

PSALM 51 TITLE

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. Last week we started our study of this important psalm. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that we talked about the background of the entire Book of Psalms. We covered four aspects of this book's background: its title, location, date, and organization. For the title I told you that the word "Psalms" comes from a Greek word that means "song of praise." And the title of this book in the original Hebrew just means "praises." So the focus of this book is on praising God. Then we talked about the location of this book. In our English Bibles it's in the poetry section of the Old Testament right after the book of Job. But in the Hebrew Bible this book is in a section called the "Writings." That's the third of three sections in the Hebrew Bible. And the Book of Psalms comes first in this section, which shows how important it is.

Then we covered the date of this book. It was produced over a period of about one thousand years, from the fifteenth century to the fifth century before Christ. One of the psalms was written by Moses, and others were apparently written after the Babylonian exile. Finally, we spent a lot of time on the organization of this book. And we can get many clues about the arrangement of the psalms from their titles. I focused on two areas with regard to the psalm titles. First, I believe they're inspired by God, because they're found in the original Hebrew text. And second, I believe that any musical information at the beginning of these titles actually belongs at the end of the previous psalm.

Now this view isn't very popular today, but it fits the evidence extremely well. First of all, it fits the pattern that we see in the psalm recorded in Habakkuk 3. That psalm has both a title at the beginning and a note at the end with musical instructions. But this view also makes good sense when we look at psalms within the Book of Psalms. Last week we look specifically at three psalms: 46, 56, and 88. In each case the title begins with information that fits much better with the previous psalm. And so I gave you an eight-page handout that rearranges the titles for the entire Book of Psalms. But only 72 of the 150 psalms are affected by these changes. And in almost every case the only kind of material that moves to the end of the previous psalm is the musical information.

So let's take a look at the title for Psalm 51 to see if it's one of the 72 psalms affected by these changes. It starts with the phrase "for the choir director," which obviously conveys musical information. This phrase appears 55 times in the psalm titles, and 54 of them are at the very beginning of the title. But I believe that all 55 of them belong at the end of the previous psalm. And that's how I arranged them on my handout. So the phrase "for the choir director" at the beginning of the Psalm 51 title actually belongs at the end of Psalm 50. But if you look at the title for Psalm 52, you'll see the exact same phrase at the begin-

ning. And so this is the one that goes with Psalm 51. We'll talk more about this phrase when we get to the end of this psalm.

But there's still a lot of material remaining in the title of Psalm 51. So before we get into the text of this psalm, let's take a look at the actual title: "A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba." This is one of the longest psalm titles in the book. That's because we don't just see who wrote this psalm. We also learn about the circumstances surrounding it. But before we get into those details, let's talk about the Hebrew word here for psalm. It's used 57 times in the Old Testament, and all of them are found in the psalm titles. This term refers to a song that was accompanied by a musical instrument. And so Psalm 51 was written to be sung in praise to God.

Now it would be easy for us to think that this was just something the Israelites did during Old Testament times. But we also see in the New Testament that Christians are to do this as well. In Ephesians 5:19 the apostle Paul said that one of the results of being filled by the Spirit is "speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord." And in Colossians 3:16 Paul wrote, "Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts." So Paul wanted us to sing the psalms, but it's not just about worshiping God. He talked about how we can teach each other as we sing. When we set words to music, they become easier to learn.

For example, most of us learned the letters of the English alphabet by singing them. Even to this day when I think about the alphabet, I find myself humming the famous tune that's associated with it. We also know it as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," but it was originally a children's folk song in France. And now it helps children learn the English alphabet. But we can learn a lot more than just the alphabet through song. My kids learned the books of the Bible in the Awana program through song. And they've also memorized quite a few Bible verses that way as well. The simple fact of the matter is that music helps us to learn whatever words we connect to it. And so when we sing Scripture, it's easier to remember and apply to our lives. That's why we sing biblically-based songs every week when we gather as a church.

So the title for Psalm 51 shows us that it was meant to be sung, and then we can see who wrote it. The title refers to it as "a psalm of David." The name "David" comes from a Hebrew root that means "beloved." This name is used about 900 times in the Old Testament, and it always refers to the same individual: the son of Jesse who became the most famous king of Israel. Now in the Book of Psalms David's name is used 88 times, and 75 of them are in the titles. Out of these 75 occurrences, 73 of them follow the Hebrew preposition that's translated with the word "of" here. This Hebrew preposition is flexible and can a variety of nuances, just like the English word "of." The two main options here are represented by the words "by" and "for." In other words, these 73 psalms were written either by David or by someone else for David.

But the best view is that these psalms were written by David. In other words, he was the author of these 73 psalms. And the best reason for taking this view is that it's supported in the New Testament. Let's start by looking at Mark 12:35-37: "While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he asked, 'How can the scribes say

that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself says by the Holy Spirit: The Lord declared to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.” David himself calls him “Lord”; how then can he be his son? And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.” So in this passage Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1, and he said that David spoke those words. And if we look at the title of Psalm 110, we can see that it has just four words: “A psalm of David.” So Jesus confirmed that this phrase is talking about authorship. He asserted that David wrote this psalm.

Now let’s look at Acts 2, which records the birthday of the church. And it includes a powerful sermon from the apostle Peter. Listen to what he said about Jesus in verses 25–28: “For David says of him: I saw the Lord ever before me; because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices. Moreover, my flesh will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me in Hades or allow your holy one to see decay. You have revealed the paths of life to me; you will fill me with gladness in your presence.” So in this passage Peter quoted Psalm 16:8–11, and he said that David spoke those words about Jesus. And if we look at the title of Psalm 16, we can see that it has just four words: “A Mik-tam of David.” So Peter confirmed that this phrase is talking about authorship. He claimed that David wrote this psalm.

Finally, let’s look at Romans 11:9–10. Look at what the apostle Paul wrote here: “And David says, Let their table become a snare and a trap, a pitfall and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and their backs be bent continually.” So in this passage Paul quoted Psalm 69:22–23, and he said that David spoke these words. And if we look at the title of Psalm 69, we can see that it’s “of David.” So Paul confirmed that this phrase is talking about authorship. He was stating under divine inspiration that David wrote this psalm. So whenever we see the phrase “of David” in the psalm titles, we should conclude that David wrote that psalm. And that applies to Psalm 51.

But before we continue looking at the title for Psalm 51, let’s do some review on David’s life. We learn the most about him in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, which are combined as one book in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the main human character in this book is David. Now certainly there’s some focus on Samuel and Saul in the first half of 1 Samuel. But both of them were connected to David. Samuel was the one who anointed David as king, and Saul was David’s disobedient predecessor and had to be replaced by him. So we first meet David in 1 Samuel 16 when Samuel secretly anointed him as king. We learn there that he was the youngest son of Jesse and that he lived in the town of Bethlehem in the tribe of Judah. At that time he worked for his father as a shepherd. But before long David started working for King Saul as his armor-bearer. And David also played music for Saul when he was tormented by an evil spirit.

But after David bravely killed the Philistine giant named Goliath, he became very popular among the Israelites. He became close friends with Saul’s son Jonathan. But Saul became so jealous that he started trying to kill David. Jonathan tried to talk some sense into his dad, but it just made things worse. So David went on the run and tried to hide from Saul. But Saul kept trying to hunt him down and kill him. One time Saul went into a cave to relieve himself, and David and his men just happened to be hiding there. David could have easily killed Saul at that time, but he was resolved not to harm the Lord’s anointed. Instead of taking matters into his own hands, he waited on God’s timing to become king.

And eventually that day finally came. Saul was killed in battle, and before long David became the king of Judah. But Saul's son Ish-bosheth ruled over the rest of the nation of Israel. And as you can imagine, this situation led to war between the two groups. But ultimately David's team prevailed. Ish-bosheth was assassinated, and in 2 Samuel 5 David became king over all Israel. Now at first things went very well for David. He was able to capture Jerusalem and make it his capital city. He also had military success against the Philistines and several other nations. He brought the ark of God to Jerusalem with great rejoicing. He expressed a desire to build a house for God, and in response God promised to build a house for him. God made an unconditional covenant with him and promised to establish his throne forever.

But trouble was brewing for David at home, and it started before he became king over all Israel. After he began ruling over the tribe of Judah, he lived in the city of Hebron. Look at what happened there in 2 Samuel 3:2–5: "Sons were born to David in Hebron: His firstborn was Amnon, by Ahinoam the Jezreelite; his second was Chileab, by Abigail, the widow of Nabal the Carmelite; the third was Absalom, son of Maacah the daughter of King Talmai of Geshur; the fourth was Adonijah, son of Haggith; the fifth was Shephatiah, son of Abital; the sixth was Ithream, by David's wife Eglah. These were born to David in Hebron." Now it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that something's not right here. I shouldn't have had to struggle at reading so many names! Did you notice that David's first six sons all had different moms? David's name is the only one that's repeated in this passage!

But this was just the beginning. Once David became king over all Israel and moved to Jerusalem, things got even worse. Look at what happened in 2 Samuel 5:13: "After he arrived from Hebron, David took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem, and more sons and daughters were born to him." Apparently six wives weren't enough for David. He wanted to have even more! But he was completely ignoring the instructions that God had given in his law about Israelite kings. In Deuteronomy 17:17 he said that the king "must not acquire many wives for himself." Okay, maybe he didn't have as many wives as his son Solomon would go on to have. But it's clear that David was living in disobedience to God's word.

So trouble was brewing at home for David, and it finally boiled over in 2 Samuel 11. David already lots of wives and concubines, but he still wasn't satisfied. He wanted to have just one more. Look at what happened in verses 2–5: "One evening David got up from his bed and strolled around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing—a very beautiful woman. So David sent someone to inquire about her, and he said, 'Isn't this Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hethite?' David sent messengers to get her, and when she came to him, he slept with her. Now she had just been purifying herself from her uncleanness. Afterward, she returned home. The woman conceived and sent word to inform David: 'I am pregnant.'" Now it was bad enough that David committed adultery with Bathsheba. But then he tried to cover it up by engineering the death of her husband. Uriah was one of David's most loyal and dedicated soldiers, but David arranged for him to be killed in battle by the enemy. Then David took Bathsheba to be his wife.

But 2 Samuel 11:27 says that "the LORD considered what David had done to be evil." And God wasn't about to let David off the hook! Look at 2 Samuel 12:1–4: "So the LORD sent Nathan to David. When he arrived, he said to him: There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man

had very large flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing except one small ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised her, and she grew up with him and with his children. From his meager food she would eat, from his cup she would drink, and in his arms she would sleep. She was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man could not bring himself to take one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for his guest."

Now look at how David responded to this story in verses 5–6: "David was infuriated with the man and said to Nathan: 'As the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! Because he has done this thing and shown no pity, he must pay four lambs for that lamb.'" So Nathan's story stirred up some good old-fashioned righteous anger in David. He knew that what this man had done was wrong. But he was completely blind to his own hypocrisy! And so Nathan had to tell him the truth plainly. Look at the beginning of verse 7: "Nathan replied to David, 'You are the man!'" Now these days we use that phrase rather positively, don't we? We treat it as a compliment, but Nathan meant it as a denouncement!

Then Nathan went on to deliver a message from God. Look at verses 7–10: "This is what the LORD God of Israel says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from Saul. I gave your master's house to you and your master's wives into your arms, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah, and if that was not enough, I would have given you even more. Why then have you despised the LORD's command by doing what I consider evil? You struck down Uriah the Hethite with the sword and took his wife as your own wife—you murdered him with the Ammonite's sword. Now therefore, the sword will never leave your house because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hethite to be your own wife.' Then Nathan gave another message from God in verses 11–12: "This is what the LORD says, 'I am going to bring disaster on you from your own family: I will take your wives and give them to another before your very eyes, and he will sleep with them in broad daylight. You acted in secret, but I will do this before all Israel and in broad daylight.'"

So David was going to face some very serious consequences for his sin. God had blessed him immensely, and yet he did what was evil in God's sight. So how did David respond to this news? Look at the beginning of verse 13: "David responded to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.'" David gave a simple acknowledgement that he had disobeyed God. He confessed his sin and didn't try to hide it any longer. That was the right response, and Nathan provided immediate comfort for David. Look at the end of verse 13: "Then Nathan replied to David, 'And the LORD has taken away your sin; you will not die.'" God could have killed David on the spot for his sin, but instead he showed patience. He gave David a chance to repent and then forgave him.

This is the incident that led David to write Psalm 51. That's what we see in the title for this psalm. He wrote it "when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba." Now this doesn't mean that he wrote the psalm while Nathan was talking to him. We should understand the time reference more broadly here. The idea is probably that David wrote this psalm shortly after his interaction with Nathan. Notice that Nathan is called a prophet here. The Hebrew word for prophet is used over 300 times in the Old Testament, and it normally refers to individuals through whom God spoke. They received direct

revelation from him and spoke his words to the people. That's exactly what we saw Nathan doing in 2 Samuel 12. He delivered two short messages from God to David.

And Nathan was just one of many prophets that God gave to the Israelites to deliver his messages to them. Some of them even wrote books in the Old Testament, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Micah. We also see prophets mentioned in the New Testament. The ability to prophesy was a gift that God gave to some Christians in the early church. And many Christians believe that God continues to provide prophets for the church today. Some people believe that prophecy still exists in the form of preaching. They claim that prophecy can contain either foretelling or forthtelling. In other words, it would involve predictions or commands. But in Scripture prophets would give both of these things. The underlying principle is that they spoke direct revelation from God. Modern-day preachers simply proclaim the revelation that has already been given by God through prophets and is now preserved in Scripture. They help people to understand this revelation and apply it to their lives.

But other people believe that there are prophets today who actually predict the future. However, Scripture shows that God required 100% accuracy from His prophets. Any prophet who didn't meet this standard was a false prophet and was supposed to be put to death. Listen to what God said in Deuteronomy 18:20–22 says: “But the prophet who presumes to speak a message in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet must die. You may say to yourself, ‘How can we recognize a message the LORD has not spoken?’ When a prophet speaks in the LORD's name, and the message does not come true or is not fulfilled, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.”

So a true prophet of God always spoke messages that came true. And quite frankly no one who claims to be a prophet today can come close to matching that standard. I believe the New Testament teaches that the gift of prophecy and several related gifts would cease once the foundation of the church was laid in the first century. That's exactly the language Paul used in Ephesians 2:20 when he said that the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” The foundation of a building is laid at the beginning of the construction process. And once it's finished, it doesn't need to be laid again. The foundation of the church is made up of the apostles and prophets, and so they aren't around anymore today.

So the title for Psalm 51 says that David wrote it “when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.” There are two verbs in this statement; they're the words “came” and “gone.” But they came from two occurrences of the same Hebrew word. Now certainly these actions were not exactly the same. Nathan went to David, but David did not technically go to Bathsheba. Instead he summoned her to come to him. But once she arrived at his palace, he did go to her in the sense of pursuing her sexually. So David could have used different verbs here, but instead he used a wordplay to stress that Nathan's action was in response to his action. Nathan's confrontation was a consequence of David's sin.

So we've taken a brief look at David's terrible sin with Bathsheba. And it would be easy for us to say that we would never do such a thing. But we need to remember that David was a man after God's own heart.

He was one of the most godly kings to rule over Israel. If he could fall into sin, then so can we! Let's remember Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 10:12: "Whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall." Sin is always lurking and ready to pounce on us in a moment of weakness. It can start with something as simple as a look. Jesus warned us in Matthew 5:28 that "everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Even the desire to do something wrong is itself wrong. If David had said "no" to his evil desire, he would have saved himself a lot of trouble!

But thankfully God is still in control even when we sin. He's sovereign over all the evil deeds that take place in the world. And Romans 8:28 tells us that "all things work together for the good of those who love God." Certainly David loved God, and so we should consider how God brought good out of his terrible sin. And it's not too hard to figure that out. All we need to do is think about the next king of Israel, Solomon, and realize that Bathsheba was his mother! And so the line of Christ is traced through Bathsheba. Matthew began his gospel in chapter 1 by giving us a genealogy of Jesus, and in verse 6 he said that "David fathered Solomon by Uriah's wife." Matthew didn't mention very many women in this genealogy, but he mentioned Bathsheba, though not by name. He called her "Uriah's wife" to stress that God used David's sin with Bathsheba to bring about the birth of his Son and provide salvation for us.

Now that's certainly the most wonderful thing that God could have possibly done through David's sin with Bathsheba. But his sin also gave him the opportunity to write about how to deal with sin in our lives. That's what he did in Psalm 51! He showed us by example what a heart of confession looks like. You see, we're all sinners. We all fall short of the glory of God. Even as believers we still sin against him. Maybe we've never done anything as extreme as what David did. But every time we disobey God in thought or deed, we offend a holy God who hates sin and can't tolerate it. So whenever that happens, we need to confess our sin to him and seek forgiveness just like David did. In the coming weeks we're going to learn from David in Psalm 51 how to do that. Let's close in prayer and thank God for his word.