

The Joy of Confessing Sin

Psalm 32

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Psalm 32 is like a page out of a journal entry that I made back in 1989. It was a time when the Lord radically changed my life, and I struggled to believe I had been forgiven of my sins.

Here's what I mean: There was a time in my life, long before I went into the ministry, when I lived in rebellion against the Lord. It's certainly not a time I am proud of, nor do I even talk about it much, because I am ashamed of how I lived. Anyway, during that time, I remember ignoring God and my sin, hiding my sin, and while I was sinning, pretending everything was okay. It was probably the most miserable time I have ever had in my life. I remember many nights laying my head on my pillow, and I had no peace and was in deep misery. I remember thinking:

"What in the world am I doing? Why am I doing this? There is no way God loves me and He must surely hate me and will punish me severely for what I am doing?"

Now, I have probably left you wondering what I was doing during that period of my life. Don't come ask me because I won't tell you. It is enough to say that I knew I was sinning against God and others, and I was pretending I was not. Ultimately, my life was a wreck. It was not until, like the prodigal son who, by the sheer sovereign grace of God, that I *"came to myself,"* and repented of my sin, and sought the Lord's forgiveness. Mercifully, the Lord brought me back home.

For me, and I hope for you, Psalm 32 will be a refresher on what it means to receive the Lord's forgiveness, the importance of confessing your sin, turning away from it, and being renewed through this process that we call repentance.

Before we get into Psalm 32, let me give you some background. Psalm 32 is the second of the so-called *Penitential Psalms*. The others are Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. But the Psalm might better be called *"a psalm of instruction."* In the superscript, you will notice the word *"maskil,"* which theologians believe to mean *"the giving of instruction."* Psalm 32 is the first of twelve psalms that bear this title. So, while it is a Penitential Psalm, it is also an instructional Psalm.

Psalm 32 should probably be interpreted in connection with Psalm 51. Remember, Psalm 51 is David's great Psalm of repentance. David wrote Psalm 51 after he had sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba. Then he manipulated the battle plan to have her husband, Uriah, who was a soldier, killed. Ultimately, he ignored and hid all of his sins for a period of time. But when the prophet Nathan confronted him about the transgression, David confessed it, and he was restored.

Psalm 51 is the immediate expression of that confession and restoration. Psalm 32 seems to have been written later. Perhaps Psalm 32 is the fulfillment of v. 13 of Psalm 51, which says:

Then will I teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

This certainly seems to be the case because Psalm 32 serves as a guide to forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul later quoted the first two verses of Psalm 32 in Romans 4. By adding David's testimony to his own, the Apostle Paul teaches us that *justification is by grace through faith alone*.

It seems significant for our understanding of Psalm 32 that, of all David's many writings, Paul chose the first two verses as Old Testament support for the critical doctrine of *justification by grace through faith alone*. By

quoting this Psalm, the Apostle Paul also linked David's testimony to Abraham's experience recorded in Genesis 15:6, where Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Psalm 32 has also been an important Psalm in church history. I don't know if you know who Saint Augustine was, but he is considered a very important figure in Christian history. The Lord radically saved him out of a life of debauchery. He struggled for a time to believe he had been forgiven, and Psalm 32 helped him understand God's forgiveness.

Eventually, Augustine became the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He is one of the key figures in the development of and defense of the doctrine of the Trinity in the 3rd century.

Psalm 32 was Saint Augustine's favorite Psalm. It was so important and comforting to him that Augustine had it inscribed on the wall next to his bed before he died, so he could meditate on it more easily. He liked it because, as he said: *The beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner.*¹

Psalm 32 breaks down into two sections. Verses 1-5 read like a doctrinal statement or a definition of forgiveness. Then, vv. 6-11, functions like the application of the doctrine of forgiveness.

Here's the main idea of Psalm 32: *Our relationship with God is broken by our sin, but godly confession and true repentance bring joy and healing to our lives and restoration of our relationship with God.*

We need to keep in mind that the forgiveness described in Psalm 32 is primarily concerned with confessing sin to God and receiving His forgiveness, not necessarily forgiving others. Forgiving others flows out of being forgiven by the Lord, but Psalm 32 doesn't address this application. So, let's get to work on Psalm 32.

I. The Doctrine of Forgiveness (vv. 1-5)

Let's read vv. 1-5 again:

*Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*²
*Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*³ *For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.*⁴ *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah*⁵ *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. Selah*

It can be challenging to develop doctrine from poetry because the language is more emotive and descriptive than simply straightforward instruction or making an argument. Yet, what we find in vv. 1-5 is as close to instructional doctrinal language as it gets. It is still given to us in poetry, but it is more instructive than much of the poetic language we find in the Psalms.

Think of how forgiveness is taught in vv. 1-5 compared to the *Baptist Catechism*, which is used to teach children doctrine and theology. Here's the doctrinal teaching on forgiveness in the *Baptist Catechism* (Question 112):

Forgiveness is God freely pardoning all our sins for Christ's sake, a grace we are encouraged to ask for because we are enabled to forgive others. It represents the lifting of the sentence of condemnation, meaning God no longer counts sins as guilty against the believer.

The catechism is simply straightforward in its language: "*Forgiveness is . . .*" Psalm 32 is instructive, but it is also given to us in beautiful poetic language. Regardless of the language, the bottom line is that forgiveness is a doctrine that the Lord expects us to obey and live out.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1–41: An Expository Comment*: Asary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 277.

So, let's unpack the doctrine of forgiveness in Psalm 32 by beginning in vv. 1-2:

*Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²
Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose
spirit there is no deceit.*

Almost every word is loaded in these two verses. David begins Psalm 32 with a double declaration of blessing or Beatitude. Notice that he says:

"Blessed... Blessed..."

The repetition of the word *Blessed* signals emphasis. David wants us to think deeply about forgiveness. He wants to make sure it is framed correctly in our minds. Forgiveness is not merely necessary for salvation and a relationship with God, but it is also critical for a sinner to be happy. So, instead of thinking negatively about forgiveness or being defensive when we are told we need to be forgiven, we must understand that receiving God's forgiveness is essential to happiness in life.

Next, in vv. 1-2, David uses three words to describe the nature of our sin: "*Transgression*," "*sin*," and "*iniquity*." His goal is to drive a stake in our hearts so that we understand the gravity of our sin and need for forgiveness. Let's take a look at each of these words.

Transgression means *rebellion*. In this case, it means rebelling against God and breaking His laws, thereby breaking the relationship with Him.

Next, the word for *sin* is "*sin*." *Sin* means *to miss the mark*. It means missing the mark in keeping God's laws. It is a failure to keep God's laws and live in a way that reflects God's nature, character, and glory.

The third word for *sin* is *iniquity*. *Iniquity* means *being guilty of sin, which is a crime and, in this case, a crime against God*. It also implies that punishment goes hand in hand with the crime.

So, David triples down on sin in vv. 1-2. However, he also triples down on the grace of forgiveness. Notice the three images of the grace of forgiveness that we find.

First is *forgiven*. *Forgiven* means *to carry away or lift away*. In this case, David tells us that the *happy person is the one whose sin has been lifted from their heart and life*.

The next image of forgiveness is found in the word *covered*. *Covered* means *to conceal or make it hidden from sight*. It means that the sin is *covered* in a way that *it no longer cries out for justice and judgment*.

Finally, *counts*, or in this case, *no longer counts*. For the LORD to no longer *count iniquity* means that He no longer charges it to our account, or He no longer imputes the sin to us. This foreshadows how our sin will be imputed to Christ, and His righteousness will be imputed to us.

The last phrase of v. 2 says, "*in whose spirit there is no deceit*." "*No deceit*" means that we do not attempt to disguise or minimize our sin against God and others. Here's what I mean. Many people at some point in their lives will want to clean up their lives. So, they change their way of life simply because they don't want to live an unproductive life, or want to live a happier life, or they may even hope to earn heaven and avoid hell by making external changes in behavior. However, we cannot be forgiven and justified before God by behavior modification. Forgiveness only comes when we are truly open in our confession of sin.

Here's the rub for them. Some people make deceitful confessions of sin. The person who is deceitful in his confession is like what Jesus calls a *whitewashed tomb*. They don't really confess their sin; they just make some lifestyle changes, but their hearts aren't changed. They have not truly and fully owned their sin and confessed it to God.

However, Psalm 32 calls us to confess without deceit. The person with no deceit is the one who is open in his or her confession, holds nothing back, and owns all his or her sins and confesses them all.

Look at how David illustrates confession and forgiveness in vv. 3-5. Here, he recounts the effects of a deceitful confession or unconfessed sin on his life. Look in v. 3:

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away

through my groaning all day long.

The cost of unconfessed sin is high and spiritually poisonous. David describes it as physical exhaustion when he says, *“my bones wasted away.”* He also described it as emotional anguish. Notice he says that he was *“groaning all day long.”*

Finally, he describes unconfessed sin as being under spiritual pressure. He says in v. 4 that the LORD’s *“hand was heavy upon”* him. This is not simply poetic exaggeration. Sin affects the whole person—body, mind, and soul. The old saying is true: *Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.*

Yet, here is the good news woven into vv. 3-4. It is the grace of God that makes sin painful in our lives. The pain and misery are a warning and a wake-up call for us. The physical, emotional, and spiritual costs of sin are a kindness that leads us to repentance. Listen to the mercy in v. 4:

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah*

We know this is a mercy because of the word *“Selah.”* This word tells us to pause and consider the work of God in our lives in these verses. Simply put, ignoring the mercy found in the pain of sin is like ignoring the check engine light on your car’s dashboard. When you first see it, it alarms you. If you ignore it, you eventually stop noticing the light and learn to live with it, until one day the engine in your car is destroyed.

Finally, in v. 5, we see the turning point. Listen to David’s words:

*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.*

In v. 5, David makes a full confession of his sin. Notice the language he used because he used three terms to describe his confession. He *“acknowledged”* his sin. The Hebrew word means to *learn, know, or perceive*. In other words, he knew he had sinned.

Next, after he learned of his sin, he *“did not cover”* it up. Here, we have the opposite of the word *“deceit”* in v. 2: He didn’t *conceal it*, instead he *“confessed”* it. He made it known to God that he knew he had sinned. In other words, David stopped hiding his sin and acknowledged to God that he had sinned.

Here’s the deal when it comes to asking God for forgiveness. Many of us simply do not want to do it. We don’t want to admit we are wrong, living in sin. What we really want to do is make some self-correction without admitting our sin. By doing this, we hope it will make it all right.

The bottom line is we live in denial. We tell ourselves again and again that we are okay. We practice exercises in self-atonement. Some of us deal with the guilt of our sin by comparing ourselves to others and concluding that we are not so bad after all. Some of us minimize our sins. We will work really hard to make our sins seem less sinful. Some of us are really good at pointing fingers and shifting the blame to someone or something other than ourselves. Some of us wallow in self-despising guilt, allowing shame to depress and isolate us. This becomes some twisted form of self-atonement or self-punishment. Some of us try to deal with our guilt by committing to a regimen of self-reformation by setting perfectionistic standards for ourselves. Friends, none of these reactions or practices ever work.² There is only one thing that works, and we find it in v. 5,

*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.*

² Paul Tripp, *Everyday Gospel*, 40-41.

Finally, in the last part of v. 5, we learn that the forgiveness that David so desperately needed was given immediately. It reads, “*and you forgave...*” me. There was no delay, no probation period, and no penance. The grace of God rushed into David’s heart, forgiving him and washing him clean of his sin.

Friends, confession, forgiveness, and repentance are not groveling—it is going home. It’s like the prodigal son who, by the grace of God, “*came to himself . . . and said . . . I will . . . go back.*” Then he returned home to his father, who was standing there waiting for him with open arms. Listen, forgiveness, confession, and repentance are not something to run from or reject. They are the spiritual medicines that God uses to heal us.

1 John 1:9 echoes Psalm 32 when the Apostle John says:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Here is God’s healing medicine. Here is the path back home. Jesus has already paid the price and blazed the trail back to God for us. All we need to do is simply ask God to forgive us of our sins.

Now, let’s consider the application in vv. 6-11, not that we haven’t already applied it to some degree.

II. The Application of the Doctrine of Forgiveness (vv. 6-11)

Verses 6-11 fall into two sections. Verses 6-7 is the first section and vv. 8-11 is the second section. Let’s read vv. 6-7, but I want you to notice that the “*you*” is addressed to God. Listen to what David said:

Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. ⁷ You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

The first word of this section is “*Therefore.*” Like the Apostle Paul, David lays out the doctrine at the beginning and then applies it. He is like he is saying, “*Here is the instruction, therefore do this...*” So, let’s apply his exhortations.

First, he calls us to: *Seek the LORD before it is too late.* Look in v. 6:

Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.

David calls those in a covenant relationship with God to pray to the LORD for forgiveness. The word “*prayer*” doesn’t mean just making one prayer of forgiveness; it means living a life of continual confession and repentance before the LORD.

The *Amplified Bible* accurately captures the spirit of this verse:

Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You [for forgiveness] in a time when You [are near and] may be found; Surely when the great waters [of trial and distressing times] overflow they will not reach [the spirit in] him.

What this verse also teaches us is that while the LORD is near, we are under deep conviction of our sin. At this point, we should confess and repent. Remember, the deceitfulness of sin that we talked about earlier. It can cause our hearts to grow callous and hard. So, while the heart is tender and under conviction, don’t ignore the check engine light on your heart. Don’t ignore the sin – confess and repent while the Lord is bringing conviction to a tender heart.

Next, v. 7 says:

You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

The second exhortation is a reminder: *Those who seek the LORD will be secure in the LORD*. The LORD doesn't abandon those who ask for forgiveness. No. Instead, He hides them in Himself. He shelters them and preserves them. He loudly reminds them that they have been forgiven and belong to Him.

Do you know how bad you feel when you sin? Then you confess it, and you still have your head down and feel rotten. It is at this point that the LORD comes to you and lifts your head and calls you to rejoice and enjoy the cleansing effects of the confession of your sin. Verse 7 tells us that He rallies around those who confess their sin to Him.

Do you realize what this means for us as a church? It means we are to do the same thing. We are to rally around those who turn from their sin and turn to Jesus. We are to lift them up and celebrate with them because they have been preserved from judgment.

Next, in vv. 8-11, David addresses the people whom he instructs with the pronoun "you." Look at his third exhortation in vv. 8-9: *Listen to the LORD's instructions*.

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you
with my eye upon you. ⁹ Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.*

Friends, the grace of forgiveness doesn't lead to lawlessness and license. In other words, forgiveness is not like the old saying:

*I'm free from the law, O blessed condition, I can sin all I want and still have
remission (forgiveness) of sin.*

No! The grace of forgiveness leads to discipleship and a life of pursuing holiness. God forgives us in order to form us in the image of Christ.

That's why v. 9 is a warning. He tells us that some people only change when they are forced to change. This is the deceived person who doesn't truly repent but only modifies his behavior. They don't want to change. However, because of the pain of sin, they stop. Some people change because they perceive some pleasure they may receive, so they display a form of godliness, but not from the heart. These people are stubborn, like a horse or a mule. They resist the grace of God.

Wisdom, on the other hand, listens, learns, responds, and yields to the LORD's instruction because they love the LORD with all their heart. These are the ones who confess their sins and receive forgiveness.

Finally, in vv. 10-11, David closes with a contrast and a call to rejoice in confession of sin. Look at the two paths that are before us in v. 10:

*Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who
trusts in the LORD.*

David tells us that there are two paths we can take. One is where we hide our sin, and it leads to sorrow. The other is where we confess our sin to the LORD because we trust in Him, and it leads to joy. The question is: Which path will you take?

Verse 11 closes the Psalm with David appealing to us to take the path of joy and our desire for happiness. He calls us to rejoice as we confess our sins:

*Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright
in heart!*

Verse 11 is the application of the Beatitudes in vv. 1-2. The word "*Blessed*" is essentially defined for us in v. 11. The word "*Blessed*" is a strong word for joy. It is not some pious cliché. The LORD is congratulating and approving of those who have been forgiven and made right with Him. It is as if He turns His face to them and makes His glory shine upon them. Therefore, joy is the natural overflow of forgiveness that the LORD imparts.

Friends, to everyone with enough sin, guilt, and regrets to know that God's grace is his last hope, Jesus opens up the treasure of Himself to them for all eternity. When Jesus works this into your heart, you will be so very glad in the LORD. You will rejoice and celebrate. You will shout for joy!

As I close, I want to ask: *How does Psalm 32 point us to Jesus? Where is Jesus in this Psalm?* I mean, think about it. Up to this point, Pastor Dean and I have been showing you Jesus in the Psalms. However, when you think about Psalm 32, you realize Jesus can't pray this Psalm. He never sinned and needed forgiveness. So, *what is His place in Psalm 32?*

Here it is: Jesus makes the forgiveness we find in Psalm 32 possible. Scholar John Goldingay, in his book on the Psalms, tells the story of Robert the Bruce in Scotland to illustrate Christ's role in Psalm 32. Goldingay writes:

In the 14th century, Robert the Bruce of Scotland was leading his men in a battle to gain independence from England. Near the end of the conflict, the English wanted to capture Bruce to keep him from the Scottish crown. So they put his own bloodhounds on his trail. When the bloodhounds got close, Bruce could hear their baying. His attendant said, "We are done for. They are on your trail, and they will reveal your hiding place." Bruce replied, "It's all right." Then he headed for a stream that flowed through the forest. He plunged in and waded upstream a short distance. When he came out on the other bank, he was in the depths of the forest. Within minutes, the hounds, tracing their master's steps, came to the bank. They went no farther. The English soldiers urged them on, but the trail was broken. The stream had carried the scent away. A short time later, the crown of Scotland rested on the head of Robert the Bruce. [Goldingay goes on to say] The memory of our sins, prodded on by Satan, can be like those baying dogs—but a stream flows, red with blood of God's own Son. By grace through faith, we are safe. No sin-hound can touch us. The trail is broken by the precious blood of Christ³

Friends, Psalm 32 shows us how to find joy in our confession and repentance of sin. Joy is not by pretending we are righteous, but by trusting in the One who makes sinners righteous. When we trust in Jesus for our forgiveness, we can sing with joy the song of Psalm 32 with King David:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

³ Secondary citation: James A. Johnston, *Preaching the Word: Psalms 1-41*, Vol. 1, 333.