldly sorrow, and it led to death.

You see, worldly sorrow focuses itself on the individual. Worldly sorrow is a selfish kind of sorrow. In other words, a person may be sorry because he got caught. A person may also be sorry because of consequences due to sin, or the way he is viewed by other people. Worldly sorrow is all about the sinner and how the sin has cost him personally – friendships, possessions, etc. Had they not lost these things there would be no real sorrow for the sin itself.

Godly sorrow is something quite different. Godly sorrow is directed toward God. Notice the inspired words of David. *"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."* (Psalm 51:4) It is a sorrow produced when a person realizes they have sinned against God. Certainly David had sinned against Uriah, but his focus was on God.

When David sinned he was focused on his own desires. He cared for no one but himself. Then, his focus turned to covering up his sin at any cost – even the cost of human life. After David was confronted by Nathan, however, his focus was on how poorly he had treated God.

David's sin was against God. Joseph realized this truth, and it kept him from sinning. *"There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"* (Genesis 39:9) Joseph realized that if he gave into the pleadings of Potiphar's wife, his sin would be a sin against God. The starting point of any genuine repentance is a realization of the grief we have caused God.

Before we go any further. I'd like to address a verse of scripture in this psalm that is often misunderstood by many people. *"Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me."* (Psalm 51:5) Many falsely use this verse of scripture to say that man is born sinful. In other words, a small child is already a sinner when he or she comes into this world. According to this line of thinking, sin is something from which man cannot keep himself.

David is not excusing his sin by saying that he can't help it. He's not justifying his sin, or blaming God by saying that God made him that way. This is exactly what many people try to do today. They blame their sin on God by saying this is the way God made me, and I can't help it.

Let's notice another psalm David was inspired to write. *"⁹But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breast. ¹⁰I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly."* (Psalm 22:9, 10) In this passage we have David trusting God at birth. So which is it? Was David a sinner at birth or not? The two ideas are not compatible.

The context of Psalm 51 is dealing with David's sin with Bathsheba. The focus is on David's personal sin that he committed, his acknowledgement of that sin, and his desire to be cleansed from his sin. The most straightforward reading of the text is that in verse 5 David acknowledges that he was born into a world filled with sin.

Isn't that exactly what the Bible teaches? Sin exists in the world, not because people are born sinners; but because all have sinned. *"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:23) Furthermore, the Bible defines for us exactly what constitutes sin. *"Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law."* (1 John 3:4) Sin is the result of someone breaking the law of God.

If you go back and read Nathan's rebuke to David (2 Samuel 12:7-12) you will find God's plan to produce Godly sorrow. Nathan made an appeal to God's love for David, he revealed David's sin, and he warned David of the consequences. This is the same plan followed in the Gospel.

The Gospel of Christ is designed to produce godly sorrow that leads to repentance. It makes an appeal to God's love as the basis for repentance. *"Or despisest thou the riches of his*

goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" (Romans 2:4) It reveals our sin. *"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:23) It also warns of the consequences of sin. *"Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile."* (Romans 3:9) Our best hope of producing repentance in others is to proclaim the gospel in its entirety.

Sadly, the world seeks to completely reject the need for Godly sorrow or anything connected to it. B. F. Skinner and Sigmund Freud are two men whose theories are greatly regarded in many fields. In fact, if you study medicine or education you will learn about the theories of these men in regards to human behavior. Both men denied the need for guilt in the life of a person. Skinner made the following comment, "Guilt is a myth because man is simply a product of evolution – controlled exclusively by his environment."¹

The world will encourage you to deny guilt. Just ignore it until it goes away because it is not necessary. The Bible talks about those who follow this line of thinking. *"Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron."* (1 Timothy 4:2) Those who do such suppress the truth. They allow their hearts to be hardened, and their conscience will be abandoned by God. If you remove the reality of sin, personal guilt, and the human conscience; you remove the need for a Savior, repentance, and redemption.

Instead of following the world, the correct response to Godly sorrow is to acknowledge our total dependence upon the mercy of God. *"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions."* (Psalm 51:1) We must acknowledge our guilt and take responsibility for our actions. *"Against thee, thee only, have I sinned."* (Psalm 51:4) We must plead for God's forgiveness and truly repent. *"Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. ¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."* (Psalm 51:9, 10)

Once we do this we must also accept the consequences of our actions. David was forgiven by God, but the son he had with Bathsheba died as a result of the sin. In fact, God told David that as a result of his sin the sword would never depart from his house. In the years that followed David witnessed the rape of his daughter Tamar by his son Amnon, the murder of Amnon by his son Absalom, the overthrow of his throne by Absalom, and eventually Absalom's death. Yes, we can be forgiven by God; but our actions often carry consequences that harm others. Most of the time our sins bring harm to those closest to us.

Our sorrow should keep us from further sin by reminding us of the pain we have caused God.

¹ McClain, Don. 2011. The Value of Guilt. *West 65th St Church of Christ*. [Online] November 29, 2011. [Cited: March 10, 2016.] <http://w65stchurchofchrist.org>.

¹⁴And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. ¹⁶Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.” (1 Timothy 1:14-16)

Notice what the Bible says. Christ came into this world to save sinners. Each and every one of us is guilty of sin before God. Jesus came and satisfied the wrath of a just God towards sin. His pain was our just wages.

Our sorrow should also motivate us to give ourselves wholly to God’s service.

⁸Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. ⁹Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. ¹⁰Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.” (James 4:8-10)

It should motivate us to live humbly toward God as we realize how unworthy we truly are, and how gracious He is toward such underserving creatures.

Finally, our sorrow should help us to be merciful towards those who have sinned against us. *“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)* Until we fully understand the severity of our sins in the sight of God, we’ll never understand the magnificence of His mercy. Furthermore, if we don’t understand the mercy of God; we’ll never appropriately be merciful towards others.

Don’t deny the conviction of the word of God. Acknowledge Godly sorrow. Give yourself wholly in service to God.