



REAL: AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY IN A WORLD OF COUNTERFEITS

## Contrition: The Gospel Emotion

Psalm 51:1-19

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- <sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
- <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!
- <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
- <sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.
- <sup>5</sup> Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- <sup>6</sup> Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,  
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- <sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
- <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
- <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
- <sup>11</sup> Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.
- <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.
- <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
- <sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
- <sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
- <sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
- <sup>18</sup> Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem;
- <sup>19</sup> then will you delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

### Introduction

In this series on *Real* Christianity, we've been looking at the marks of authentic Christianity. Two weeks ago we looked at the first mark: humility, or brokenhearted joy. Last week we consider meekness, or the lamblike disposition of Jesus, how love responds to injury from others. This week we turn our attention to a third mark of authentic Christianity: *Contrition*.

Contrition is how real Christians respond to the reality of sin in their lives. This is a hallmark of real Christians, while a lack of contrition is a telltale sign that a person isn't real. If

you're real, you will have experienced contrition—and go on experiencing contrition. You will have what David has: “a broken and contrite heart” (v. 17). In fact, a contrite heart will be your characteristic response to the continuing presence of sin in your life.

Of course, everyone has some sort of response to sin, whether that person calls it sin or not. God has wired us to react to sin in different ways: we experience shame, embarrassment, the fear of punishment, regret, guilt. All of these are natural responses to the reality of sin in our lives. But none of these is what the Bible calls contrition.

Contrition is a unique Christian response to sin; it's a gospel response. Contrition is seeing your own sin in light of God's mercy. To be contrite is therefore to experience sorrow and joy simultaneously: deep sorrow because of the depravity of your own heart; yet profound joy because of the promise of God's forgiveness in Christ. Contrition is the painful realization that you fall short of the glory of God and are without excuse; and yet, the joyful recognition that God has reconciled the world to himself through his Son Jesus Christ. Thus, contrition is a paradoxical emotion: it's a pleasing pain, a glad grief, a beautiful brokenness; it's weeping over who you are, even as you rejoice over who Christ is for you.

Contrition is what we see in Psalm 51. This is a psalm penned by a penitent King David, in the immediate aftermath of his sin with Bathsheba. God then sent a prophet named Nathan to confront David in his sin. The result was much shame and guilt and remorse and sorrow. Yet somewhere along the way, David finds himself at that place called contrition. And this psalm is his putting his experience of contrition to words; it's the lyric of contrition, you might say.

## **My Sin is Ever before Me**

The contrite heart understands a few critical things that a non-contrite heart doesn't get. What are these?

*First of all, a contrite heart understands the pervasiveness of sin.* You won't arrive at a place of contrition until you realize that sin is everywhere; it's in your soul and in your life; it's everywhere you turn, it's everywhere you go. Contrition can't happen until you can say with David: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (v. 3).

That is why contrition is hard to come by these days, because sin has all but disappeared. It's not that people sin less these days than in the past. It's just that we as a society no longer use the word 'sin' for much of anything other than a sumptuous chocolate cake on a dessert menu. And we have lots of other ways to describe the bad things we do: criminal, unhealthy attitude, self-destructive, intolerant, politically incorrect and dysfunctional.

You see, you must realize that sin isn't simply transgression, or your sinful *acts*; it is also corruption, or your sinful *nature*. And thus sin, as sinful corruption, is with you always in this life; it is, in one form or another, ever-present. Wherever you go, whatever you do, sin is right there with you. Contrition is sharing in Paul's recognition that “when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand” (Rom. 7:21). Until you can say with David, “my sin is ever before me,” you won't ever reach the place called contrition, where you find you have “a broken and contrite heart” (v. 17).

## **Against You, You only, have I Sinned**

*Second, a contrite heart understands the offense of sin.* When David sinned with Bathsheba, he sinned against many people: Bathsheba herself, Uriah her husband, those who he enlisted to help cover his crime, the people of Israel as a whole who entrusted him with kingship. When you and I sin, we too sin against others as well. Yet notice who David thinks his sin is ultimately against? “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (v. 4).

Gallup recently reported that among self-identifying ‘born again’ Christians, only 17% of them define sin in relationship to God. We live in a therapeutic age, in which the real offense of sin—if anything is even identifiable anymore as sin—is that it’s not good for yourself. You shouldn’t do bad things because those things aren’t good for you. It’s not healthy to have an anger problem, or engage in lying or stealing, or talk behind people’s backs, or overeat at every meal, or sleep with someone who’s not your spouse. None of that’s best for becoming a whole and healthy you. This, of course, is the reason why the universe exists—for you! Right?

What the contrite heart knows is that sin is first and foremost always sin against God: his law, his will, his character, his nature, his reputation. While there is a horizontal—or person-to-person—dimension to virtually every sin, the vertical dimension is more fundamental. Because God is more important than human beings—ininitely more so! A contrite heart understands that each and every sin is primarily sin against God. Contrition comes from realizing that your sin is ultimately an offense against God; that the real heinousness of sin is the offense it is to God’s holiness.

## **Brought Forth in Iniquity**

*And, thirdly, a contrite heart understands the depth of sin.* Sin isn’t something that runs only surface deep. If that’s how you see things, you’ll not only be badly deceived about yourself, but you’ll also never be truly contrite. David understood things differently; this tragic act of sin taught him the true depth of sin. “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (v. 5).

Ultimately, David doesn’t try to transfer blame for his sin onto someone else. He doesn’t look for an alibi in the environment or his circumstances; instead, he owns it wholly and completely. In fact, David recognizes that ultimately the problem is *him*. David is his own problem. That’s what a truly contrite heart realizes: my problem isn’t my individual sins I commit, but the fact that I am a sinner at the core of who I am, and from the very start.

## **You Delight in Truth in the Inward Being**

*Fourth, a contrite heart understands the purpose of sin.* Believe it or not, there is divine design behind your sin. God, of course, despises sin, whether in the world or in our lives. Because he’s holy, he cannot have any other reaction to sin. And yet God, in his mysterious providence, nevertheless uses our sin for his purposes in our lives. David’s comes to realize this even about his own tragic sin, when he says: “Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart” (v. 6).

You see, there’s something worse than committing adultery or even murder, and that’s remaining ignorant of the mercy of God. To not know the grace of God is the worst situation you could ever find yourself in. You might think there could be nothing worse than being

convicted of a crime and then publically crucified; yet if in that moment you are brought to see the mercy of God, then it is not a dead-end but a doorway into paradise.

This is why God is not afraid to use our sin to break us, so that he can rebuild you with his mercy. His love is so fierce that he will sometimes allow severe things to happen to you so that you can taste the sweetness of his grace. He wants to get you ultimately to a place called contrition, where you can say with David: “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice” (v. 8).

I often find myself tempted to despair over my inability to control my tongue; personally, I find it very difficult to be, for example, “quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19). That may be one of my least favorite verses in the Bible! I can engage in conversation with this verse in mind, and three minutes into it find that my mouth has taken over. Then, three minutes after that, I feel those subtle but painful waves of guilt gently wash over me as I realize I’ve done it again.

But I must recognize that there is a purpose to this ongoing sin in my own life. For it’s precisely in my despairing of my own ability to control my tongue that I come to realize more fully what God means when he says: “if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body” (James 3:2). But more than that: my own sin helps me marvel at the sinless Savior, Jesus Christ, who never spoke a single sinful word. Not a single one! And what is more: that this sinless Savior died for me, and in my place, in order to forgive every careless word I ever uttered—all to impress upon my soul the astonishing mercy of God.

## **Have Mercy on Me, O God**

*Fifth, a contrite heart understands the remedy for sin—and has embraced it by faith.* This fifth feature of a contrite heart distinguishes contrition from guilt. Unlike guilt, contrition isn’t a dead-end; contrition sees a way out of guilt. A contrite heart understands that there is a remedy for your sin; you don’t have to live forever with your guilt—or fear of punishment, regret or embarrassment. A contrite heart sees there’s an opening called mercy. Contrition is marked by *confident hope*. This is why we ought to hear David’s opening plea in this psalm, not as a cry of anxious desperation, but as a cry of confident hope. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love” (v. 1).

Jesus once told a parable about contrition. It was a parable of two men: one was a very religious and devout man, a Pharisee; the other a well-known bad-boy, a recognized sinner, a tax collector.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ (Luke 18:10-14).

The Pharisee has not arrived at a place of contrition. He’s obviously thankful that God’s kept him from doing really bad stuff; but there’s not the broken-heartedness over sin that is the mark of true contrition. He doesn’t understand the pervasiveness of sin, the offense of sin, the

depth of sin, nor the purpose of sin. And therefore he doesn't yet see or even feel the need for the remedy for sin. The tax collector, on the other hand, knows his need. He sees it. And so he cries out in the same way David does, with the cry of contrition: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

### **How do I know if I Have a Contrite Heart?**

Have you ever experienced what David experienced: a broken and contrite heart? Is that your regular response to the reality of sin in your life?

*You know you have a contrite heart when you look to Jesus as Savior from your sin, not Savior of your sin.* Listen to how David's contrite heart prays and pleads with the Lord: "according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgression. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" (v. 2). "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (v. 7). "Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities" (v. 9). "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation" (v. 14). A truly contrite heart wants salvation from sin, not salvation of sin.

But I suspect some professing Christians are interested in Jesus as the Savior of their sin. Jesus is the Savior of your sin when you tell yourself that he delivers you from all the negative consequences of your sin, but not necessarily from sin itself. This is the hallmark of the hypocrite, the not-real Christian. He adores Jesus because he presumes upon the grace of God to free him from all the consequences of sin, without delivering him from the sin itself. Jesus saves him from the consequences of sin, but lets him hang onto to the sin itself. He recognizes sin is a problem: it's not healthy, inconvenient, painful, embarrassing, damaging to your reputation, harmful to other people. But he doesn't see sin as sinful and hateful in itself.

There are those who Jude calls "ungodly people, who pervert the grace of God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (v. 4). Sure, with their lips they profess faith in Christ, but with their lives they clearly deny him because they turn his grace into an occasion for sin. Jesus is for them nothing more than the Savior of their sin, rather than the Savior from their sin. The Apostle Paul similarly points out to these types of not-real Christians when he says: "They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works" (Titus 1:16). They're the kinds of church-goers who have "the appearance of godliness, but [are] denying its power" (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5).

You see, God does not despise a contrite heart because a contrite heart does not despise God, but reverences him above all things. You despise God when you secretly hold onto your sin. You may not like sin's consequences: the regret or guilt, shame or embarrassment. But the sin itself—that you actually like, and would like very much to hold onto if you could. Ask yourself this question: What would you become if you knew you'd never suffer any of the consequences of sin: you'd never get caught or punished or embarrassed or have guilty feelings or live with regret? Someone quite different than who you are today? If so, then perhaps it's not a contrite heart and a hatred of sin that holds you back, but the shame or guilt that goes along with sin.

You see, this is why contrition is so effective in driving moral transformation. A broken and contrite heart shapes Christian character and makes you look more and more like Christ Jesus. The truly contrite heart is a changed heart: a heart that delights less in sin and more in

holiness; grieves more intensely over offending God and strives more earnestly to honor him in all things.

### **Contrition Comes by Looking to the Cross and Confessing Sin**

Contrition comes about by looking to the cross. For there you see something truly horrific that ought to cause us deep sorrow and pain: God pouring out wrath and judgment upon his own Son. On the other hand, you see something that ought to cause our hearts to sing, as we see the profound mercy of God, as the Father puts forth his one and only Son to receive on the cross the judgment we deserved.

Contrition is then expressed and encouraged by confessing our sin. As we own our sin and set it before the Lord and others, we see in an even more acute way the heinousness of our sin and yet the sweetness of God's mercy. Confession is the way to cultivate contrition. When you confess sin, you bring it out into the open, into the light; and there in the light of God's truth, you can see the true ugliness of sin. But there you also see the power of Christ's mercy.

Sinners like you and me come to Christ through the doorway of contrition. This is how conversion or coming to Christ is experienced. Contrition is the gospel emotion that captures the twofold movement of the soul in turning away from sin and self in repentance, and turning to Christ in faith. Contrition is the emotion that accompanies this movement of repentance and faith—turning away from and turning toward. It is a despising of sin and a delighting in the Savior.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to close by telling you about a man named Bob. I met him several weeks ago at the Eternity Bible College in Southern California, where I taught a class on Paul's theology. Bob was one of my students, though he wasn't what you'd call a traditional student. For starters, he was a bit older than the rest of the class: he was eighty-four. He also had a very different story to tell about his life. He was a career military man who had fought in three different wars: World War II, the Korean War, and then Vietnam. His mother had died when he was twelve, and he'd been raised by an aunt and uncle; then largely left to fend for himself once he turned eighteen. From an early age, he'd wrestled with same-sex attraction, something he grappled with his entire life.

Bob didn't come to faith in Christ until the ripe old age of seventy-nine. A lifeguard at the YMCA where he exercised, a young man in his early twenties, led him to Christ. Now, Bob is a redeemed man, a new creation. He's become real by the power of God. You see in him such deep contrition, over his life of sin and away from Christ, which is powerfully mixed together with a profound sense of the mercy of Christ that comes to him through the gospel. Bob always sat in the front row of the class, and tracked with every word I said. He often wanted to interject something into the discussion, but he couldn't compose himself emotionally to get the words out. Instead, he would often just clasp his hands together and raise them over his shoulder in a cheering motion, registering his approval with what I'd said.

Toward the end of the week, I sat down with Bob for over an hour and listened to him recount his story of grace. He would often stop, gasping for air because the sheer thought of his life of sin and the mercy of Christ literally took his breath away. The swell of this emotion made

him weep most of the time. It made me weep more than once as well. I said to Bob at one point: “Bob, all I know is I want to be near you when you get to see Jesus face to face for the first time.”

When Bob thinks about living over three-quarters of a century apart from Christ, he feels deep waves of grief and sorrow well-up and wash over him. He regrets so much of his former life; and yet he knows now that there is something that God does not despise—indeed something God delights in with all his infinite being—and that is Bob’s broken and contrite heart.

Contrition is a beautiful thing. It is the gospel emotion. It is our response to our own sin, the sinner we in fact are, yet in light of the grace and mercy of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Do you know contrition, friend? Have you ever experienced this uniquely Christian and gospel emotion?

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