

OVERCOMING GUILT

Psalms 32 and 51

Many people don't know that King David of Israel battled two giants in his lifetime. Goliath is the well-known giant he defeated in a matter of minutes, but Guilt is the lesser-known giant it took him many months to defeat.

David met the giant named Guilt when he saw a beautiful woman from the roof of his palace and had her brought to him. He committed adultery with her and then sent her home. What he thought was going to be a simple and brief encounter became complicated when the woman, Bathsheba, sent him word that she was pregnant by him.

David knew he had to cover his sin or risk losing his reputation as a godly king. He sent for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, who was away fighting in David's army. He figured Uriah would come home and have relations with Bathsheba, and it would then appear her pregnancy was caused by her husband, not David. But David did not plan on Uriah's loyalty and honor. Uriah refused to enjoy the comfort of his wife when his fellow soldiers were still in battle, so he spent the night outside David's palace.

When David realized his plan hadn't worked, he implemented a second plan—to have his army commander send Uriah into the heat of battle so he would be killed. And that is exactly what happened. David was then guilty of murder as well as adultery. Nine months later a child was born to Bathsheba. Through his own writings, we are introduced to David's state of mind and his actions following the birth of his child.

Two psalms—*Psalms 32 and 51*—give us insight into what it was like for David to live with the guilt of his sin (*Psalms 32*) and the confession of his sin to God (*Psalms 51*). Defeating Guilt, the giant of his philandering, became a far greater challenge than defeating Goliath, the giant of the Philistines.

THE AGONY OF GUILT (*PSALM 32*)

Psalms 32 describes in part the anguish of body and soul that David went through while concealing his sin.

Silence (32:3)

David couldn't talk to the Lord about his sin, and therefore he couldn't talk to the Lord about anything. The Bible says, "*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear*" (*Psalms 66:18*). So David no longer had fellowship with God. His heart became silent. His communication with God was cut off. His guilt began to take on physiological dimensions. He said that his bones grew old through his groaning all the day long. He apparently became physically incapacitated from carrying the guilt of what he had done.

Sorrow (32:4)

He said, "*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.*" King David was still commanding all of his subjects as the king, but he could not command his own conscience. He was filled with agony. His freshness of life was gone, replaced with bitterness and anguish. His conscience was filled with disgust, breaking his communion with God. His life was a mess.

Secrecy

One reason he suffered so much was there was no one to whom he could convey his pain. Nobody knew what David had done except Bathsheba and Joab—and each of them only knew the half of it. His sin with Bathsheba may not have been planned, but his sin against Uriah was planned and premeditated.

For over a year David tried to live with his secret guilt. He couldn't talk to God. He couldn't talk to his friends. He could only talk to himself, but he kept getting only condemnation from his own conscience. Guilt was wearing him away.

Then the Lord sent someone to help David with his problem—which brings us to the accusation of guilt.

THE ACCUSATION OF GUILT (2 SAMUEL 12:1–7)

God sent a prophet named Nathan to confront David about his sin. The Lord apparently revealed to Nathan what he needed to know about David's sin, and Nathan decided to use a story to call David to account. It was a story of two men, one rich and one poor. When a traveler came by and needed some food, the rich man, instead of taking food from his own flocks, took the poor man's sole lamb and gave it to the traveler.

In this story, David is obviously the rich man, Uriah the poor man, and Bathsheba the lamb taken by the rich man. David has no idea Nathan is telling a story about him. He thinks this is something that actually happened in his kingdom, and he exclaimed ***"... the man who has done this shall surely die ... because he had no pity!" (2 Samuel 12:5)***. Nathan then lowered the boom on David: "You are the man!"

It's hard to imagine a moment filled with more anguish and relief at the same time. While David was humiliated and ashamed, finally the secret sins he had carried for so many months were out in the open. It was now time for him to admit his guilt and move toward cleansing.

THE ADMISSION OF GUILT (PSALM 51)

We now move to ***Psalms 51***, which says in its superscription (at the beginning of the psalm), ***"A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."*** What we have in ***Psalms 51*** is David's response to his confrontation with Nathan the prophet. In this psalm we discover the pattern for defeating the giant of guilt in our own lives.

He Accepts Full Responsibility for His Sin

Step one in defeating guilt is accepting full responsibility for sin. You might take a colored highlighter pen and go down through ***Psalms 51*** and highlight each first person singular pronoun: I, me, my, mine. You'll get a good indication of exactly how precise David was being in his confession. He was not avoiding the fact that he was the one who had sinned and was guilty before God.

Taking responsibility for sin is almost a lost art in our day and time. We have learned to excuse and rationalize almost every conceivable act. But guilt is only removed when it is acknowledged and confessed. Sin is like a stain on a table top. You may hide it by putting a plate over it, but the stain is still there. It only comes off by removing what's hiding it and dealing with the stain itself. That's what David did.

He Acknowledges the Sinfulness of Sin (51:1–2, 4)

In three verses David uses four different words to describe what he has done: transgression, iniquity, sin, and evil. Each of these words expresses a different aspect of his breaking of God's law. When we confess our sin we are saying the same thing about it that God says about it. If we don't say the same thing God says, we haven't confessed. In *Psalms 32:5* David said, ***"I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.'"*** That's saying it like it is.

Even in America, there was a day when people were scared of sin. They fled from it and hated it and feared that concealing it might threaten their very salvation. But today we find people using every word except "sin" to describe behavior that is offensive to God.

When it comes to our sin we mumble instead of confess. We find teachers asking rebellious children how it made them feel when they stole another child's lunch money. We find the word "sin" appearing on desert menus, describing the decadence of chocolate fudge.

We have so insulated ourselves against the concept of sin that our modern generation thinks nothing of living with all kinds of sins unconfessed in their lives. And the church is in danger of adopting that mentality as well. We don't need to model David's sin, but we do need to model his confession.

He Addresses His Confession to God (51:4)

Notice that he says it is ultimately against God that he has sinned. It's not that David was insensitive to the reality of the damage he had brought to other peoples' lives. He is saying that he realizes sin is first and foremost a violation of God's holy standards and that God is the one, before whom confession and repentance is due.

If we go and ask another person to forgive us before we have confessed our sin to God, then we have misunderstood the priorities of confession. Of course we should ask forgiveness of the people our sin has hurt. But above all, a holy God is most offended by our sin and to Him our confession should first go.

THE ANSWER TO GUILT (*PSALM 51:7–12*)

There are three steps to the complete removal of sin in the sight of God and man: Remove the sin, restore the joy, and renew the fellowship.

Removing the Sin (51:2, 7, 9)

If the confession of sin is the bad news then the removal of it is the good news. And David addresses sin's removal with a variety of language equal to that which he used to describe his sin: ***"Wash me thoroughly ... cleanse me ... purge me ... wash me ... blot out ..."*** As mentioned before, sin is like a stain. The word ***"cleanse"*** was also used to refer to the cleansing of a leper in the Old Testament. It is as if David is saying, ***"Cleanse the leprosy-like sin which has afflicted my soul."***

When a person in Old Testament Israel came into contact with a dead body, he had to be ceremonially cleansed with hyssop. Here David says, ***"Purge me with hyssop ...,"*** probably a reference to the death of Uriah which he caused. ***"Blot out all my iniquities"*** probably refers to the fact that there was no sacrifice for murder and adultery in the Old Testament. David asks for mercy, that God would blot the sins out of His book.

Once the sins are blotted out, the joy which the sins took away needs to be restored. That is David's next request.

Restoring the Joy (51:8, 12)

In **verses 8 and 12** David prays that God will return to him the joy of salvation he has enjoyed before. David isn't asking for God to restore his salvation but the joy of his salvation. David's salvation wasn't lost when he sinned, nor is ours.

What was lost was the joy and refreshment of soul which salvation brings, which definitely will be lost when we try to hide our sin from God. We can think of the time David danced for sheer joy before the Lord as the ark of the covenant was transported up to Mount Zion in Jerusalem (**2 Samuel 6:14**). We do not get the impression from Scripture that David was a moody, downcast individual.

From the many songs (psalms) he wrote and the enthusiasm with which he lived life, we can suspect that he took great joy in his relationship with God. But that joy had disappeared like the morning mist as a result of his concealed sin. And now he wants that joy back. He is tired of having his vitality drained daily like pond water in a time of drought. He wants to be filled afresh with the joy of salvation.

You probably know the feeling David had. No matter what the sin, joy is lost when sin is not confessed. A Christian with unconfessed sin in his life will be far more miserable than a non-Christian. Why? Because the Christian knows what the joy of the Lord is like and knows what he is missing by not being in fellowship with God. A person who has never experienced the joy of salvation could not know what that is like.

When the joy of salvation is restored, fellowship can be renewed—both with God and with man.

Renewing the Fellowship (51:11)

When David prays not to be cast away from God's presence and for the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit, he is asking for the renewal of fellowship. He wants the chasm between God and himself to be bridged so there is once again oneness and unity. Perhaps David is remembering how the Spirit of God left King Saul (**1 Samuel 11:6**). He does not want the same thing to happen to Him.

Then David begins to focus on the future. In **verse 12** he prays to be upheld by God's Spirit. Never again does he want to fail like he failed with Bathsheba and Uriah. Never again does he want to fail himself in delaying the confession of his sin for so long.

Perhaps you have experienced something similar to what David went through. Once you have confessed your sin and been restored to fellowship with God, you feel the need to make some new covenants with God, to drive a stake in the ground, and to purpose never to traverse the same territory again. You ask the Lord for new strength and power to resist temptation and sin. You ask for a fresh filling of His Spirit in order to be upheld in strength in the future. When we have been cleansed of sin and its guilt and shame, that is exactly what we should do.

David's experience at this time in the whole process of his restoration is best summarized in **Psalms 32:1–2: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit." "Blessed" means "happy," or "contented."** Happy, satisfied, and content is the man whose sin is forgiven by God and who is restored to fellowship with Him.

Thinking about David's sin may have raised unpleasant memories in your own mind of past sins in your life. I hope you have been through the same process David went through. No matter what sin any Christian has committed, no matter what condemnation you may have felt, or what guilt and shame you may have experienced, blessed contentment can only come through confession, forgiveness, and restoration. Don't ever think you have sinned too greatly for God to forgive you. You see that He forgave the double sins of adultery and murder that David committed. And He will forgive your sins as well.

But you must come as David came: accepting responsibility, acknowledging the sinfulness of sin, and addressing your confession to God. If you do that, you will enjoy all that David did. Your sin will be removed, your joy restored, and your fellowship renewed. The giant of guilt will be defeated.