

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

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Psalm 32 The Joy of Forgiveness

Psalm 32 expresses the joy and relief which comes from confessing ones sins to God and knowing his free forgiveness through Jesus Christ. David is speaking here from personal experience and could be thinking back to his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah the Hittite. Initially, David tried to hide and cover up his sin - and he tells us how miserable life was. But then after he confessed his sin to God, David tells us about the joy he knew that his sins were forgiven and his fellowship with God was restored.

The title tells us this is a *maskil*. No one is sure what a *maskil* was – but it could come from the word *instruct*. All Bible Psalms are there to instruct, but this Psalm is especially seeking to instruct us how to live under God’s blessing and favour – and the need therefore to confess our sins to God. For it is God’s desire that we should live under his blessing each day and know the joy of his forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

Let’s think first about **David’s blessing** in verses 1, 2. **Read verses 1 and 2**. David himself knew such blessing and he wants us to know it too. In Psalm 1 we are told that *blessed in the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, but his delight is in the law of God*. In Psalm 2 we are told that *blessed is the man who takes refuge in the Lord’s anointed king*. But now we come to a third beatitude. *Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven*.

If Psalm 1 encourages us to walk in God’s ways and Psalm 2 to find refuge in God’s Messiah, then Psalm 32 encourages us to seek God’s forgiveness when we fail to walk in his ways or seek his Messiah. In other words, Psalm 32 is telling us there is a way back when we fail God. And blessed is the person who finds that way.

The word ‘blessed’ can mean ‘happy’ or ‘fortunate’. It describes the *privilege* of knowing the free and gracious forgiveness of God. None of us is without sin. Every person has sinned against God. But how happy and fortunate, how privileged is the person who finds the forgiveness of God. **Read verses 1, 2 again**. Three different Hebrew words are used to describe sin here. The first is translated *transgressions* in **verse 1**. A *transgression* is a wilful rebellion against authority. The authority is God who gives us his Law, but the *transgressor* deliberately rebels against his Law. He looks God in the eye and shakes his fist in God’s face as he breaks his Law. The transgressor therefore sins with a ‘high hand’.

The second word is translated *sins* in **verse 1**. This second word *sins* describes missing or falling short of a target. When we commit *sins* we miss the mark in our behaviour. We do not live up to the standard of a human being made in the image of God. God has given us great dignity as human beings, but we do not behave with this God given dignity. We fall short.

Then the third Hebrew word used is simply translated *sin* in **verse 2**. The root of this third word means ‘twisted’ or ‘bent’. God’s way for us is *straight* but the sinner chooses instead a *twisted* or *perverted* path. The sinner does not behave uprightly. And consequently he loses some of the glory God gave him at creation.

So the description of sin given here is threefold – to deliberately rebel, to miss the mark and choose a twisted path. But then to balance this there are three words which describe the comprehensiveness of

God's forgiveness. The first word is translated *forgiven* (1). The root meaning of this word is to *lift*. Sin is like a weight or burden that is heavy to carry. But God graciously *lifts* the burden off our shoulders - and we are forgiven. The classic picture of this is found in the book 'Pilgrim's Progress' by John Bunyan. At the beginning of this allegory of the Christian life, *Christian* is described as a man with a heavy burden on his back. It's his sin. But when he comes to the cross, his burden is lifted off his shoulders and disappears, never to be seen again. A similar idea is found when John the Baptist says of the Lord Jesus one day, "Look the Lamb of God who takes away (*lifts*) the sin of the world". Or again as the prophet Nathan confronts David after the Bathsheba incident, Nathan assures David that the Lord has taken away (lifted) your sin. And blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven (lifted).

The second word is *covered* (1). When God forgives the sinner their sins are *covered*. Sins cause terrible offence to God. We might say these sins 'scream' at God in the way that a terrible stain on your brand-new living room carpet might scream at you - only far worse! But the forgiven person has had his sins *covered*. It doesn't mean the sins are *covered* in the sense that something is put over the sins to hide them. The sins are dealt with by the death of the Lord Jesus whose blood atones for sins. But the *covering* really means that the offence of sins is removed. Our sins no longer scream at the Lord because of the satisfaction which Christ has made on our behalf. Our sins have been dealt with - they are remembered no more. They have been removed as far as the east is from the west. And so Charles Wesley's hymn says, "Plenteous grace in thee is found, grace to cover all my sin."

Then the third word for forgiveness is translated *count against*. **Read verse 2a again.** The Lord does count our sins against us before we come to Christ. We are reckoned to be guilty before God. But with the forgiveness of sin, this guilty, condemned 'state' before God is changed. Before, we are guilty sinners and liable to punishment. But the forgiven person's position and status before God is forever changed. Paul spells this out in Romans 4. **Read Romans 4:6-8.** Paul uses our Psalm to teach us something very wonderful. Through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, God not only considers us 'not guilty', but something even more wonderful. He credits our faith in the Lord Jesus as righteousness. And we are considered to be 'righteous' - in fact *declared* to be righteous because the perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ is given (or imputed) to us. We are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. No wonder therefore David writes, "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him"!

So if there are three words describing sin there are three words describing forgiveness and together they emphasize the complete and comprehensive nature of God's pardoning grace to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we are not finished yet. For David adds, *and in whose spirit is no deceit* (2). And this is part of the blessing too. At the beginning, David sought to cover up his sin. He sought to deceive himself and others and even God that he was not guilty of this particular sin. But God worked in David's life to show him his sin. God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David with his sin and as a result David came to acknowledge it. He no longer tried to deceive anyone that he was *not* a sinner. He was. And this is part of the blessing. Naturally, we deceive ourselves that we are not that bad, and that God should receive us as we are. But in his mercy, God shows us who we are. He reveals to us our sins and the seriousness of them. He convicts us of our transgressions and then helps us to confess them so that we can receive his pardon. And God's forgiveness is free. It does not cost any money. It is not part of a bargain where we agree to do so many good works in exchange for God's forgiveness. No, it is free. When the sinner confesses it to him, we find, through Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sin. **David's blessing.** Do we know it?

Then we move from **David's blessing** to **David's story** in verses 3-5. Here, David gives us his testimony, and tells us of his miserable state when he refused to acknowledge his sin. **Read verses 3-5.** What misery David describes first of all. *When I kept silent.* At the beginning, David chose to keep silent

about his sin. He tried to move on with his life without confessing his sin to God. He hoped that with time, the memory of what he had done would fade. And David also hoped that God would forget his sin and eventually things would return to normal. And so David was ‘silent’ – but that resulted in his whole relationship with the Lord becoming silent. David lost fellowship with God. His silence about his sin cut himself off from that primary relationship which is the essence of real life – his relationship with God.

But what happened then? Well, it’s a story of grace, for the Lord did not judge David as he might have done, nor did he cut David off as he might have done. Instead, the Lord took the initiative to restore the broken relationship.

But what did the Lord do? He made David feel the misery of losing fellowship with God. **Read verses 3, 4 again.** The Lord’s hand was heavy on David. That hand did not *strike* David. That hand did not *crush* David. But the hand of the Lord *pressed* David. There was a certain *pressure* put upon David to make him reconsider his ways. David was not left alone, for the Lord mercifully pursued the lost sheep and gently led his servant back.

David tells us how his bones wasted away. Some think this implies some physical illness which came upon David. It could mean that. But not necessarily. It could simply mean that David’s estrangement from God really affected him. David’s life lacked any element of joy or brightness or hope. Instead his life was one of groaning. He was thoroughly unhappy. He could not say, as he did in Psalm 27, “The Lord is my light.” For David lived in the shadows.

And the Lord’s hand sapped David’s strength. Just as the summer heat exhausts and dehydrates us, this was the effect of the Lord’s hand on David. Pressure was brought to bear upon David, which did not allow him to settle down in this silence. And notice how relentless this gentle pressure was – *day and night your hand was heavy upon me*. Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time to keep silent and a time to speak. But that doesn’t refer to the confession of sin. There is never a time to keep silent about sin – never. And so here was the Lord’s fatherly discipline upon his servant, forcing him to turn and confess what he had done.

And eventually, David came to his senses. **Read verse 5.** The verse uses the same three Hebrew words for sin that we saw back in verse 1. And the meaning is that David comprehensively confessed his sin to the Lord. Instead of being silent, he confessed it all. But then – “O how wonderful, you forgave the guilt of my sin.” It’s interesting that the Lord did not give David a great *lecture* on what he had done wrong, or on how offended the Lord had been. No doubt the Lord would address all these things in time in the future training up of David. But at least initially, the forgiveness was immediate and the restoration instant. One thinks about the parable of the prodigal son. Once the lost son had come to his senses and returned home to his father, the son had scarcely started his confession when the father put his arms around him, kissed him, put a ring on his finger, a robe on his back, sandals on his feet and the fattened calf was killed.

The prodigal son was not taken through, line by line, how wicked he had been – he was forgiven, shown great love and was welcomed back immediately. And this is David’s story. And it’s my story. Is it yours? The Lord is full of compassion and rich in mercy. David’s story is a story of God’s grace. God did not leave him in his sins – the Lord led him to confess his sins and then restored him. And that is every Christian’s story. The Lord leads us to confess our sins and repent when we first to come Christ. But then as we go on as Christian pilgrims, the Lord prompts us to confess our sins and repent many, many times. We do not despise the Lord’s discipline, but remember it is a sign of his love. **Read Proverbs 28:13 and 1 John 1:9.**

David's blessing, David's story and then lastly **David's exhortation**. Finally David exhorts us all to learn the lessons he had learned. Here is the *instruction* after which the term 'maskil' may be named. But what does David exhort us to do? Three things as we close. The first is to *pray*. **Read verses 6 and 7.**

He exhorts us to *pray*. And that refers back to David's silence in verse 3. David is saying to us, "Do not refuse to confess your sins as I did. Do not be silent, but pray and cry out to the Lord for his mercy." The 'godly' in verse 6 describes those who are committed both to God and to his people. And David tells us to pray *while the Lord may be found*. When the Lord draws near and lays his hand on you, when he encourages us to pray, do not harden your heart and dig in your heels. Pray while the Lord may be found. Who knows whether he will give you another chance to repent. Do not presume on his grace. Just as Today is the day of salvation, so Today the day for calling out to the Lord.

What are the *mighty waters* in verse 6? The *mighty waters* could stand for the Lord's judgements in this world or for his final judgment on the Last Day. It could also be linked with the 'trouble' of verse 7. David says, "You do not want to face either judgment or trouble when you are out of fellowship with God and your heart is hard! Therefore pray, so that instead of being surrounded by trouble or judgment you will be surrounded by songs of deliverance." How happy to know the Lord's *deliverance* rather than his *judgment*. So David exhorts us to *pray* and not to be silent. Prayer leads to fellowship and to songs of deliverance.

Then secondly, David exhorts us to *obey*. **Read verses 8-10.** Again there is every incentive given to obey the Lord and follow his instructions. It's best to understand verse 8 to be the Lord's instructions to David which David then passes on to us. **Read verse 8 again.**

God's love for us is such that he will be a loving father – encouraging us but also patiently instructing us. I like the 2011 NIV's translation of verse 8. 'I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.' "Do not doubt God's love as he disciplines you" says David. "Do not doubt his loving design for your life. And do not act like the horse or the mule." These are animals with little or no moral compass or spiritual sensitivity.

The owner can only make his animal come to him by bit and bridle. Now the Lord want us to come to him too, but he has made us different to animals. We have a soul, we are created in the image of God to have fellowship with God. So do not behave as if you were a stubborn animal. **Read verse 10 again.** While misery surrounds the person without God and deaf to God, unfailing love surrounds the person who trusts the Lord and obeys him. I can testify to that too. Can you?

Then finally, the third exhortation of David is that we *rejoice in the Lord*. **Read verse 11.** Do not rejoice in sin or the deeds of the darkness. Rejoice in the Lord - in his love, his ways and his grace. Do not let your life be consumed by darkness. Turn to God, pray to him, obey his word (in particular his command to confess your sins) and he will surround you with his joy. **Read verse 11.**

Is there anyone listening this morning who does not know the joy of sins forgiven? We have all done things which have offended and displeased the Lord. Do not continue in this condition - it leads only to misery and eventually disaster. Turn to the Lord, confess your sin to him. Remember the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for sinners. Remember the great love of God for sinners and the plan of God to give us a hope and a future. Turn to the Lord when he is near. Know the joy of sins forgiven and the hope of heaven through Jesus Christ.