

Cries of a Broken Heart

Jeremiah 31:31-34 | Psalm 51:1-12 | Hebrews 5:5-10 | John 12:20-33

PSALM 51:1-12

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement. ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

INTRODUCTION

Takotsubo Cardiomyopathy, sometimes called Takotsubo Syndrome, is the sudden weakening of the muscular part of the heart. It is caused sometimes by a physical condition or, quite often, an emotional condition: sorrow. That is, sometimes, a person can be so sad, so mournful, so full of anxiety and anguish, that their heart physically weakens—with symptoms like a heart attack—weakening to the point of causing grave danger to the person.¹

As we turn to our Psalm this morning, we find a poet who is considering the brokenness of his own heart. This is not an uplifting Psalm. This is not ‘praise the mighty Lord with trumpets and cymbals.’ It is an emotional outpouring in which the Psalmist is struck with sorrow for his sin, contemplating what hope might be available to him. In these 12 verses, he attempts to convey this simple truth: *While our sins should break our hearts, God’s love is enough to restore us.* While our sins should break our hearts, God’s love is enough to restore us. Let’s take a look.

1. REPENTANCE (VV.1-2)

In the first two verses, the Psalmist pleads with God in a profound statement of repentance. Like the blast of a canon in the dead of night, the words of the poet ring out. No preamble. No build up. Just “*have mercy on me,*” he pleads.² ‘Deep down I believe that you, O God, are disposed toward mercy, so I beg you to now reach into your stores of divine lovingkindness and find a way to absolve me of my transgressions.’ It’s a stark opening. Direct. Desperate even. The Psalmist has been confronted by his shortcomings. He uses a few different words here: transgressions, wickedness, iniquity, sin. They are all ways of describing the evil intentions of our hearts and minds, our evil actions and words, everything about us that offends God, hurts those around us, and slowly destroys us. The Psalmist is acutely aware of his sin. And for it, he knows he deserves punishment, he deserves death for his evil deeds.

¹ The British Heart Foundation describes Takotsubo cardiomyopathy as “a condition where your heart muscle becomes suddenly weakened, usually because of severe emotional or physical stress.” For more information, see bhf.org.uk/information-support/conditions/cardiomyopathy/takotsubo-cardiomyopathy.

² Ps 51:1.

But he also turns the corner. He recognizes that he is able to repent because of the character of God. That is, he declares his need of mercy, contrasting the darkness of his heart with the profound love of God. He counts on the character of God—whose “property is always to have mercy,” as the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* says—his steadfast love.³ The Psalmist knows that if he is to be spared, to be redeemed, it will be because God is merciful, not because he, the sinful human, deserves it. He repents. But he also stops short of giving up. He repents with the ever-so-slight hope that God’s love will prevail in giving him the forgiveness he desperately needs, that God’s love is more than his sin.

2. REASONS (VV.3-6)

In the verses that follow, verses 3-6, the Psalmist does something important. He demonstrates that his repentance was not empty or merely the product of having gotten caught. It was not a superficial act. He demonstrates contrition by considering, by meditating on the reasons for his sin. And in so doing, he arrives at a few conclusions. One is that he owns his sin. He notes that God’s sentence for him is justified. And perhaps, that is for good reason. In our liturgical reading of the Psalms, we never recite the superscription—descriptions added to the beginnings of some of the Psalms that provide historical or musical context. In this case, the superscription reads: “*To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*”⁴ It is interesting that this Psalm is thought to be his reflection on his great sin—the time he committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and upon discovering that she was pregnant, conspired to have her husband killed. And in all this, he had basically gotten away with it. He did not confess proactively. It was not until Nathan the prophet confronted him that he admitted his sin. But when confronted, he did admit it. He did not defend himself or explain it away or deny it. He owned his sin.

Another conclusion that the Psalmist draws is that, while destructive to him and others around him, his sin is directed fundamentally at God. He writes: “*Against you, you alone, have I sinned.*”⁵ Perhaps this is another reference to David. Whether he was ever going to seek to make it right with Bathsheba or with Uriah’s family, David’s understanding was that his sin was, first and foremost, an offense to God. Nathan’s accusation also makes this clear: “*Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight?*”⁶ As terrible as sin is, as horrible as its consequences can be for both the sinner and those against whom he has sinned, the basis of the offense is that it is a violation of God’s Word, his self-revelation of his glory and holiness. Because we all sin, it might be easy to justify it in our minds that our sin is not so bad. But God is so abundantly clear on this. Our evil offends him, and our evil against his creation, against those whom he loves, offends him. Sin is, first, against God.

³ Cranmer, *Book of Common Prayer*, 312.

⁴ Psalm 51, superscription. It should be noted that I do not think the superscriptions are necessarily original or should be considered as part of the canon. This particular Psalm is one of the reasons why I hold that position. The request in verse 18—“rebuild the walls of Jerusalem”—seems to indicate a post-exilic audience, several generations after David. At best, the inscription is in reference to part of the Psalm and it is a composite composition.

⁵ Ps 51:4. This is, perhaps, an echo of David’s first words upon being confronted by Nathan: “*I have sinned against the LORD.*” 2 Kgs 12:13.

⁶ 2 Kgs 12:9.

Another conclusion the Psalmist draws is that the sin is intrinsic to him. *"I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me,"* he writes.⁷ This is the idea, echoed in places like Paul's Epistle to the Romans, that all of humanity participated in Adam's sin, and so we are bound by the simple fact of our birth to sin and experience the consequences of sin.⁸ This is a doctrine called original sin, more fully developed later in by Saint Augustine.⁹ Because he understands it, the Psalmist owns his sin, he knows it is directed at God, and he knows it was always his.

3. RENEWAL (VV.7-12)

Having considered the reasons for his sin, in verses 7-12, the Psalmist turns back to pleading with God.¹⁰ The focus here is on the renewal that he seeks. He's not just asking for forgiveness, but in his repentance, he is asking for renewal, for restoration. The language he uses is that of cleansing, having his iniquities blotted out, of having a clean heart, of being saved. Three times he speaks of having a right spirit, that is God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, renewed in him. But, perhaps even more surprisingly, he speaks of it being a joyful occasion. *"Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice... Restore to me the joy of your salvation."*¹¹ Forgiveness is not just a return to neutral, or a restoration of balance, but a cause for celebration.

4. REDEMPTION (FOR US)

As we turn from the text to today, I want to consider for a moment why this Psalm is so important for us, especially in this penitential season of Lent. I think, sometimes, we are not nearly horrified enough by our sins, those evil thoughts, words, and deeds that offend God and hurt those around us. I know I am guilty of this, of downplaying my own sin. It's too easy to write my sin off as victimless or think I've somehow made up for it by rectifying the situation with the victim. 'Oh, I had this horrible thought in my head, but nobody knows about it, and nobody got hurt. Oh, I was horrible to my wife. But I apologized and made her dinner. Everything is better now. Oh, I lied to this other person, but they'll never know, so it's not a big deal.' It's so easy to get caught up in this way of thinking and not really acknowledge just how depraved, how dark, how horrifying my sin is. And there are some big ones in my past. I suspect some of you also have some big ones, persistent ones, lifestyle or hidden secrets that need confronting. And it is too easy to become numb to them, to forget those conclusions that the Psalmist reached: that we should own our sin, it is fundamentally against God, and it has plagued us from birth and will be with us until death. I won't labour the point here, but you need to know it is okay to mourn your sin. But brothers and sisters, this is the liturgical season to really contemplate our hearts, to be realistic about our hatred and jealousy, our greed and lust, our profound selfishness, and the way it slowly destroys us from within, like heart disease, lurking inside and waiting to crush us. Perhaps you want to finally confront it, to come forward for the first time in your life, honest about your heart. Maybe it is time to make a confession, to kneel before God in true repentance. This is not a bad time to do it.

⁷ Ps 51:5.

⁸ See Rom 5:12-21.

⁹ See especially Augustine, *The City of God*, 14.3-6. See also Augustine, "De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione," from *Retractions*, II.23, "De Spiritu et Littera," from *Retractions*, II.37, and "De Natura et Gratia," from *Retractions*, II.42.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the lectionary reading of Ps 51:1-13 is based on the Coverdale Psalter which corresponds to verses 1-12 in the NRSVA.

¹¹ Ps 51:8, 12.

But as you do, remember the Psalmist. Broken hearted as he was about his sin, he had hope. And so should you. It won't feel like a time to celebrate, but it should.

Remember that image he used. The language of cleaning, washing, cleansing, having a clean heart—it all goes back to that image of being purged with hyssop.¹² This is a reference to the cleansing of people and houses in the Old Testament law.¹³ The priest would dip a hyssop branch in the blood of a sacrificial animal and then sprinkle that blood all around, representatively cleansing that which the blood touched. It goes back to the original Passover, in fact, where they Israelites were to use a branch of hyssop to smear the blood of the sacrificial lamb on their doorposts as to be spared God's judgment. When the Psalmist writes "*purge me with hyssop,*" it is more than just a practical recommendation that hyssop branches are good for this. It's a reference to the whole system of forgiveness and ritual cleansing. And it is a window into how God gives renewal. There is a single reference to hyssop in the Gospels. In John 19, just moments before his death on the cross, Jesus is given sponge of wine extended on a branch of hyssop. In a last symbolic act, it points to how his blood, about to be shed, is what offers cleansing, washing, redemption to his people. As John later writes: "*...the blood of Jesus...cleanses us from all sin... If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*"¹⁴ His blood, the blood of Jesus Christ, is what brings cleansing from unrighteousness, what brings forgiveness, to those who confess their sins and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, just like blood on a hyssop branch.

CONCLUSION

Friends, I hope that you find yourself wondering about God's mercy this day. Because the truth is, we could all use a little Takotsubo Cardiomyopathy, or as it is more commonly known, Broken Heart Syndrome. It's okay to have a broken heart over our evil deeds. Because while our sins should break our hearts, God's love is more than enough to restore us. And God does love us. As the Psalmist wrote, his mercy for us is according to his steadfast love.¹⁵ God's love is more than our sin.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we are grateful that your Son has reconciled us to you in his death and resurrection. May we remember our sin, but rely on your loving mercy. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹² Ps 51:7.

¹³ See especially Leviticus 14 and Numbers 19.

¹⁴ 1 John 1:7b, 9.

¹⁵ See also Rom 5:8. "*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*"