

A PSALM OF FORGIVENESS

Psalm 32

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Tonight we're in Psalm 32. This is one of the more familiar of the psalms. We're going to have the chance to look at it together. It's a relatively short psalm—only eleven verses. I've called this psalm "A Psalm of Forgiveness." There are in the Psalter, out of the 150 psalms, 7 psalms in particular that are called penitential psalms. Or hymns of the penitent ones. Hymns in which the author is saying, "O God, I need forgiveness." Out of those 7 psalms, 5 of them are written by David and 2 we do not know who the authors are. Just in case you ever need a penitential psalm. I realized that probably nobody here has any need for a penitential psalm. But if in that rare chance you ever need a penitential psalm then let me again give them to you. Psalm 6 is the first of the penitential psalms. Psalm 32 is the second penitential psalm. The third penitential psalm is Psalm 38. Psalm 51 is the fourth penitential psalm. It's the center and, well, might it be the center of the seven because Psalm 51 is obviously the most famous of the penitential psalms. It is written by David as he asked for forgiveness for his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. Then the last three are Psalm 102, Psalm 130, Psalm 143. But you can sort of, when you need a penitential psalm, just go through those seven. One will fit the particular thing you need to pray about. Psalm 32 has certainly been an inspiration and encouragement in my own life. Of those I should mention that 5 of those psalms are Davidic. Only Psalms 102 and 130 were not authored by David or ascribed to him.

Augustine used these psalms in a particular way near the end of his life. When he saw that the time was coming he had these psalms written on his bedroom walls. As he turned and tossed on his pillow he could look at these words coming to him and have them upon his heart and his

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breathing in and his breathing out. Psalm 32 in fact was Augustine's very favorite psalm. He had been a great, a flagrant, sinner prior to his conversion.

It's interesting as you read the New Testament and see the New Testament use of Old Testament psalms—and the New Testament does make extensive use of the Psalter—Jesus doesn't make any use of the penitential psalms. I don't recall a quote from the lips of Jesus from the penitential psalms. He didn't need them.

Some of the psalms that we don't ever use ourselves He quoted. Like Psalm 2 and Psalm 22 which especially refer to Him were very much on His heart and lips. But the penitential psalms certainly not.

We've noticed that sometimes there's a Hebrew term that is in the superscription over the psalms. It is thought that term meant something to the musicians about the type of melody that was to be used. Or the pace of the psalm, how it was to be sung. The root in the Hebrew for *maskil* is closely associated to another word, which means "didactic" or "teaching." Some have suggested that when a psalm is called a *maskil* it is meant to indicate that this psalm is especially to be used in an instructive way for God's people. When you look at this psalm which is a psalm of thanksgiving for forgiveness it is meant to have doctrinal meaning because out of David's own experience of forgiveness, we're to understand that God treats us in similar fashion.

One other introductory thing I'll tell you about this psalm is we're not told within the psalm itself what particular moment in David's life the psalm might be pointing to. The guess of many over the years—the typically historical interpretation of this psalm is that it follows the murder of Uriah and the affair with Bathsheba and the death of the child born to him and Bathsheba. This forms a twin to Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is a passionate cry for forgiveness. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my

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transgressions” (verse 1, NIV). He talks about in verses 8 and 9, “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity” (NIV).

That psalm in the superscription is directly attributed to after the time Nathan came to David when he confronted him with his sin with Bathsheba. It is thought that Psalm 32 beautifully follows the tenor of Psalm 51. Psalm 51’s emphasis appears to be asking forgiveness and Psalm 32’s emphasis appears to be thanking God for the forgiveness that He has wrought.

Psalm 32 itself easily divides. Not all the psalms easily divide by theme or by subsection but this one really breaks down into five parts that are easy to discern.

I. The first part is the blessedness of the person who is forgiven.

Verses 1–2. Note in these two verses the double use of the word “blessed.” “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit” (NIV).

Obviously as you look the psalm is beginning with a note of joy. Maybe the word “happy” could even be used here rather than “blessed.” The idea behind it is one of exuberance.

David is not beginning this psalm with the statement of the problem that has dominated his life.

But he begins the psalm with the statement that the problem has been resolved. I find that so often my prayers to the Lord are directed toward Him when I’m in the midst of a problem or a sin. When the problem or sin has been removed then I’m on to praying about some other need. I don’t go back to reflect on what God has done in working through my need or my situation. Here again David is telling us something very important about prayer. That one of the great things about prayer is follow up. After we have asked God to do something and He has done it then we take some moments in His presence to reflect on what He has done and to give Him an

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appropriate thanksgiving. Psalms 32 says it's right to do that. If this is a teaching psalm that's certainly one of the things it wants to communicate to us.

In the blessedness of the person forgiven David gives us four very specific dimensions of atonement. "At-one-ment" is the real idea of atonement. Being made one with God. He gives us four dimensions of atonement that are covered when we are forgiven.

A. The first thing he notes is that our transgressions are forgiven. "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven" (verse 1). "Transgressions" is a very specific word meaning those things which we have done deliberately. It carries the idea of stepping across the line, willful disregard of God's law. The idea of forgiveness carries the connotation of being lifted up or removed.

B. This forms a contrast with the second dimension of atonement which is sins covered. The word for "sin" as opposed to the word "transgression" simply means falling short. Not hitting the goal. Not hitting the target. It started out to be one thing and it wound up another. "The life of every man is a diary in which he meant to write one story and instead writes another. His saddest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it" (James Matthew Barrie). Who doesn't have that feeling? Sin is falling short.

It can include the idea too of sin of omission. David says, in essence, "I've sinned in that way. I've not only deliberately transgressed but I've fallen short, and Lord, You have covered my sin." On the one hand David says the sin has been lifted up or removed. Then the next moment he says that they have been covered. How do our sins get covered? They become covered when we no longer cover them ourselves. As long as we are covering for ourselves—covering our sin, refusing to deal with it—God cannot cover it. God cannot hide it. It is open to Him. But it is when we bring our sins in confession to Him and get it out in the open that God then can cover it.

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C. The third thing he says about atonement is that the Lord does not count iniquity against us. Iniquity is guilt which has not been forgiven. To have it not counted against us means that all charges against us have been dropped. For him to say that God does not impute his iniquity against him is a statement that is remarkable. It's saying that when we come clean with God He drops all charges against us and ceases prosecution. When we choose not to be open and confess our sins God moves ahead with the prosecution. That's a God of grace that can drop charges.

D. The fourth part of atonement is kind of a counterbalance to all of this. "In whose spirit is no deceit" (verse 2). That is perhaps our part in being forgiven. That the emphasis ultimately also falls upon our own sincerity. God had forgiven and covered and not counted David's sins, transgressions, and iniquities against him because his spirit was honest when he sought forgiveness. He did not have the attitude that some in the apostle Paul's day had: "I'll confess this so I can get God's forgiveness and just go right on doing the same old thing." "In whose spirit there is no deceit."

David in these first two verses in which he recounts the blessedness of forgiveness is doing a twin blessing—blessed is he/blessed is the one.

II. Verses 3–5 work backward in his experience.

He started out by thanking God for what He has done and forgiveness. Now the second part of this psalm describes the work of conviction in our life when we have committed sin.

"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'—and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (NIV).

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There may be some who show no evident sign of being convicted of sin. In fact I really hold that to be true. I've counseled enough people in my life, some who have been sincere in their quest for God. Others who really aren't. But I'd say that anyone who is in a sincere quest for the Lord has got to come to grips with their own inadequacy to face God. The so-called flagrant sinners are the ones who often have the most callous souls and don't feel anything at all in the way of conviction. Whereas the person who is really trying to live a right life is sometimes the most sensitive and guilt-prone person there is.

That to me is kind of an amazing thing. Something we've kind of got to be sensitive to as people who are really trying to live the Christian life, that we distinguish between real guilt and false guilt. That there is such a kind of guilt in our life that just heaps upon ourselves condemnation and condemnation and lives perhaps with needless conviction. Don't be surprised if in living the Christian life you may even feel at times guiltier than what you felt like before you became a Christian. You didn't feel near the guilt before you became a Christian than you felt as a Christian for doing something wrong. It's because you've come to a greater knowledge of light because the Holy Spirit has made your conscience alive and you are aware of the things that really please the Lord. Not just what actions are right and wrong. Now it's what's intents of your heart are right and wrong. What thoughts are right and wrong. We struggle more greatly with conviction.

In David's case he was not dealing with false guilt. He was dealing with real guilt. This was heavy stuff. He shows that what happens when we don't deal with sin in our life and the Holy Spirit's convicting us. We will sense God's heavy hand. "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me" (verses 3-4, NIV). Silence is not an answer to an estrangement in relationships. Whether it's an

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estrangement between friends. I remember Jewel and I disagreed about something. We started out with the silent treatment and it went on for a whole week. I can identify with “My bones wasted away and day and night your hand was heavy upon me and my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer” (verses 3–4). Really a mess to be living with a person whom you are giving the silent treatment to and who is giving you the silent treatment. Somehow somebody must speak. The logjam must be broken.

We can be on occasion like David. Stubborn about getting to a solution. He was stubborn for a long time. He says, “Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me,” but when you look how long it took for David to come around to himself in regard to the sin which he had committed it was a considerable period of time.

There’s first of all the affair with Bathsheba. Then there is learning that she is expecting. Then there is another week tha goes by when David sends to bring Uriah back from where he was fighting. He tries to get him to sleep with his wife so he’ll think it’s his kid. But Uriah is so loyal to the king that he won’t. David’s conscience beats him again. Then he sends a letter by Uriah’s hand—he’s got to feel a pang of conscience of putting a letter in his hand that’s going to result in Uriah’s execution. The word comes back he’s dead. Then probably another seven more months go by and the baby is born. We don’t know how long the baby had been alive until Nathan finally confronts David and says, “It’s time you made it right, David.”

It’s well put when it says, “Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me.” He had been struggling with this for a year in his life and had sat on it. The more he sat upon his sin, the worse he got inside.

David had the guts not to blame his sin upon somebody else. He also had the guts not to blame his adultery on the idea that he had a demon in him. I have difficulty with people who find such

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easy excuses for their sin, a scapegoat. I think some of what I hear are cop-outs to works of the flesh. We can be more ingenious about inventing excuses for sin instead of taking responsibility. David at least admitted he was the culprit and he was not blaming it upon an evil spirit or somebody. "I did it." Tremendous honesty.

God forgave David his sin. That is something I wouldn't do, quite frankly. I don't know if I could. Maybe you could forgive them but I'm not sure you could ever trust them again. I'm learning there is a great deal of difference between forgiveness and trust. The remarkable thing about God's grace and forgiveness is that it so goes beyond anything that we have done, are able to do. Part of the miracle of God's grace if we open our hearts to God, God is able to even put some of His own nature to help us not only to forgive but to trust again. I think it's a great thing. God really forgives this person.

Why has God put such rogues in the Bible such as David? Because of people like us. If God can forgive a person like that and restore him, He can do that for me. That's encouraging.

When we talk about the forgiveness of sin we also have to recognize from the Scripture that God forgives our sins and He removes the impediment between us vertically. There's nothing any more between us and God. But the social consequences of that sin still go on. David is forgiven by God but he can't retract Uriah's life. He can't bring the dead baby back to life. There are some things sociologically that we do in respect to sin and the consequences that we will always go on reaping even though God has wiped the slate clean. The human relationships can't be unscrambled.

David was willing to not sweep anything under the rug anymore in his life and deal with his life openly. I think that's the first indication of a person who's ready to be righteous. To say, "I'm ready before You and I admit where I am wrong." David had such power in his hand when he is

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confronted by Nathan. All he had to do was give the order and Nathan was wiped out. But in addition to honesty he was willing to submit himself to God and agree with God's verdict of what was wrong in his life. He was willing to totally humble himself and take responsibility. There are social and family consequences for sin that happen in people's lives. God has forgiven them. The slate is clean. But, maybe the human relationship is such that that could never be again what it once was. From an interpersonal relationship. If you're honest in your heart and you've asked God for forgiveness, He's forgiven you. But you can never go back. You can't go back and undo all that in terms of the impact on the family life. It can't be done. You can commit the family to God and pray that God will work through this. I think David finds that to be the case. God has forgiven him but there will always be consequences in his home. Look at the problems David will encounter after that with his own children. He had to come to grips with the consequences.

III. The third thing in Psalm 32 is not only is there the blessedness of being forgiven and the work of conviction, which is the first two parts, but the third thing is the encouragement that is given to others.

Verses 6–7: "Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance" (NIV). When David knows and experiences the fact that God has forgiven him, his first impulse is to share his discovery. This is the basic element of testimony. David's words are so profound. They have come to help those who are in trouble of any kind. Not just the trouble associated with committing sin. But trouble of any kind. David is universalizing his experience, saying if God has done this for me then for everybody He will do the same.

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IV. Verses 8–10 bring us to the fourth part of the psalm where David speaks a word from the Lord himself.

The language of verses 8–10 becomes first person. “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him” (NIV). What these verses are doing is calling for a teachable spirit. In doing so they're driving home the lessons that have been learned earlier in the psalm. What these verses are saying, once God has given us forgiveness, He's desiring to lead us into fellowship with Him. When we were in sin we felt His heavy touch but now in fellowship we feel His gentle touch upon our life. David through sharing these words is trying to keep others away from the stubborn experience that he had had of being the horse or the mule, which wasn't being guided by the Lord. He is telling us not to be like a dumb animal that has to be yanked and pulled around. But instead be one that our will is subservient and pliant to what the Lord wants.

V. The fifth part of this psalm is a call to rejoice.

Verse 11 “Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (NIV). Here the last verse of the psalm is at harmony with the very opening of the psalm, which had begun on a note of joy. The delight of our heart is in God. That is the true goal of the believer. David is not delighted that some external thing has happened to him or some external material prosperity has come his way. But his true joy and rest is in what he has in his relationship with God.

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Once we have had sin dealt with in our life then we can rejoice and sing and be upright in heart.

If I keep things and don't deal with them, then there's no cleanness and my strength is zapped or sapped.

Sin is like everyday dirt in our life. If we're not doing 1 John 1:9, which is "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins," if we're not dealing with things as they arise—we keep letting things build up in our lives—we're going to find that it's just like physical dirt. It begins to cake and then it becomes more difficult to get out. Until we literally have to get a Brillo pad to our spiritual skin and rub until it hurts. Whereas it can be taken care of on a more daily cleansing basis.

David let things build up so bad until God had to use a spiritual Brillo pad on him. It hurt his soul deeply. But if David were here and could say anything to us he would say, "Never let things build up to the extent that they build up in my life. Don't let your strength be sapped. Bring your actions and your intents to the Lord. Get His forgiveness and 'rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!'" (verse 11, NIV).

Closing Prayer

We want to rejoice and be glad. We're so grateful, Lord, that there's no night so dark and no pit so deep but what Your love and forgiveness is not present. Thank You, Lord, for what You did in David's heart three thousand years ago. As an example for us in the present time. We might ourselves have comfort and encouragement. For those in this congregation who feel very much Your hand heavy upon them and who have not dealt with wrong actions or wrong thoughts or wrong words, may this psalm tonight be a psalm of liberation and healing for each of them. May it be a means whereby the joy of the Lord is restored in their life. Forgive us our sins, O Lord. Forgive us for the wrong acts we have taken in direct disobedience to You. Forgive us for the

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ways we have hurt other people with looks, with actions, or sometimes the lack of action. With words. Forgive us, Lord. Make us clean in Your presence. Instruct us in Your way that we might not be like the horse or the mule that has to be pulled around by an external force. But may our hearts instead have an internal guidance system that is obedient and suppliant to Your will in our life. We rejoice and be glad and thank You for Your presence. Thanks for Your forgiveness in our lives that brings a cleansed life and wholeness. We pray these things in Your name. Amen.