

## How to Apologize to God

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Psalm 51:1-17

The 1996 Academy Award-winning (and tremendously violent) film *Fargo* tells the story of the numerous and cumulative misfortunes of Jerry Lundegaard, who is an automobile salesman in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jerry, played by William H. Macy, is, unbeknownst to his family, in severe financial trouble. Despite the fact that Jerry's father-in-law is quite wealthy (though antagonistic), Jerry concocts a plan, rather than simply ask for help from his family.

The plan is for him to pay two men to kidnap his wife Jean in exchange for half of the ransom he believes his father-in-law will pay to free his daughter, along with a car he steals off the dealer's lot. After convincing his father-in-law to participate in a real estate deal with him, he tries to call off the kidnapping, but it is too late. The rest of the film is one fiasco after another, as the kidnapers are pulled over for a license plate infraction by a state trooper, who they kill before killing a couple who witness the crime.

One of the kidnapers meets with Jerry's father-in-law to receive the ransom money, an encounter that ends with the father-in-law dead and the kidnapper wounded. The other kidnapper kills Jean, Jerry's wife, and then kills the first kidnapper. Jerry and the surviving kidnapper are eventually arrested.

When the story begins, Jerry is gainfully employed. He has a loving wife and a nice house in the suburbs. By the end of the film, six people are dead, two are in prison, and the lives of several families are forever changed, all because one bad idea led to another, which led to another, and another, and another. All because no one knew how, or was willing to break the cycle.

This evening's text is Psalm 51. It is one of the penitential psalms, one that we regularly read each year on this night, as we begin the season of Lent. Psalm 51 was written after events in David's life described in 2 Samuel 11:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

David now had a problem: Bathsheba was the daughter of Eliam, one of King David's "thirty" warriors. She was the granddaughter of Ahitophel, one of David's most trusted advisors, and she was

the wife of Uriah, another one of David's "thirty" warriors. Furthermore, Uriah was as good, decent, and loyal of a servant of a king that we find anywhere in the Bible.

So, in an attempt to make Uriah believe that he is actually the child's father, David calls for Uriah, makes small talk with him about the war and the condition of the soldiers, and then tries to convince him to spend the night at home with Bathsheeba. Yet Uriah decides to sleep at the entrance to the palace with his master's servants, because, in his own words, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!"

Increasingly desperate, David tries again to get Uriah to go home, this time plying him with alcohol, yet again, Uriah puts his loyalty to his comrades above his own desires, and sleeps on a mat with his master's servants.

So David, desperate and feeling out of options, orders Uriah's commander to "Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die." Uriah, a paragon of virtue and loyalty is killed, a marriage is destroyed, David takes Bathsheeba as his wife, and sets in motion events that will eventually lead to the death of the child conceived with Bathsheeba.

Both of these stories end in tragedy because the person or the people in the center of them could not break the downward spiral of bad choices. Rather than deal with the sin that was the prime mover in these stories (greed and lust, respectively), the protagonists ultimately attempted to rectify each sin with another sin, until the irreversable was done and lives were lost.

Tonight's text, Psalm 51 is David's song of repentance for the wrong he has done, and in it, he gives us an example of what a raw, honest, passionate plea for God's grace looks like. As we begin our Lenten journey on this Ash Wednesday, it serves to show us how we can be honest with ourselves and honest with God in acknowledging our personal sinfulness, while acknowledging that our God is a God who seeks the cleansing of our hearts for the sake of restoring God's relationship with us, restoring our relationships with one another, and breaking the cycles of sin that can lead us further and further away from the life we are meant to have:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 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 judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Psalm 51 stands against our modern notions of purely personal decisions, and in turn, purely personal sin. David cries “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 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 judgment.” David knows that all sins, regardless of their outcome, is a sin against God, and therefore our need for God’s grace is indeed “ever before us.”

Second, David acknowledges that repentance and the forgiveness of sin is something that we can (and must) seek, but it is something only God can grant. This is not about self-improvement vis-a-vis a sheer, determined act of will. David writes, “You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

I believe that there were times in both the story of Jerry Lundegaard and the story of King David when the protagonists felt like they were powerless to stop the avalanches they had set in motion, and they would be right. However, God is under no such constraints. So often, we get in trouble because we are hell-bent on satisfying one desire after another, and so seldom it is that we cry out to God *before* things spiral out of control, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

Third, David makes it clear that we are forgiven for a purpose beyond our own life and health and spiritual-well being. He writes, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.” Too often, Christians are people who receive great grace from God, only to forget to offer that same grace to others. We become judgemental, convicting, and otherwise act as though discipleship means privileged status and not servanthood. What if we really saw forgiveness as David does in this psalm, as a liberation that allows us to help others find *their* liberation in God? What if our lips were constantly full of words of grace that bespeak the great grace God shows to us?

Finally, I believe our message for Ash Wednesday is that our God is a God who is not interested in religion for show. David writes, “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Ritual and the outward practices of our faith are important, but it is a changed heart that God ultimately seeks, because what God wants most of all is restored relationship with all of God’s children.

There is forgiveness with God. There *is* forgiveness with God. If our God is truly the God who would come to earth to impregnate a young girl, so that God could become incarnate in the person of God’s Son, so that our God could experience death on a cross for our sake, then there is absolutely no length to which our God will not go to find *you* and *me* and *everyone*, until we all have experienced God’s abundant mercy, God’s steadfast love, God’s washing, God’s cleansing, God’s purging, God’s restoration, and God’s recreation.

Break our hearts, O God, but do not ever let us go. Break our cycles of sin and alienation, from you, and from one another. Create in us a pure heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us all.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.