

The old saying, 'Confession is good for the soul', in a worldly sense means that when people admit to something they feel guilty about, it helps them to feel better in themselves. It is often thought that the phrase is a Bible verse, which is not the case. Biblically speaking, however, the saying is absolutely true, but in a far deeper way. "*Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.*" (Prov 28:13) Therefore confession is another essential element in repentance and a vital part of the process of our conversion.

The words 'confession/confess/confessed' occur 48 times in the ESV Bible, indicating that it is a significant matter. Also, the words are used in a variety of ways. Sometimes they are used in the context of confession to God or to other people; either privately or publicly; of a particular sin or of sinfulness generally. Confession can be silent or vocal, or can be made by an individual or a group of people. On occasion, confession is used, not only as an acknowledgement of guilt, but as a declaration of faith in God. Jesus used the word to express the idea of commitment: "*Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.*" (Matt 10:32)

In my previous article, I said that the process of conversion consists of two major parts – repentance and faith – and that confession is needed in both. In this article, however, I am going to limit my remarks to confession of sin as an ingredient in repentance, as clearly expressed in Psalm 38:18 – "*I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.*" As we resort to confession in this sense, we are making the best possible use of the conviction and contrition engendered in our minds and hearts by the Holy Spirit.

That then raises an important question. Why does God require us to confess our sins to Him? After all is said and done, our confession is not going to tell Him anything He does not know already! He has always known how sinful we are. He is fully aware of the awful catalogue of our iniquities. He also knows when we are truly sorry for our sins, for "*no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*" (Heb 4:13). In fact, God knows more about our sinfulness than we shall ever know! It is the conclusion that David was inspired to come to: "*O God, you know my folly, the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.*" (Psalm 69:5) So, since all that is true, why does God require us to confess? I want to suggest four reasons...

### **1. CONFESSION ENABLES US TO ACKNOWLEDGE REALITY**

I accept that David's confession, recorded in Psalm 51, was not in the context of his coming to the Lord for the first time, as in conversion. There are, however, some parallels to our being converted, from which we can learn. Immediately after David became aware that Bathsheba was pregnant, resulting from his adultery with her, he embarked on an iniquitous 'cover up' strategy! He tried to 'get away with it' by deceiving Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, and then arranging for him to be killed in battle. Then, after a brief time of mourning by Bathsheba, David married her, obviously hoping that everyone would think the baby to be born was legitimate! (2 Sam 11) David deliberately attempted to hide his sin and go on living in the pretence that nothing untoward had happened.

It was not until the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront David that he then confessed, "*I have sinned against the LORD.*" (2 Sam 12:13) In effect, David's confession blew away all the pretence and helped him to face up to the awful reality of his wickedness. I am thinking it is rather like those occasions when we find ourselves expressing our grief to another person. It is often said that, hearing our own voice telling someone else how awful we feel, somehow it 'brings it all home to us.' I think that is true when it comes to grieving over our sin. One of the most fundamental mistakes anyone can make is to pretend that he or she is not a sinful sinner: "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*" (1 John 1:8). The right, and by far the best thing to do, is to admit to ourselves our sinfulness in God's sight and then confess it to Him. Hearing ourselves in confession to God helps us to face up to the reality of our true condition.

### **2. CONFESSION CAUSES US TO RECALL OUR HISTORY**

If we are going to confess sin we obviously have to know what sin we are going to confess! Going back to King David, Nathan made his sin very clear and plain to him (2 Sam 12:9). There was no question as to what David needed to confess. It is very interesting to note, however, that in his recorded confession of Psalm 51, David, as well as thinking of his immediate wickedness, went right back to the very start of his life. He said "*Behold*" – that is, consider this fact carefully, don't miss this vital truth – that "*I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.*" (Ps 51:5). He was admitting that he had been a sinner all along and not been a 'saint' until he committed adultery!

David was in effect expressing the same truth that Paul was inspired to write of many years later: "*sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*" (Rom 5:12). So when we realise we need the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, we own up to the fact that it is because we are sinners at heart and always have been. As in the parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector, whose confession was simply included in his plea, "*God be merciful to me a sinner!*" (Luke 18:13). That simple admission covered all his life up to that point in time!

Scripture also records people confessing sins more specifically. The Prodigal Son is pictured as admitting to his father, "*I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*" (Luke 15:21). He confessed his overall sinfulness against God and then added his more particular sins against his father, which included taking and squandering his father's wealth in immoral living.

We have too the example of Zacchaeus who, after having the Lord Jesus in his house, declared “*If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.*” (Luke 19:8) The fact is that the tax collectors of his day made their living by over-charging people. Zacchaeus would have been a very exceptional tax collector if he had never defrauded anyone! Having found himself in the presence of the holy Son of God, the particular sin of exploitation lay heavily on Zacchaeus’ mind and heart, so he confessed it. Even so, in all these examples, the confessions are given in just a few words. There is clearly no need for someone in coming to Christ for salvation to try to dredge up from their memory all the sins they have ever committed and confess them. In any case, that would be utterly impossible! But confession does cause us to recognise our fallen state and think back over our sinful behaviour.

### **3. CONFESSION AIDS US ON OUR ROUTE TO RECOVERY**

At the start of this article I included a verse from Proverbs: “*Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.*” (Prov 28:13). The implication is that if we will not acknowledge that we are sinners, we are not going to be saved. “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Tim 1:15). Jesus Himself said, “*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*” (Luke 5:32). Knowing we are sinners and being unreservedly willing to confess the fact is a vital qualification needed for being saved! Jesus came to “*seek and to save the lost*” (Luke 19:10), and confession of our lost state is a significant step along the narrow way that leads to eternal life.

The most sensible thing to do when convicted of sin, therefore, is to confess it. David, in Psalm 32, described living under the burden of conviction: “*day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*” (Ps 32:3,4) He felt bowed down with the weight of his sins and his arid state of soul. But then, he said, “*I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*” (Ps 32:4,5). In those circumstances the most rational thing he could do was to confess his sin, otherwise he would have gone on toiling under the conviction and weight of them.

One of the great promises of God is that “*If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” (1 John 1:9). If you are labouring under a burden of conviction, turn to the Saviour now; confess your sin to Him and ask for His forgiving mercy. He will not disappoint you!

### **4. CONFESSION HELPS US TO HONOUR GOD’S SOVERIGNTY**

This is the most important aspect of confession. It helps us to get a better perspective on who and how great God is. King David, having confessed that “*Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight*”, then tells us he said, “*so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgement.*” (Ps 51:4) This verse teaches us that the most important aspect of David’s confession was in vindicating God’s justice. David was acknowledging that God was fully justified in condemning his crimes; that the verdict issued against him was fully deserved; that God was entirely blameless in dealing with him as a guilty sinner. David’s confession was in effect a declaration that God, as the sovereign judge, had every right to pronounce him a guilty transgressor and punish him accordingly.

We find a similar situation when the sin of Achan was being exposed following the defeat of the Israelites at Ai (Joshua 7). The people had been told to dedicate the spoils from the fall of Jericho entirely to the Lord. Achan, however, took some articles for himself and buried them in the ground under his tent. This was a further example of trying to hide sin and pretend that it had not been committed. When Achan’s disobedience was brought to light, however, Joshua told him to say to him “*give glory to the Lord God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.*” (Josh 7:19,20) The obvious point is that Achan’s confession would be honouring God, who had revealed the means of discovering his sin. Achan, and the people of Israel, were being taught a graphic lesson in the matter of deception. People can only deceive themselves if they think they can deceive the sovereign God by trying to hide their disobedience from him: “*You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.*” (Ps 90:8) So Joshua demanded that Achan gave honour and glory to God for knowing all about his wickedness and exposing it.

As with everything else about God, including the matter of judgement, “*his work is perfect and all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.*” (Deut 32:4) Abraham had come to the same conclusion in saying “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*” (Gen 18:25) Nehemiah honoured God in acknowledging the justice of his judgement in exiling the people of Judah and Jerusalem to Babylon because of their sins. In his confession to God he stated, “*you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.*” (Neh 9:33).

Therefore, the only right and sensible thing to do, when convicted of sin, is frankly to confess it to God, for by doing so we give Him honour and acknowledge His sovereign right to be our judge.

If you have never become a Christian, but are aware of your sinfulness, then bow before the Lord even now in confession and embrace Him as your Saviour, “*because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*” (Rom 10:9,13)

If you are a Christian but are burdened with some sin, do not hesitate to turn to the Lord again in confession, fully relying on words of Psalm 86:5 – “*For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.*”

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