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—PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, Senior Minister,
Tenth Presbyterian Church

“*Whiter Than Snow* is convicting and encouraging, cutting and healing. Paul Tripp delves into the misery of sin and the goodness of grace with insight and inspiration. This book wonderfully blessed me, and I pray for its widest possible reading.”

—DANIEL L. AKIN, President; Professor of Preaching
and Theology,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

whiter than snow

meditations on sin and mercy

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PAUL DAVID TRIPP

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Whiter Than Snow: Meditations on Sin and Mercy

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Preface

Once a Week with Mercy

It all started with a sleepless night, a condition that many of us can relate to. But it explodes into a story of lust, adultery, pregnancy, deception, and murder. If the story of David and Bathsheba were a television drama, you wouldn't watch it, or a paperback, you wouldn't choose to buy it. Yet, the terrible details of this ugly story splash across the pages of that religious book you and I call the Bible. Why would God preserve such a dark story? Who is the sex and blood of this story going to help anyway?

These are good questions to ask and worthy of answers. First, the New Testament (1 Corinthians 10) tells us that these things were written for our example and our instruction so that we would not fall into the same errors as God's people of old. Yes, this story is in the Bible because it is meant to be instructive. The details are not there to titillate you, but to help you understand things you need to understand about yourself, God, life in a fallen world, the nature of sin, and the power of God's transforming grace. Second, the Bible tells us that the people in this story were people just like us. As you read through the Bible, you know that its history is not filled with accounts of noble people who always did the right thing. No, the characters of the Bible, even the ones that we would tend to think of as heroes, were broken and flawed people. They, like us, were all sinners and, like us, all needed to be rescued by God's grace. "Rescued from what?" you might ask. Just like us, they needed to be rescued from themselves.

Think about David, whose story of temptation and sin is the backdrop of the psalm that provides the content for these meditations. When you read about all the war between nations and bloody power struggles that surrounded David's reign, it would be tempting to think that David's biggest enemy was the warring nation around

him. But what this story demonstrates is that David carried his most powerful enemy around with him. That enemy lived inside of him. That enemy lives inside us as well. That enemy is called sin.

It would also be tempting to think that the greatest victory in David's life was his victory over the Philistines with their mighty Goliath. Yet this story, and the psalm that goes with it, points us to the fact that the greatest victory in David's life was not a victory of war but a victory of grace. It is amazing to watch this hardened adulterer and murderer brought to confession and repentance by the power of God's grace. And it is incredible that he does not lose his throne and, in fact, becomes a man who is known as "a man after God's own heart"! The greatest victory in David's life was not a victory of David's at all, but, rather, God's victory of grace over the sin that had captivated David's heart.

You'll never get David's story or the expansive helpfulness of Psalm 51 if you stand apart from the story and say to yourself, "I am so glad that I am not like David!" To say that completely misses the point. This story is in the Bible precisely because David's story *is* your story. No, I don't mean that you are an adulterer and a murderer. What I mean is that, like David, you are a sinner. There are times when you let yourself be ruled by your self-focused desires rather than by God's clear commands. There are times when you love something in the creation more than you love the Creator. There are times when you willingly step over God's boundaries in pursuit of what you want. There are times when your little kingdom of one means more to you than his transcendent kingdom of glory. There are times when you work hard to deny what you have done or to cover your tracks in fear of being caught.

David's story is our story, so Psalm 51 is our psalm as well. This psalm of moral failure, personal awareness, grief, confession, repentance, commitment, and hope wraps its arms around the experience of each one of us. These themes are in each of our lives. But the dominant theme of Psalm 51 is not sin. The dominant theme of Psalm 51 is grace. There would be no Psalm 51 if a God of boundless love hadn't sent Nathan to David as an instrument of rescuing mercy and restoring grace.

Psalm 51 is about how God meets us in our moments of deepest

failure and transforms us by his grace. It is about how broken sinners can be brutally honest with God and yet stand before him without fear. All of the themes of sin, grace, and redemption are compacted into this powerful little psalm.

Come and look at yourself in the mirror of Psalm 51. Stop and look at the picture of your Lord that is painted by the words of this psalm. Let your ears hear the music of grace that is so beautifully played here. Take just one day a week and let yourself be transformed by the mercy that is not only the hope of this psalm but of your life and mine as well. And take time each week to celebrate the grace that is the greatest victory in your life as well.

Permit me to introduce the tool that you have in your hands. This is not the classic devotional that you are probably used to. Generally, those devotionals do a careful exegesis of a passage of the Bible and then draw out personal applications for you. This set of biblical meditations was put together in a very different way. Let me use a musical illustration. I have approached Psalm 51 like a piece of sheet music. The key signature, the time signature, the notes, and the dynamic markings that are on the page are there because that is precisely what the Great Composer designed to be there. This devotional book is not my attempt to help you to understand each note on the page. No, this book is more like jazz. While endeavoring to stay inside God's key signature and time signature, I have attempted to introduce to you creative, practical, everyday-life riffs on the themes that make up the music of grace of this wonderful psalm.

Think about it. This is exactly how you live your life as a Christian. God hasn't given you in the Bible the exact notes to play in every situation of your life. No, in the Bible, he gives you a divinely inspired musical structure (the history, command, principles, and perspectives that flow out of the narrative of Scripture) and invites you to improvise harmoniously with him. In this way, the life of a believer is more like jazz than it is like playing off sheet music. So, what you have in your hands is devotional jazz, designed to help you improvise more harmoniously with the Great Composer.

Because this psalm speaks into a dark moment of a child of God in the middle of the difficulties and temptations of life in a fallen world, it is brimming with themes that touch all of our lives. But

preface

the thing that is most engaging and exciting about this psalm is that no psalm plays the notes of God's grace better. The music of grace is meant to score the life of every believer. May it be so for you, and may this book contribute to making sweet improvisational music with your Redeemer right where you live every day.

The Story

The Story of David and Bathsheba

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house. And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab was doing and how the people were doing and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." And Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. And David invited

him, and he ate in his presence and drank, so that he made him drunk. And in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die." And as Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant men. And the men of the city came out and fought with Joab, and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite also died. Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting. And he instructed the messenger, "When you have finished telling all the news about the fighting to the king, then, if the king's anger rises, and if he says to you, 'Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? Who killed Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman cast an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?' then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.'"

So the messenger went and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. The messenger said to David, "The men gained an advantage over us and came out against us in the field, but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall. Some of the king's servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also." David said to the messenger, "Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it.' And encourage him."

When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms,

and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'" David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die."

— 2 SAMUEL 11:1–12:13

The Story of David and God

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

the story

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;
then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

—PSALM 51

Meditations

1 | Mercy Me: Psalm 51 and Everyday Life

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

PSALM 51:1

It was one of those moments you want to take back. It was one of those times when you go where your desires and emotions are leading you. It was one of those situations when you know you should stop or walk away but feel you can't. And it was one of those moments when afterward you are confronted with the sin that still lives inside of you. Yes, it was one of those moments.

It wasn't a big deal in one way. Just a small conversation that had turned a bit ugly. It wasn't a dramatic life-altering moment. It was in the privacy of my home with one of my family members. But maybe that's the point. Perhaps it's very important because that's where I live every day. You see, you and I don't live in a series of big, dramatic moments. We don't careen from big decision to big decision. We all live in an endless series of little moments. The character of a life isn't set in ten big moments. The character of a life is set in ten thousand little moments of everyday life. It's the themes of struggles that emerge from those little moments that reveal what's really going on in our hearts.

So, I knew I couldn't back away from this little moment. I knew I had to own my sin. The minute I thought this, an inner struggle began. "I wasn't the only one at fault. If he hadn't said what he said, I wouldn't have become angry. I was actually pretty patient for much of the conversation." These were some of the arguments I was giving myself.

Isn't this interesting. Rather than appealing to the mercy of the Lord in the face of my sin, what I actually do instead is function as

my own defense lawyer and present a list of arguments for my own righteousness. The theology behind the defense is that my greatest problem is outside of me, not inside of me. In so arguing, I'm telling myself that I don't really need to be rescued by the Lord's mercy. No, I'm telling myself that what I need to be rescued from is that sinner in the room who caused me to respond as I did.

Here's the point. Before you can ever make a clean and un-amended confession of your sin, you have to first begin by confessing your righteousness. It's not just your sin that separates you from God; your righteousness does as well. Because, when you are convinced you are righteous, you don't seek the forgiving, rescuing, and restoring mercy that can be found only in Jesus Christ.

What's actually true is that when I come to the Lord after I've blown it, I've only one argument to make. It's not the argument of the difficulty of the environment that I am in. It's not the argument of the difficult people that I'm near. It's not the argument of good intentions that were thwarted in some way. No, I have only one argument. It's right there in the first verse of Psalm 51, as David confesses his sin with Bathsheba. I come to the Lord with only one appeal, his mercy. I've no other defense. I've no other standing. I've no other hope. I can't escape the reality of my biggest problem—me! So I appeal to the one thing in my life that's sure and will never fail. I appeal to the one thing that guaranteed not only my acceptance with God, but the hope of new beginnings and fresh starts. I appeal on the basis of the greatest gift I ever have or ever will be given. I leave the courtroom of my own defense, I come out of hiding, and I admit who I am. But I'm not afraid, because I've been personally and eternally blessed. Because of what Jesus did, God looks on me with mercy. It's my only appeal; it's the source of my hope; it's my life. Mercy, mercy me!

Take a Moment

1. When you go to God in prayer, do you go as your own defense lawyer or as the guilty party (see Luke 18:9–14)? Do you tend to stack up arguments for your acceptability before God?
2. If you more quickly rested in God's mercy and, because of this, more readily admitted your sin, what practical changes in your life would result?

2 | On Being Sustained

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

PSALM 51:12

It's a curious phrase: "and uphold me with a willing spirit." What does it mean to be upheld with a willing spirit? What is it that David prays for here and how does it fit with the confession that makes up the rest of this remarkable psalm?

Human beings are simply not self-sustaining, and we were never designed to live as if we are. The doctrine of creation confronts us with the reality that we are neither physically or spiritually self-sustaining. We were created to be dependent. Dependency is not therefore a sign of weakness. Rather it is a universal indicator of our humanity. Humans are dependent beings. Yet we do not like to be dependent. It is the legacy of our fallenness to do everything we can to conceptually and functionally repudiate the doctrine of human dependency.

So, all fallen human beings tend to buy into two attractive but dangerous lies. These are the lies that were on the tongue of the serpent on that fateful day of manipulation and disobedience in the garden. The first lie is the lie of autonomy, which tells me that I am an independent human being with the right to invest my life however I choose. The second lie is the lie of self-sufficiency, which declares that I have everything I need within myself to be what I am supposed to be and do what I am supposed to do. Because we do not want to live for God, but for ourselves, we are easily seduced, at the mundane, everyday level, by these lies.

But David now has his eyes open. He sees the lies for what they are. He had wanted his own way. He had opted for independence. He had stepped outside of God's boundaries. He had used his power in the service of his own kingdom rather than God's. And it had all

been exposed and came crashing down around his feet. David had tried the path of independent self-sustenance. Psalm 51 is his prayer of repentance.

God has promised to sustain us by his grace. He has promised us the sustaining grace of forgiveness, so that we can stand before him unafraid. He has promised the sustaining grace of enablement, giving us the strength to do what he calls us to do. He has promised us the sustaining grace of protection, delivering us from evil. He has promised us the sustaining grace of wisdom, protecting us from our own foolishness. He has promised us the sustaining grace of perseverance, keeping us until the final enemy has been defeated. He has promised the sustaining grace of eternity, giving us the hope of a day when the struggle will be over.

It is a willing heart that causes us to seek the grace that has been promised. When we turn from our own way and recognize our inability to live his way, we begin to seek the full range of resources that he has promised us in his Son. Grace is for the willing and we only become willing when we confess not only the gravity of our sin, but our inability to deliver ourselves from it. Then our willingness opens to us all the sustenance of heart that can only be found in the Son.

Take a Moment

1. Where in your life have you opted for independence? In what ways are you not taking advantage of God's resources of help?
2. In what places do you need to rely more on the grace of Christ and the resources of help he has placed in your life (receiving loving confrontation well, seeking more honest fellowship in the body of Christ, more willingness to confess need to God and others)?

3 | Something in My Hands I Bring

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

PSALM 51:17

God doesn't want you to come to Him empty-handed.
No, you can't come to Him full of yourself,
And you can't come to Him based on your track record
And you can't use your performance as a recommendation.
No, you can't come to Him based on your family,
Your personality,
Your education,
Your position in life,
The successes you've had,
The possessions you've accumulated,
Or the human acceptance you've gained.
But God requires you to come with your hands full.
He requires you to bring to Him the sweetest of sacrifices,
The sacrifice of words,
He calls you to bring Hosea's offering.
"Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God.
Your sins have been your downfall!
Take words with you
And return to the LORD.
Say to Him
'Forgive all our sins
And receive us graciously,
That we may offer our lips as the sacrifice of bulls.'"¹
God doesn't want you to come to him empty-handed.
He asks of you a sacrifice.
Not a grain offering,
Not a lamb or a bull.

¹Quotes in "Something in My Hands I Bring" are from Hosea 14:1-3 (AT).

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No, that requirement has been satisfied
By the blood of the Lamb.
Yet God asks of you a sacrifice
It is the offering of words,
Words of humility,
Words of honesty,
Words of moral courage,
Words of moral candor,
Words that could only be spoken,
By one who rests in grace.
Words of confession are what you must bring.
Place words,
Free of negotiation or excuse,
On His altar of grace,
And receive forgiveness and cleansing.
Uncover your heart,
Exposed by words, and say:
“We will never again say, ‘Our gods’
To what our own hands have made,
For in You the fatherless find compassion.”
What David willingly did He requires of you,
Come with words,
It is the way of grace,
It is the way of freedom,
It is the way to God.

Take a Moment

1. What “word” sacrifice is God calling you to bring to him? Where do you need to seek the grace of forgiveness?
2. Is there a place where you are saying “our gods” to what your hands have made? What thing(s) in the creation tend to compete in your heart with the place that the Creator alone should occupy (a possession, position, person, circumstance, relationship, personal dream)?

4 | Big Grace

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

PSALM 51:5

What a devastating and hard-to-swallow description! Maybe you had it happen to you? A friend tells you he wants to talk to you, and when you get together, you realize that what he really wanted to do was confront you. You're not really excited about being told bad things about yourself, but this is your friend, so you're willing to listen. As he begins to lay out his concerns, you begin to feel pain inside. You can't believe what you're being told about yourself. Silently and inwardly you begin to rise to your own defense. You marshal arguments that you're a better person than the one being described. You want to believe that what you're hearing is a distortion, lacking in accuracy and love, but you know you can't. You're devastated because deep down you know it's true. Deep down you know that God has brought this person your way. Deep down you know what you're being required to consider is an accurate description of yourself.

Such a description is found in Genesis 6:5, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." What a devastating description! It's hard to swallow, isn't it? You want to think that this biblical description is of the people who are more sinful sinners than you and I are. But this verse is not describing a super-sinner class. No, it's a mirror into which every human being is meant to look and see himself. It is capturing in a few powerful words what theologians call "total depravity." Now, total depravity doesn't mean that as sinners we are as bad as we could possibly be. No, what it actually means is that sin reaches to every aspect of our

personhood. Its damage of us is total. Physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, motivationally, socially, we have been damaged by sin. Its ravages are inescapable and comprehensive. No one has dodged its scourge, and no one has been partially affected. We are all sinners. It reaches to every aspect of what makes us *us*. Sadly, when each of us looks into the mirror of Genesis 6:5, we see an accurate description of ourselves.

Now, you have to ask yourself: Why is Genesis 6:5 so hard to accept? Why do we spontaneously rise to our own defense? Why are you and I devastated when our weakness, sin, and failure are pointed out? Why do we find confrontation and rebuke painful even when they are done in love? Why do we want to believe that we are in the good class of sinners? Why do we want to believe that we are deprived, but not depraved? Or that we are depraved, but not totally? Why do we find comfort in pointing to people who appear to be worse sinners than we are? Why do we make up self-atoning revisions of our own history? Why do we erect self-justifying arguments for what we have said or done? Why do we turn the tables when someone points out a wrong, making sure that they know that we know that we're not the only sinner in the room? Why do we line up all the good things we've done as a counter-balance for the wrong that is being highlighted? Why is this all so hard to accept?

There's only one answer to all of these questions. There's only one conclusion that fits. We find this all so hard to accept because we studiously hold onto the possibility that we're more righteous than the Bible describes us to be. When we look into the mirror of self-appraisal, the person we tend to see is a person who is more righteous than any of us actually is!

We were at the end of a wonderful service at Tenth Presbyterian Church that had been punctuated by a powerful sermon from the Ten Commandments. I immediately turned to my wife at the end of the service and said, "I am so glad our children were here to hear that sermon!" She didn't even have to say anything to me. She simply gave me that look. You know, the one that says, "I can't believe you are actually saying what you are saying." Immediately I felt embarrassed and grieved. It had happened to me so subtly and quickly. I had placed myself outside of the circle of the sermon's diagnosis. I had accepted

the fact that whatever Exodus and Phil Ryken were describing did not include me. And I was glad that the people in my family who really needed the diagnosis had been in attendance.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1–2). If the Bible’s description is accurate, then God’s grace is our only hope. Thank God that he has given us big grace! Each one of us needs grace that’s not only big enough to forgive our sin, but also powerful enough to free us from the self-atoning prison of our own righteousness. We’re not only held captive by our sin, but also by the delusion of our righteousness. Resting in God’s grace isn’t just about confessing your sin; it’s about forsaking your righteousness as well. So we all need the big grace that’s found only in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must all, with humility, say to the God of big grace, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. . . . Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” (Psalm 51:5, 2). And then rest in his righteousness alone.

Take a Moment

1. Is there a possibility that you are not resting in the righteousness you have been given in Christ because you are seeing yourself as more righteous than you actually are? Where in your life do you tend to take too much pride in your wisdom, maturity, and performance rather than resting in the big grace you have found in Jesus?
2. How do you typically respond when personal sin, weakness, failure, foolishness, or immaturity is pointed out to you? Where do you tend to erect self-justifying arguments for your words or behavior?