

## All at C

**Intro:** The English language never fails to delight me with its rich variety of words, phrases and metaphors. Whatever the situation, it always has just the right word... or even the *mot juste*, since it never hesitates to steal a word or two from another language if it likes them!

But I think it might worry you if I began my sermon by saying I was all at sea. Hang on, that doesn't sound at all helpful! In a state of confusion and disorder? That's not what you want from a preacher! But, as you know by now, there are few things I like better than a good pun, and so you might quickly realise that I was not, in fact, all at sea, but all at C. I might even go so far as to suggest that to *unlock* the meaning of this psalm we need to be in the *key* of C... feel free to groan!

**Context:** Our first C is *context*. Whenever we come to any bible reading, before we even begin to think about what it might be saying to us in *our* circumstances, it's always good to understand the original context of the passage. Who is speaking, and to whom, and why?

In this case the compiler of the Psalms has made it easy for us, because we have a note before the psalm itself that tells us exactly what was going on. This is "A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba."

Though David is revered as Israel's greatest king, who established the lineage and dynasty into which Jesus would later be born, we know that he was far from perfect. *2 Samuel 11* tells us the story of perhaps the most ignominious chapter in his life, when he lusted after Bathsheba, got her pregnant and then plotted to ensure her husband was killed in battle so he could have her for himself. It's not quite the behaviour you expect from a hero! In the following chapter God sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke him for his sin.

I wonder what we would have done if we were in God's shoes at that point. I think I might have been like one of those writers you always used to see in films and TV programmes, ripping the paper out of the typewriter, crumpling it up and starting again on a fresh sheet... or, as we're more likely to do now, pressing the backspace key and seeing the words disappear one by one. But God knew that, despite his sin, David could still serve him and fulfil his purpose, depending on what he did next.

**Confession:** Which brings us to our second C, *confession*. God doesn't need David to tell him what he has done, he already knows... he knows *everything*, after all! What he wants is for David to recognise his sin, to own up to it and accept whatever consequences there might be... in other words, to confess.

I can imagine the scene playing out like a movie, with the detective interviewing the suspect, who he knows is guilty, but he doesn't yet have the proof he needs to arrest him. And so he says, "This will go a lot easier for you if you confess..."

And that is exactly what David does here. This psalm is his prayer to God, and he says to him, "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" 3-4.

It's important to note that he does not make any excuses or try to justify what he has done. He is *absolutely* in the wrong, and he knows it. That is the first lesson we need to learn about confession. A confession that says, "I have sinned, but..." is no good to God at all. To return to our suspect being questioned, God knows exactly what we have done and has all the evidence he needs to secure a conviction, he has no need to make any deals with us.

David *hopes for* forgiveness, but he does not *demand* it as his right. He does not suggest that his previous good character or record of service entitle him to any special consideration, but throws himself completely on God's mercy... or as he puts it, using another C, God's "unfailing love... [and] great *compassion*" v1.

There is no doubt that David deserved punishment for his sin, just as we do for ours... thank God, then, that he doesn't always give us what we deserve! We live in times where a sense of *entitlement* has become commonplace and we speak of our *rights*, but sometimes we need to be reminded that when we sin against God we have *no* rights and are entitled to nothing more than punishment. If God chooses to act otherwise it is because of his compassion, not our merit.

**Contrition:** Our next C reminds us that confession is more than just a recitation of our deeds. I'm sure you are familiar with the words of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*, "A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti." It's not a *confession* but a boast, because it completely lacks any element of *contrition*. Lecter acknowledges what he has done, but he is certainly not *sorry* for it.

I went to bed last night, as I usually do on a Saturday if I'm preaching the following morning, with this sermon more or less fully formed in my mind. It just lacked one thing, but, as I sat on my bed at half past three this morning after a trip to the toilet, it came to me... a song! In the words of Elton John, "Sorry seems to be the hardest word."

David pleads, "Create in me a pure heart, O God" v10 and says, "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" v17. Crucially, he not only knows what he has done, he knows it is *wrong* and is *sorry* for it. Before there can be forgiveness there must first be *repentance*. But don't expect it to be easy. Our fragile egos or a misplaced sense of entitlement can make "sorry" a very hard word indeed to say!

If, like me, you grew up with brothers or sisters, I'm sure you had your share of fights with them. Sometimes a fight would be brought to an end by a parent and you would be made to say you were sorry, perhaps through gritted teeth... and then maybe even to "say it again like you mean it"!

True confession is always accompanied by contrition. David comes to God and says, "I have wronged you and I'm sorry", and once again he gives us a pattern to follow when *we* sin.

**Cleansing:** Our final C follows on from confession and contrition, and is *cleansing*. David knows exactly what he wants from God, and asks him, "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" v2. Again, he pleads with God, "Cleans me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" v7. It almost sounds like an advert for the latest washing powder, but what soiled David was not just on the outside, but in his heart... that is what sin does.

Remember, though, that God is not *obliged* to give him what he asks, but he grants it in his *compassion*. David is effectively saying to God, "I have let you down and am no longer fit to serve you, but I repent and know that you can restore me and make me fit to serve again, if you will."

I remember many years ago moving house, and in the garden shed of the new house I found an old toolbox that had been left behind, with a handful of tools inside. They were dirty and rusty and, at first glance, completely useless. The obvious thing to do would have been to just throw them away. But I knew that with a little bit of work and effort (well, quite a lot of effort, actually!) I could sand off the rust and clean off the dirt and make them useful again.

When God looked at David he saw a servant, or a tool if you like, that was broken and dirty, but *not* useless. He heard David's confession, and saw in his heart that he was contrite, and so, rather than discarding him, or throwing him on the scrap heap, he cleansed him and restored him. He put him back in the toolbox and gave him another chance to serve him and fulfil his destiny, so that some thousand or so years later Jesus might continue his lineage.

God could still see in David the potential to be restored and used, and helped him to fulfil that potential. It was not something David could do for himself, any more than the tools in my shed could clean themselves, but something only God could do for him, and it was a process that began with David's confession and contrition.

**Conclusion:** David has a position of high honour in the history of God's people, not because he was any better than anyone else, but because when he sinned he confessed and was contrite, and so God cleansed and restored him. But his story would have had a very different ending had he not confessed. Our stories are still being written, and we can still influence how they will end. When you sin (and trust me, that is "when" and not "if!"), confess your sin to God with a contrite heart, seek the cleansing only he can give, and rejoice in his love and forgiveness!