

## **Psalm 51:12-15 - “Rejoicing in Repentance”**

Ash Wednesday 2024

It may seem a bit strange on Ash Wednesday, after many of us put ashes on our foreheads and heard the words, “*you are dust, and to dust you shall return*” (Genesis 3:19), to then sing in the sermon hymn “rejoice with exultation springing.” The season of Lent is one of repentance over sin. Our alleluias during the service are buried, awaiting their resurrection on Easter Sunday. That’s when our songs of praise will proclaim the glorious news that Christ has risen, He has risen, indeed, in victory over our sins, death and all the forces of evil that held us in bondage! So isn’t it premature to be rejoicing with exultation in the midst of our repentance on this first day of Lent?

The truth is, the hymn “Dear Christians One and All Rejoice” is very appropriate for Lent, for the kind of joy that Martin Luther has us sing about in this hymn is not to be found apart from repentance. But where repentance is taking place, there is also joy. Jesus said “*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*” (Luke 15:7), referring to the self-righteous who see no need to repent. But the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents is the joy that David spoke of when he prayed in Psalm 51, “*Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit*” (v. 12).

It’s this type of joy that causes David to confess, “*Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation; and my tongue will sing aloud of Your righteousness*” (Psalm 51:14). Where there is repentance, there is the joy of God’s forgiveness. Where there is repentance there is the declaration of what God has done to set us free from our sins.

There are only two outcomes when it comes to sin. Either a sinner dies **in** their sin, or a sinner dies **to** their sin. To die **in** sin is hell. To die **to** sin is heaven. There are no other options.

If we as sinners refuse to repent of all our sins, we are saying to God that we don’t want the forgiveness that Jesus earned for us on the cross through His damning death. If we want to hang on to our sins, we will in the end pay for them through a damning death. And since we are not divine in nature, we will never be able to rise in victory over our sins. Eternal death and separation from God and all His good gifts will be our eternal future.

Remember when David committed adultery with Bathsheba and tried to hid his actions by making sure that Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, was killed in the battle field. In his unrepentant state, David was headed to hell in a hand basket. But He was not dead yet. So God pursues David through His prophet, Nathan. When Nathan makes it clear to David that his sins were not hidden from God, our just judge who must punish sin, David, by the grace of God, came to his sanctified senses and repents of his sins.

The next words out of Nathan's mouth is not what David should do to make amends for his sinful actions. Instead, Nathan announces the good news, "*The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die*" (2 Samuel 12:13). All David's sins and ours are erased because of what God's Son and David's later son, Jesus Christ, would do for all mankind. Jesus would die for the sins of the world; past, present and future. When God, working through His words of Law and Gospel, judgement and forgiveness, enables us to repent of our sins, we immediately receive God's forgiveness.

Jesus does for us today, what He did for David in his day. He takes away our sins. The main focus of Lent is not on our giving something up to show our repentance, it's on what Jesus gave up on the cross so that we can be forgiven. His death in payment for our sins and His resurrection victory over our sins is the Gospel and the power of God to enable us to repent of our sins and immediately rejoice in His forgiveness.

Lent reminds us that Jesus did not choose the easy part. "*For the joy that was set before Him [He] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*" (Hebrews 12:2). God assures us in 1 Peter 1:18-19, "*You were ransomed [saved, rescued, delivered] from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*"

It's this Good News that inspired Luther to write in his explanation to the Second Article of the Apostle's Creed, what we can all say as God's baptized believing Christians, that Jesus Christ "has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He has risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true "

"This is most certainly true," because it's clearly promised by God in His Word. God's promise of salvation through Jesus Christ is "*the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*" (Romans 1:16). Working through this promise, the Holy Spirit enables us to repent of our sins and immediately rejoice in God's forgiveness.

Dear Christians one and all rejoice, for in giving you Jesus, God gives you His "dearest treasure." In repentance and faith we return to this treasure this Ash Wednesday, for God does not leave us in dust and ashes. His right hand, the hand of power, nailed to a cross, won the victory for us. Through Baptism God has put a cross of water on our foreheads which washes away the grimy ashes of our sins which Jesus paid for through His death. And as often as you eat His body and drink His blood, you proclaim His death until He comes. In His death you have life in His name.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.