

29 | The Terrible Trinity

Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

PSALM 51:1-2

The Bible doesn't pull any punches as it describes the scary reality of sin. You have the powerful words of Genesis 6:5: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (NIV). Every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time! Could there be a more forceful way of characterizing the pervasive influence of sin on everything we do?

Or you have Paul building his case for the sinfulness of everyone, which reaches this crescendo: "All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:12).

Along with this, the Bible very clearly unpacks the underlying spiritual dynamics of sin. Passages like Luke 6:43-45 and Mark 7:20-23 teach us that sin is first a matter of the heart before it is ever a matter of behavior. Romans 1:25 alerts us to the fact that sin, in its essence, is idolatrous. It is when God is replaced as the ruler of our hearts that we give ourselves to doing what pleases us rather than what pleases him.

Psalms 51 is also one of the definitional passages when it comes to sin. David employs three words for sin that really define the nature of what our struggle with it is all about. The first definitional word he uses is the word *transgression*. To transgress means to acknowledge the boundaries and to step willingly over them. I transgress when I knowingly park in a no-parking zone. I know I'm not supposed to park there, but for the sake of personal convenience, I do so anyway. Often our sin is just like this. We know that God has forbidden what

we're about to do, but for personal success, comfort, or pleasure we step over God's prohibition and do exactly what we want to do. When we transgress, we not only rebel against God's authority, but we convince ourselves that we're a better authority with a better system of law than the one God gave us. Propelled by the laws of personal wants, personal feelings, and personal need, we consciously step over God's boundaries and do what we want to do.

But not all of our sin is conscious, high-handed rebellion. So David uses a second word, *iniquity*. Iniquity is best described as moral uncleanness. This word points to the comprehensive nature of the effect of sin on us. Sin is a moral infection that stains everything we desire, think, speak, and do. Sadly, no infant since the fall of the world into sin has been born morally clean. We all entered this world dirty and there's nothing we can do to clean ourselves up. Iniquity is like inadvertently putting a pair of bright red socks into the wash with a load of whites. There'll be nothing that escapes the red stain and remains completely white. In the same way, sin is pervasive. It really does alter everything we do in some way.

But there's a third word that David uses that gets at another aspect of sin's damage. It's the word *sin*. Sin is best defined as falling short of a standard. In our moments of best intention and best effort we still fall short. We're simply unable to reach the level of the standards that God has set for us. Sin has simply removed our ability to keep God's law. So, we fall short of his standard again and again and again. In your thoughts you fall short. In your desires you fall short. In your marriage or family you fall short. In your communication you fall short. At your job you fall short. With your friends you fall short. We simply are not able to meet God's requirements.

This "terrible trinity" of words for sin really does capture with power and clarity the nature of the war that rages inside each one of us. Sometimes I do not do exactly what God requires, but I don't care because I want what I want, and so I step over his wise boundaries. Sometimes I look back on what I've done, having thought that I'd done pretty well, only to see ways in which my words and behavior were once more stained with sin. And over and over again I'm confronted with my weakness and inability. I fall short of God's standard even in moments of good intention.

How can this terrible trinity do anything other than drive us to seek the grace that can only be found in the divine Trinity? In our sin we need a Father who's not satisfied with leaving us in this sad state of affairs but will exercise his sovereign power to set a plan in place that will rescue us from us. In our sin we need a Son who is willing to take our punishment so that we can be forgiven. And in our sin, we need a Spirit who will dwell within us, empowering us to do what we would not otherwise be able to do.

We haven't been left to the ravages of the terrible trinity, because we've been rescued by the love of a better Trinity. Thank you, Sovereign Father, for your gracious plan. Thank you, Sacrificial Son, for standing in our place. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for your empowering presence. In you, triune Lord, we really do find help and hope.

Take a Moment

1. How do the three biblical words for sin—transgression, iniquity, and sin—help you to understand the daily battle in your heart between right and wrong?
2. Remind yourself once more of your inability to defeat sin all by yourself and celebrate the power over sin that is Christ's gift of grace to you.

my own defense lawyer and present a list of arguments for my own righteousness. The theology behind the defense is that my greatest problem is outside of me, not inside of me. In so arguing, I'm telling myself that I don't really need to be rescued by the Lord's mercy. No, I'm telling myself that what I need to be rescued from is that sinner in the room who caused me to respond as I did.

Here's the point. Before you can ever make a clean and un-amended confession of your sin, you have to first begin by confessing your righteousness. It's not just your sin that separates you from God; your righteousness does as well. Because, when you are convinced you are righteous, you don't seek the forgiving, rescuing, and restoring mercy that can be found only in Jesus Christ.

What's actually true is that when I come to the Lord after I've blown it, I've only one argument to make. It's not the argument of the difficulty of the environment that I am in. It's not the argument of the difficult people that I'm near. It's not the argument of good intentions that were thwarted in some way. No, I have only one argument. It's right there in the first verse of Psalm 51, as David confesses his sin with Bathsheba. I come to the Lord with only one appeal, his mercy. I've no other defense. I've no other standing. I've no other hope. I can't escape the reality of my biggest problem—me! So I appeal to the one thing in my life that's sure and will never fail. I appeal to the one thing that guaranteed not only my acceptance with God, but the hope of new beginnings and fresh starts. I appeal on the basis of the greatest gift I ever have or ever will be given. I leave the courtroom of my own defense, I come out of hiding, and I admit who I am. But I'm not afraid, because I've been personally and eternally blessed. Because of what Jesus did, God looks on me with mercy. It's my only appeal; it's the source of my hope; it's my life. Mercy, mercy me!

Take a Moment

1. When you go to God in prayer, do you go as your own defense lawyer or as the guilty party (see Luke 18:9–14)? Do you tend to stack up arguments for your acceptability before God?
2. If you more quickly rested in God's mercy and, because of this, more readily admitted your sin, what practical changes in your life would result?

2 | On Being Sustained

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

PSALM 51:12

It's a curious phrase: "and uphold me with a willing spirit." What does it mean to be upheld with a willing spirit? What is it that David prays for here and how does it fit with the confession that makes up the rest of this remarkable psalm?

Human beings are simply not self-sustaining, and we were never designed to live as if we are. The doctrine of creation confronts us with the reality that we are neither physically nor spiritually self-sustaining. We were created to be dependent. Dependency is not therefore a sign of weakness. Rather it is a universal indicator of our humanity. Humans are dependent beings. Yet we do not like to be dependent. It is the legacy of our fallenness to do everything we can to conceptually and functionally repudiate the doctrine of human dependency.

So, all fallen human beings tend to buy into two attractive but dangerous lies. These are the lies that were on the tongue of the serpent on that fateful day of manipulation and disobedience in the garden. The first lie is the lie of autonomy, which tells me that I am an independent human being with the right to invest my life however I choose. The second lie is the lie of self-sufficiency, which declares that I have everything I need within myself to be what I am supposed to be and do what I am supposed to do. Because we do not want to live for God, but for ourselves, we are easily seduced, at the mundane, everyday level, by these lies.

But David now has his eyes open. He sees the lies for what they are. He had wanted his own way. He had opted for independence. He had stepped outside of God's boundaries. He had used his power in the service of his own kingdom rather than God's. And it had all

been exposed and came crashing down around his feet. David had tried the path of independent self-sustenance. Psalm 51 is his prayer of repentance.

God has promised to sustain us by his grace. He has promised us the sustaining grace of forgiveness, so that we can stand before him unafraid. He has promised the sustaining grace of enablement, giving us the strength to do what he calls us to do. He has promised us the sustaining grace of protection, delivering us from evil. He has promised us the sustaining grace of wisdom, protecting us from our own foolishness. He has promised us the sustaining grace of perseverance, keeping us until the final enemy has been defeated. He has promised the sustaining grace of eternity, giving us the hope of a day when the struggle will be over.

It is a willing heart that causes us to seek the grace that has been promised. When we turn from our own way and recognize our inability to live his way, we begin to seek the full range of resources that he has promised us in his Son. Grace is for the willing and we only become willing when we confess not only the gravity of our sin, but our inability to deliver ourselves from it. Then our willingness opens to us all the sustenance of heart that can only be found in the Son.

Take a Moment

1. Where in your life have you opted for independence? In what ways are you not taking advantage of God's resources of help?
2. In what places do you need to rely more on the grace of Christ and the resources of help he has placed in your life (receiving loving confrontation well, seeking more honest fellowship in the body of Christ, more willingness to confess need to God and others)?

spirit (vv. 10–11), he’s acknowledging that his struggle with sin runs deeper than just behavior. He’s not only confessing to the physical acts of adultery and murder, but also to the reality of a heart that’s corrupt; that is, it loves personal pleasure more than it loves the Lord. When he talks of God’s desire for a truthful and wise heart (v. 6), he’s confessing to a heart that’s craved what’s impure and that’s loved what’s foolish.

What results when you confess because you’re deeply grieved by what you’ve done? What happens when you acknowledge that your physical sin is caused by a heart that’s run amuck? The result is that you turn, really turn. What do I mean? I mean that you don’t just turn away from the physical sin pattern, but your heart turns to God in new and deeper ways. What does this mean? It means that rather than being driven by the craving for the delivery of your little kingdom desires by the people and circumstances around you, your heart begins to be motivated by big kingdom purposes. True confession always results in living for something bigger.

And so David, once obsessed with the temporary and impure pleasures of his claustrophobic little kingdom of one, now becomes excited with and engaged in the transcendent purposes of God’s big-sky kingdom. So he says:

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness,
O God, God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise. (vv. 13–15)

A truly broken and contrite heart will always turn to live for something bigger. Is your confession leading you there?

Take a Moment

1. Do the things you confess tend to be limited to wrong words and wrong actions, or do you confess to the wrong thoughts and desires that lie behind the behavior or words?
2. Does your confession result in an excitement with living for something bigger than your own wants, needs, and feelings?

11 | Romans 7

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and
cleans me from my sin!

PSALM 51:2

I am a mass of contradictions; I don’t want to be but I am.
I preach a gospel of peace, but my life isn’t always driven by peace.
I talk about a Jesus who alone can fully satisfy the soul, but I am
often not satisfied.
I celebrate a theology of amazing grace, but I often react in ungrace.
And if I rest in God’s control, why do I seek it for myself?
Even in moments when I think I am prepared, I end up doing what
I didn’t want to do.

Irritation
Impatience
Envy
Discontent
Wrong talk
Anger
Self-focus

Are not the fruit of the new life, are not the way of grace.
So there is this law operating inside of me.
When I step out with a desire to do good, evil follows me wherever I go.
There is this war that rages inside of me, between a desire for good
and sin that is anything but good.
There are times when I feel like a prisoner, held against my will.
I didn’t plan to be mad in the grocery store, but that guy made me mad.
I didn’t plan to be discontent, but it just enveloped me in the quietness
of the car.
That discussion wasn’t supposed to degenerate into an argument,
but it did.
I am thankful for God’s grace, but there is daily evidence that I’m still
in need of help.
That battle inside me cannot be solved by

Theology
Strategies
Principles
Techniques
Plans
Preparation
Helpful hints
Outlines.

I have been humbled by the war I cannot win.
I have been grieved by desires I cannot conquer.
I have been confronted by actions I cannot excuse.
And I have come to confess that what I really need is rescue.
So, have mercy on me, O God,
According to Your unfailing 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.
I embrace the rescue that could only be found in You.
Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Take a Moment

1. Is there a place right now where how you live is not consistent with what you say you believe? Isn't it wonderful that you do not have to panic, hide, or be depressed? Stop and confess your inconsistency to the One who was consistent so that you could be accepted and forgiven even in your moments of greatest inconsistency.
2. What temptations tend to hook you again and again? Are you holding onto and celebrating the grace that you have been given that really is greater and more powerful than any sin that hooks you?

whiter than snow

are no longer living for their own little kingdoms but are living for his, the result is the furtherance of his kingdom purposes on earth, which results in his glory. Give wisdom to a man who is living for God's kingdom and he'll use that wisdom to advance God's kingdom. Give money to a man who loves God's kingdom and he'll look for ways to invest that money in kingdom causes. Give a house to a person who seeks God's kingdom and his house will be a place of hospitality, love, and ministry. David prays for prosperity, not for his glory but for the glory of the Lord to whom his heart has now turned.

But there's more. When people are blessed by the Lord they turn to him in humble, sacrificial worship. It's in those moments when I am cogently aware of God's forgiveness and gratefully aware of his undeserved blessing that I willingly offer to him what I would have once held to tightly. God delights in the sacrifices of his people, because when they are worshiping him in this way, they are doing the thing for which they were created. When I've quit looking for satisfaction in the created world and begin to find my satisfaction in the Lord, then I'm willing to hold loosely to the things that once held me. It's here that my delight is the Lord's delight.

So is it right to pray for prosperity? It is and you should, not for the sake of your kingdom, but for the success of his. Not for the sake of your delight, but for his. You see, when God prospers people who are living for him, they use that blessing to serve him all the more, and for this he gets glory and in this he finds great delight.

Take a Moment

1. What kind of blessing do you crave? What are the "good things" that you wish God would give you? If you had your way, how would God prosper you?
2. How *do* you hold the blessings God gives you? How do you tend to use the things that he has entrusted to your care?

17 | Somebody Else

... so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.

PSALM 51:4

I really wish I could blame
somebody else.
I wish I could place the responsibility
on somebody else.
I would love to point the finger
at somebody else.
I wish I could convince myself
that it was somebody else.
I tried to feed myself the logic
that it was somebody else.
For a moment I bought my argument
that it was somebody else.
There is always another sinner
who can bear my fault.
There is always some circumstance
that can carry my blame.
There's always some factor
that made me do what I did.
There's always somewhere else to point
rather than looking at me.
But in the darkness of bedtime
the logic melts out of my heart.
In the moments before sleep
the pain begins to squeeze away my breath.
As my mind replays the day's moments
the conclusion is like a slap.
There is no monster
to hide from.
There is no excuse that holds.

whiter than snow

My war is not external,
the enemy is not outside.
The struggle rages within me,
nowhere to point or run.
No independent righteousness,
no reason for smugness or rest.
I am my greatest enemy
and rescue my only hope.
In the quiet I face it
I cannot blame somebody else.
One more time I close my eyes admitting
my only hope is found in Somebody else.

Take a Moment

1. Are there places where you have been tempted to blame inside (heart) struggles on outside pressures? ("He makes me so jealous!" "This traffic makes me so angry!" "I wasn't this irritable until I got this job.")
2. Where have you failed to seek the grace that is yours as God's child because you have successfully told yourself that your biggest, most abiding problem is outside, not inside, of you?

38 | Wisdom Is a Person

You teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

PSALM 51:6

Sin is all about foolishness. Sinners are fools who are able to convince themselves that they are wise. When I sin I convince myself that my way is better than God's way, that my thoughts are wiser than God's thoughts, that what I desire is better than what God has planned for me. Sin is all about how a fool is able to swindle himself into thinking that what's wrong is actually right.

Think of sin in its original form in that awful moment in the garden. There would have been no disobedience if Adam and Eve had refused to listen to the voice of another counselor. What was this counselor seeking to get them to do? He was enticing them to question, if but for a moment, the wisdom of God. He was enticing them to think that he was wiser than Wisdom himself. And he was tempting them to believe that they could be as wise as God.

Check out what Moses records as being one of the things that attracted Adam and Eve to the forbidden fruit. Here's what's said in Genesis 3:6b: ". . . and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise." Now, this phrase is worth unpacking.

You and I will never understand the full range of the temptation of Adam and Eve, David, or ourselves until we understand the fundamental nature of wisdom. Wisdom, in its purest form, is not an outline; it's not a theology; it's not a book; it's not a system of logic. Wisdom is a Person. You don't get wisdom by experience, research, or logical deduction. You don't get wisdom by education and experimentation. You get wisdom by means of a relationship to the One who is the source of everything that's wise, good, and true. In talking of Christ in Colossians 2:3, Paul says that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ.

Adam and Eve had all the wisdom they needed; no, not in their independent ability to figure out themselves and life, but in the relationship they had with Wisdom, a relationship that hadn't yet been tainted by sin. Tragically, they took the bait, turned their back on Wisdom, and received foolishness—the exact opposite of what the snake had promised them. This act of foolishness and disobedience began a storm of foolishness that has flooded humanity ever since.

No longer wise, now born into the world as fools, we all need to be rescued from ourselves. And yet, even though there's empirical evidence that we're fools (debt, addiction, obesity, conflict, anger, fear, discouragement, fear of man), we convince ourselves that we're wise and head confidently down pathways that lead to destruction and death. The way that seems wise to us isn't wise, and the way that is wise looks to us to be the way of the fool.

You can't argue us into wisdom, because every wise thing you would say is filtered through the grid of our own foolishness.

And so we need what David needed. Blinded by his own false wisdom and able to take tragically foolish actions that would forever alter his life, David needed rescue. No, he didn't need rescue from Bathsheba. No, he didn't need rescue from the temptations that accompany positions of power. No, David needed to be rescued from himself. He was held by the hands of his own foolishness. What David needed was Wisdom to come near and break David's hold on David. Like us, David needed the rescue of the Wisdom Redeemer. Then and only then would he be wise. Then and only then would he see, confess, and turn from the foolishness that had so deceived him.

Thankfully, the One who is Wisdom is also a God of grace. He delights in transforming the hearts of fools. He finds joy in gifting us with the wisdom that can only be found when he's in us and we're in him.

Take a Moment

1. How does the way that you think about and approach daily living reveal pockets of functional foolishness that still remain in your heart?
2. Where do you need to be rescued by Wisdom? Where does Wisdom need to teach and enable you to live in a way that is wiser? Consider eating, relationships, decision making, private choices, finances, work, thoughts, daily habits.