

## Mortal Combat: Jesus vs. Pride

### Psalm 51 (NIV)

For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. <sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. <sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. <sup>5</sup> Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. <sup>6</sup> Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. <sup>7</sup> Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. <sup>10</sup> Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. <sup>15</sup> Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. <sup>16</sup> You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. <sup>17</sup> My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. <sup>18</sup> May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem. <sup>19</sup> Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Tonight is the beginning of the church season of Lent, a time of battle against sin, death, and the devil. Looking at the Bible readings for tonight and for the Sundays in this church season of Lent, I was reminded that we are in constant spiritual battles, battles against our sinful nature, pride, misunderstanding, ignorance, culture, and death. I guess you could say that we are locked in a mortal combat, frail human beings battles for our lives, for our very souls. These battles that we will encounter through Lent will be brutal, unpleasant, hard to stomach – kind of like the video game *Mortal Kombat*, a fighting game which gained notoriety because of its violence and gore. This night is no exception.

On Ash Wednesday, many of us have ashes smeared on our foreheads or our hands. Why? Because back in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned, God told them, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:19) To say it more explicitly: “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) The ashes remind us that because of our sins we will die. That’s a pretty brutal, unpleasant, hard to stomach thought.

It’s a thought that King David had, as we heard in Psalm 51. “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (verses 3-5) And this is coming from a guy who is described as having a heart after the Lord’s! How can he say such awful things about himself?

In the introduction to Psalm 51, we are told the occasion of its writing. “For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.” (Psalm 51:title) In the Old Testament, there are many examples of David living a great faith in God, striving to follow God’s Word, trusting in him to win his battles, inquiring on him when deciding what to do, treating people with mercy. But aside of David and Goliath, the story of David and Bathsheba is probably the next best well known.

When the springtime of the year came for the kings to go out for battle, David stayed in his palace and didn’t go out with his army. One evening, David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of his palace. Not a great plan as he saw a beautiful woman bathing, lusted over her, and decided that he needed to have her, even though David was told that she was married to one of his elite soldiers, Uriah.

David got her pregnant but didn’t want to own up to his sin. He called Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, back from the frontlines and told him to go home and be with his wife. If Uriah did this, then the child could be passed off as his and Bathsheba’s and David could get away with his sin. But Uriah wouldn’t go home because he sympathized with his brothers-in-arms who were away from their homes, fighting and dying. So the next day David got Uriah drunk, hoping that he would stumble home to his wife. But Uriah still had enough of his faculties to hold to his word and not go home and be with his wife. To try to get himself out of this mess without owning up to what he had done, David sent sealed orders with Uriah telling the commander of the army to pull back when the fighting would become fierce and let Uriah die in battle. By his orders, Uriah was killed. David had murdered him. Instead of expressing sorrow, instead of repenting, owning his sin and turning from it, he took Bathsheba to be his wife and kept on going about his normal life.

Lust. Adultery. Deception. Drunkenness. Murder. These are some big sins. But David seemed unphased by what he had done until the prophet Nathan came and confronted him, pointed out just how awful his sins were, sins bad enough that he thought that he would die for them.

Do you think that the sins you have committed are bad enough that you should die for them? Have you done anything deserving of the death penalty? Well, I may have snuck a few looks at websites and videos that I shouldn't have, but I didn't do anything with it. Maybe I did have sex before marriage, but it was consensual, and, since I got married, I never stepped out on my spouse. Well, there was that one time with that site, with those texts, with those pics. Maybe I did cheat on my spouse, but I didn't murder anyone. I haven't been as bad as David. I don't really think that my sins of gossip, of a little bit of laziness, of hate, of worry, of "white" lies are all that bad.

Are you convinced that you haven't done anything meriting death? Are your sins too little to matter to God – especially when compared to other people? Do you believe that you deserve death because of your sins? Do you think that you have done anything bad enough to be condemned by God, cast away from his presence and have the Holy Spirit taken from you?

Whether or not you are convinced that your sins are bad enough for you to merit death, the fact is that you and I are dying. The only reason that people die is because of their sins. If our sins weren't that bad, then our bodies would not be degrading, failing, falling apart. If babies had no sin, they wouldn't die. If we had no sins, we wouldn't die.

But we protest: "My sins aren't that bad." If that's what is running through your mind right now, you are locked in mortal combat with your pride. You think that you are better than what you really are, that you are less evil than other people, that your sins, your imperfections, your mistakes, your indiscretions – they are not the kind of sin that deserve death, that deserve hell, that deserve to be cast away from God. But all sins merit death. That's what these ashes say today. This truth, realizing this, admitting this, this kills our pride. "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." (verse 17)

Like David, we have come here tonight because we know that we our sins are bad enough deserve death, to have God take his Holy Spirit from us – regardless of whether we think that they are big or small, monumental or insignificant. With these ashes, our pride in this mortal combat is killed. We have nothing to put before God to make him love us, to make him accept us.

So, what do we do now that our pride has been killed? We cry out like David: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." (verses 10-12) God, cleanse us. Make us whole.

Was David's prayer answered? It was. David cried out to be cleansed by God, and Nathan the prophet replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin." (2 Samuel 12:13) All of David's asks for cleansing, for forgiveness were given by God. And all of them were given to us as well. God had mercy on David and us according to his unfailing love. According to God's great compassion, he had indeed blotted out all David's transgressions as well as ours. God washed away all of David's and our iniquity. He cleansed us all from our sin. He made us whiter than snow. He created in us pure hearts and renewed a steadfast spirit within us, that we know for sure that our sins are paid for and taken away. He did this through the life and death of Jesus Christ, God our Savior.

In our mortal combat, God has killed our pride with pointing out that our sin – no matter how big or small we think it is – merits death. But he has washed us clean. He has blotted out all our iniquity. This restores to us, as well as to David, the joy of the victory we have in this mortal combat. This makes us want to share that victory with others, just like David did through this psalm. "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise." (verses 14-15)

We sing tonight not because we are dying due to our sin. We sing tonight because God has killed our pride, cleansed us from all our sin. We will live with him forever. God has given us the victory over our mortal combat with our pride. Amen.