

Sermon 7th June 2020

I stood there looking at them and they were as happy as pigs in muck. It was July 1988 and I was looking at a group of thirty plus young men who had spent the last two hours up to their necks in mud, fetid water and rotting vegetation. They were campers at the Salvation Army summer camp at lake Sebago in Maine. We had been playing capture the flag in a Bilberry Bog which, was a maze of narrow muddy flood passageways between towering walls of Bilberry bushes. The stench from them was so bad that even the ever-present Mosquitos had decided they were off the menu.

They were filthy, covered in a reeking black mud that coated every surface of their bodies and clothes which made it difficult to tell who was who. All that stood out in the layers of mud were the whites of their eyes and teeth. They were filthy, stinking, covered in rotting vegetation and they were utterly, utterly joyful.

When I read Psalm 51 I often think of that year at Camp Sebago and the contrast in the image of these young men and their joy in being filthy and David's desperate pleas to God in Psalm 51 to be cleansed from the sin that smothered him like the filth that smothered those young men.

The background to Psalm 51 is found in 2 Samuel 11. In a nutshell, saw Bathsheba bathing while he was walking around the roof of his palaces. Though Bathsheba was married herself, David wanted her. And because he was the king, he took her. When Bathsheba became pregnant, David went so far as to arrange the murder of her husband so that he could take her as his wife.

After these events, David was confronted by the prophet Nathan in a memorable way -- see 2 Samuel 12 for the details. When Nathan confronts David with the implications of what he has done, David's only words are, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13). Might we read Psalm 51 as the rest of David's words: David's confession of sin and his plea for forgiveness?

I wonder do you identify with David's heart felt cry to be forgiven, to be cleansed, to be free? David in this Psalm voices not just his but the desire of many to be free of the sin that so easily smoothers us.

However, David starts in a surprising place not in the darkness of his sin but in the character of God. David asks God to have mercy on him, "according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion". David can plead for mercy because God's character is to be faithful to those he has chosen even when they are unfaithful to Him. God had chosen David and appointed him as king and David had used and abused that position and authority. David could look back on the long history of the Jews nation being unfaithful to God time after time and yet God always remaining faithful to them. For us we sometimes feel that when we sin God is done with us but that is not the case, God is faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to Him.

David could also plead for mercy because he personally knew God's love for him. The word translated "compassion" in the original Hebrew has the idea of a mother's love for her child. David knew God loved him with that unconditional love of a mother for her child. That love that no matter what the child does or says the mother will always welcome the child back with open arms. Jesus reminds of us the immensity of God's love in the parable of the Prodigal Son where he describes the father rushing out to meet the son arms open wide to welcome back the child who was lost back in to the family.

We can approach God for mercy and cleansing for those same reasons; because He is faithful to us even when we are not and because He loves us with a depth of love we can only barely begin to understand.

David moves on in his prayer with a cry for forgiveness, emphasizing the urgency of the situation with a series of imperative verbs: have mercy, blot out, wash, and cleanse. Using the original word pictures or ideas of the Hebrew words David used, the verses could be read like this:

"Wipe away the grim of my childish rebellion against you"
"Scrub away the filth that so deforms and bends me out of shape."

“Wash away the stain of failing to do all that you wanted me to do and for doing all that you didn’t want me to do.”

This is a disconcertingly accurate picture of what sin does to us; sin makes us feel dirty and somehow soiled, sin makes us feel we are becoming something horrible or even monstrous and sin make us feel as if we have failed. David desperately wanted to be freed from the effects of his sin.

For some people that is where it ends, the effects of their sins are ignored and pushed aside and they seem almost content, despite the effects their sins are having in their life to continue to live life as they have been. But not for David, he acknowledges his sin and confesses to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." In doing so David rightly recognized that all human sinfulness is first and foremost a rebellion against God. In other words, David wanted to address the primary causes and consequences of his sinful behaviour -- his sinful heart and his need to be cleansed by God.

David, after confessing his sins returns to his desire to be cleansed in verse 7 *“Cleanser me with Hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.”*

This mention of "hyssop" is important. Hyssop is a small, bushy plant that grows in the Middle East -- it's part of the mint family of plants. Throughout the Old Testament, hyssop is a symbol of cleansing and purity. This connection goes back to the Israelites' miraculous escape from Egypt in the Book of Exodus chapter 12. On the day of the Passover, God commanded the Israelites to paint the door frames of their houses with lamb's blood using a stalk of Hyssop. Hyssop was also an important part of the sacrificial cleansing rituals in the Jewish tabernacle and temple.

By asking to be cleansed with hyssop, David was again confessing his sin. He was also acknowledging God's power to wash away his sinfulness, leaving him "whiter than snow."

It is important to realise that the Old Testament practice of using sacrificial blood to remove the stain of sin points directly to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Through the

shedding of His blood on the cross, Jesus opened the door for all people to be cleansed from their sin, leaving us "whiter than snow."

David cries out in verse 10 *"create in me a pure heart, O God,"* which could equally be read as create in me a new heart. The word translated create is the same word used in Genesis when God creates the world. David wanted to change fundamentally who he was, he wanted God to create in him heart that no longer had those sinful desires and replace it with one that only contained God's pure desires. For David that was only a distant hope, a plaintive plea. David would have to continue to offer sacrifices year in year out to deal with his sin always yearning for that new/pure heart. That is where David's experience differs from all those who call Jesus Lord and Saviour. For those that confess Jesus as lord and saviour experience what David could not, they are radically and unequivocally made new and receive what David yearned for, Paul writes **2 Corinthians 5: 17** *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"*

To understand the new creation, first we must grasp that it is in fact a creation, something created by God. John 1:13 tells us that this new birth was brought about by the will of God. We did not inherit the new nature or decide to re-create ourselves anew. Neither did God simply clean up our old nature; He created something entirely fresh and unique. The new creation is completely new, brought about from nothing, just as the whole universe was created by God ex nihilo, from nothing. Only the Creator could accomplish such a feat.

We need remember that this new creation comes at a price Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 5: 18** *"All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ"* Paul writes earlier in his letter that Jesus became our Passover Lamb; Jesus became the once and only sacrifice for our sins. On the cross Jesus took all our sins on himself and became sin for us or as Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 5: 21** *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* We can be made new only through Christ sacrificial death on the cross, there is no other way.

What about the Christian who continues to sin? There is a difference between continuing to sin and continuing to live in sin. No one reaches sinless perfection in this life, but the redeemed Christian is being sanctified (made holy) day by day, sinning less and hating it more each time he fails. Yes, we still sin, but unwillingly and less and less frequently as we mature. Our new heart hates the sin that still has a hold on us. The difference is that the new creation is no longer a slave to sin, as we formerly were. We are now freed from sin and it no longer has power over us (Romans 6:6-7). Now we are empowered by and for righteousness. We now have the choice to “let sin reign” or to count ourselves “dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11-12). Best of all because we are a new creation, now we have the power to choose the latter.

The new creation is a wondrous thing, formed in the mind of God and created by His power and for His glory.

I have to confess that I really struggle with the idea that at my heart, at my very core I am a new creation fitted for heaven. I see my struggles with sin, the constant failures, the bumps, bruises and scars of life. Yet the truth is in, God’s eyes I am not a sinner, I am not a failure. God does not see the scars of life he only sees His new creation which is wholly righteousness and flawless before Him. God looks beyond the surface of our lives, of what we and the world sees of us and looks at the perfection of what he formed in our hearts.

We are going to listen to a song that expresses this truth, that despite how you or the world views you, God views you as flawless.