

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation”

Essay 2 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Early in our series on “Salvation: The Quest” we come to the great 51st psalm in which the psalmist pours out his heart to God, utterly exposes himself to God, and becomes heartbreakingly, breathtakingly, vulnerable in ways that leave us at first uncomfortable. He cries out. He is utterly devastated. He seeks to understand himself and can only suppose that he was “born bad.”

Traditionally this psalm is attributed to the time of David’s adultery with Bathsheba. The superscription, in those tiny words added later at the beginning of this psalm, reads: “For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”

You probably know the story. One evening well into his reign as king of Israel when his army was off at war with the Ammonites David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. “The woman was very beautiful.” You may remember where things go from there. It’s recorded in 2 Samuel 11-12.

The woman is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David’s most esteemed soldiers. David, who already has wives and children, sends for Bathsheba. He has to have her. He has to possess her. He has to pour into her all his pent-up desire. And so he sleeps with her. She goes home, conceives, and sends word to David, saying, “I am pregnant.” David sends word to Joab, commander of the army besieging the city of Rabbah, that Uriah be sent home to cover David’s adultery. Perhaps he’ll sleep with his wife and no one will notice that the child is David’s. But Uriah is too honorable; he will not take pleasure in his wife while his comrades are dying in battle. So David sends the ever trusting Uriah back to Joab with a letter ordering Joab to see that Uriah is killed in the fighting. And so it was done. Bathsheba becomes David’s wife and bears him a son.

The prophet Nathan, however, exposes David’s sin. The child sickens and dies. And though David, once exposed, becomes penitent and God forgives him, the consequences remain – specifically, that the sword will never depart from the house of David. And it never did, as one of David’s sons, Amnon, raped his half-sister Tamar, and another son, the charismatic Absalom, Tamar’s full brother, rose in rebellion against his father.

Now there are (in truth) questions about the date and authorship of this psalm, but it is this story that gives us the perfect way to “get” this psalm, to feel its deep spiritual rhythm. And when we read it we remember that for almost everyone a time comes when we stand before God knowing we are wrong, and not just in small matters, but at the very core of our identity. Then our sin is always before us (verse 3). We feel that we were somehow born wrong (5). We feel it in our bones (8). We feel almost that we have blood on our hands (14). Our heart is broken (17). We feel cast off from the presence of God (11). And we cry out to God to have mercy on us (verse 1), to wash away our iniquity (2), to cleanse us, literally, to un-sin us (7), to create in us a pure heart and renew

a steadfast spirit within us (10), to restore to us the joy of our salvation (12). And in such moments we know it will not be ritual that will save us. Addressing God in verses 16-17, the psalmist affirms,

“You do not delight in sacrifice,
or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure
in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices of God
are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.”

And with this, this psalmist lines up with the moral genius of Isaiah (1:11-17), Amos (5:22-24), and Micah (6:1-8):

“With what shall I come before the Lord?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.”

What the psalmist knows is that a time comes when we, when I know I am wrong, know I have done wrong. There is blood on my hands. I have hurt others and now there is no way to make amends. It can't be undone. All I can offer God is my broken spirit, my broken heart. That's it – my God and I, and my broken heart. And I realize that it's always against God that I sin. “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (verse 4).

Yes, there is Uriah, honorable, trusting Uriah, and, yes, there are the victims of our sins, those who suffer deeply because of us – the trusting friend, the abused child, the thousands defrauded of billions, the widows, widowers and orphans of 9/11, the six million Jews killed in the Shoah. But a time comes when we realize that we are wrong not in superficial ways out on the edges of our lives but we are wrong at the core – that our ego (the partial perspective from which we see the world) is wrong, dead wrong, that we are blind and do not see, that we have violated what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, the excellent and praiseworthy, that our primary sin is to not see our connectivity with all that is, that in our self-absorbed way we have betrayed all that is and the very personal God who loves it all, and who loves those we have wounded and scarred. And all we can offer God is the death of our ego, and we leave behind our me-centeredness and enter a higher consciousness, aware of the very personal love that is God.

It's then that we cry out (this in verse 12 of our text), "O God, restore to us the joy of your salvation." We are reminded of the joy, the joy we had and the joy we lost. We remember that time when all was well between us and God. Maybe it was at our baptism. Maybe it was at some other moment of great spiritual breakthrough. And we felt our oneness with God. We felt the divine flow in us and all around us. And we understood grace. We knew how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. All was O.K., deeply, profoundly, unshakably O.K. And that too – this sense of well-being with God – is part of salvation.

Getting back to it is part of the quest. It is this that we are called back to, back to a place we once knew before ego and fear and the need to accomplish our own salvation undid us.

– Dale Pauls