



Psalm 32 - The Joy of Forgiveness

Of David. A Maskil.

Introduction

This is usually classified as a thanksgiving hymn, in which the worshippers give thanks to God for the joy of having their sins forgiven. Because of v.3 <<**while I kept silent**>>, it has been common to connect this psalm with Psalm 51; but as there is no clear indication of this from either the title of the psalm or its body, it is better to take this psalm as geared more generally to the experience of confession and forgiveness. Psalm 32 can be classified as a penitential psalm along with Psalm 6, 38, 51, 130, and 143.

Psalm 1 tells the way to be blessed: <<**Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night**>>. Yet if one has failed to do this and fallen into sin, Psalm 32 shows another way to be blessed, to make full confession and repentance of sin.

This is the first of thirteen occasions that a psalm is called a Maskil. It generally means that it is a skilful, poetic, or didactic psalm.

Psalm 32:1-5 - The Doctrine: Only the Forgiven Are Truly Happy.

Verses 1-2 state the theme, answering the question, 'Who is truly happy or blessed?' Then vv.3-5 recount a personal experience that supports this theme. The terms 'transgression,' 'forgiven,' 'sin,' and 'iniquity' all echo Exodus 34:6-7, the fundamental expression of God's kindness and mercy toward those who receive his covenant. No one needs to compel God to show mercy; rather, the faithful confess their sins because they believe he is merciful. Note how several words here appear in a mirror pattern, which binds all five verses together: 'forgiven, covered (v.1); hide or cover, forgave (v.5).' There is a contrast in the kind of covering: when God

‘covers’ sin, he graciously blots it out, as confirmed in Psalm 85:2; when man ‘covers’ his sin, he is sinfully hiding it, as confirmed in Proverbs 28:13.

- 1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- 2 Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Psalm 32:1-2

Happy or, more commonly, **blessed** translates the Hebrew word *esher* meaning also contentment. The truly happy person is happy because God showers him with favour and blessing. Jesus uses the Greek equivalent in Matthew 5:3-11; and James writes: <<**Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him**>> (James 1:12). The Latin translation, *beatus*, is the source of the word beatitude.

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven. David spoke of the great blessing that exists for the man or woman who knows the forgiveness of God. Their sin is no longer exposed; it is covered. Paul uses vv.1-2a in: <<**Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them**>> (Romans 4:7-8), to show that ‘not counting sin’, which he treats as another way of counting righteousness, has always been done ‘apart from works.’

David had great opportunities to know this blessedness in his own life. This great man of God, a man after God’s heart, nevertheless had some significant sin and what may be called backsliding or spiritual decline. Notable among these were David’s time at Ziklag (1 Samuel Chapters 27, and 29-30), and David’s sin regarding Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Samuel Chapter 11). On each occasion David came to confession, repentance, and forgiveness. Therefore, David knew what it was like to be a guilty sinner. He knew the seriousness of sin and how good it is to be truly forgiven. He knew, as Paul would later state in Romans 4:6-8, the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works. If David were judged on works alone, the righteous God must condemn him; nevertheless he knew by experience blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity. David spoke of real forgiveness by the declaration of God, not merely the quieting of a noisy conscience or an imagined peace with God. This was a standing with God declared and given, not earned as already noted.

And in whose spirit there is no deceit. The prior life of sin and double-living was over for David, the repentant and forgiven sinner. The forgiven life needs no more deceit to cover one's ways. To mention the spirit reinforces in the worshippers that they must combine the right words with the right intentions. Deceit refers to deceiving man or God about one's own sins. The right way is shown in the case of Nathanael: <<*When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'*>> (John 1:47), and the 144,000 who will stand with Jesus on Mount Zion: <<*It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless*>> (Revelation 14:4-5).

In these first two verses, David used three words to describe sin:

- The idea behind 'transgression' is crossing a line, defying authority.
- The idea behind 'sin' is falling short of or missing a mark set by God.
- The idea behind 'iniquity' is of crookedness and distortion.

David also used three terms to describe what God does to put away sin:

- The idea behind 'forgiven' is the lifting of a burden or a debt.
- The idea behind 'covered' is that of sacrificial blood covering sin.
- The idea behind 'imputes no' is bookkeeping; it does not count against.

³ While I kept silence, my body 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 Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord',
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

Psalm 32:3-5

While, For. The now-forgiven David remembered his spiritual and mental state when he kept his sin hidden and was silent instead of confessing and repenting. The stress of a double life and unconfessed sin made him feel old, oppressed, and dry, i.e. my body wasted away through my groaning all day long: <<*For my*

sighing comes like my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water>> (Job 3:24), and: <<*I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping*>> (Psalm 6:6). These verses support the theme that only the forgiven are truly happy. They recount a time while I kept silent, i.e. when the singer refused to confess his sins in order to have God forgive them.

The lost vitality of vv.3-4 is really a sign of mercy; it is God's hand heavy upon his faithful, to help them come to the point of confessing: <<*If he would take his rod away from me, and not let dread of him terrify me, then I would speak without fear of him, for I know I am not what I am thought to be*>> (Job 9:34-35). Having come to that point, the singer acknowledged his sin, and God forgave the guilt of his sin; this brings the psalm back to v.1, with the implication that the singer has now learned more fully the blessedness of being forgiven. No doubt David was slow to acknowledge this, yet in looking back he understood that his misery was directly connected to the oppression of unresolved sin and rebellion against God.

My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. David's dryness and misery was actually a good thing. It demonstrated that he was in fact a son of God and that the covenant God would not allow him to remain comfortable in habitual or unconfessed sin. One who feels no misery or dryness in such a state has far greater concerns for time and eternity.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity. David's first problem was the sin he committed, in this context, probably the immorality with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband to cover the immorality. David's second problem was the double life he lived to hide those sins. It was only as David was ready to repent and end the second problem that God would graciously forgive the first problem.

I will confess my transgressions to the Lord. Forgiveness was ready and waiting for David as he agreed with God about the nature and guilt of his sin: <<*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us*>> (Psalm 103:11-12). Restoration was ready, but the confession of sin was the path to it. Real, deep, genuine confession of sin has been a feature of every genuine awakening or revival in the past 250 years. However, it is not something new, as demonstrated by the revival in Ephesus recorded in Acts

19:17-20. It says, many who believed came confessing and telling their deeds. This was Christians getting right with God, and open confession was part of it.

Psalm 32:6-11 - Application: Confess Our Sins Freely.

The opening word of this section ‘therefore’ shows that it is drawing a lesson for everyone who is godly, namely, to offer prayer of confession at a time when God may be found; i.e. do not be foolish and wait indefinitely (v.9). The godly are not expected to be sinless; rather, they are those who believe God’s promises and confess their sins, i.e. the righteous of v.11. Verses 6-7 are addressed to God, whom the faithful find to be a hiding place; vv.8-11 are addressed to fellow worshippers, urging them to accept this instruction about ready confession and to be glad in the Lord, who shows such goodness to his people.

- ⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
- ⁷ You are a hiding-place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

Psalm 32:6-7

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you. Knowing that God’s mercy is so great provides Christians with an even greater reason to seek him in the confidence that he may be found, and therefore ready to connect with his servants.

At a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. David knew what it was to be overwhelmed and mired in the guilt and misery of sin, and that God could deliver in that crisis and, indeed, all others. The prophet echoes this concept: <<*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you*>> (Isaiah 43:2).

You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Setting one term upon another, David gloried in the protection he now felt as one in fellowship with God and under his care. God himself was his hiding-place, a secure shelter. A good hiding place has strength, height, is not easily seen, and is reliable. In more modern phrasing it might be said

that Jesus is a safe house. David found security surrounded by God's own songs of deliverance, sung in the joy and confidence of victory.

The idea of God as a **hiding-place** is also associated with the idea of finding shelter in the house of the Lord, in his very presence. This is indicated by the use of the same Hebrew phrasing in two earlier psalms: <<*For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock*>> (Psalm 27:5), and: <<*In the shelter of your presence you hide them from human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues*>> (Psalm 31:20).

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

⁹ Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

Psalm 32:8-9

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Here David prophetically spoke in God's voice to his people. Through this, God promised to instruct, teach, and guide his people.

I will counsel you with my eye upon you. The idea is of one who waits upon another so attentively that a mere look at the eye indicates the will. A butler waiting upon his master at dinner can illustrate this; the master need only look at the cruet set and the butler understands that he wants it. God promised that for those who diligently seek and focus on God, he will also guide. This is a great blessing that comes from being forgiven and having fellowship restored. In David's season of guilt and misery he did not, so to speak, look upon God for the guidance of his eye, and therefore could not receive it. When fellowship was restored, the blessing of such close relationship could be enjoyed again. Many modern translators put the sense as merely God watching over the believer, which is true. Yet since the context in the following lines regards guidance and responsiveness to the Lord, it is fair to render the lines as the King James and New King James versions do: <<*I will guide you with My eye*>>.

Like a dumb animal, David would not come near to God until these terrible experiences have ended and faded from memory. God speaks to his people through David's experience and says: Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding. The horse and the mule are used as examples of animals that are

not easily guided. They need the bit and bridle and sometimes rigorous training before they are useful for a given task, such as ploughing or being ridden.

James speaks of the difficulty of controlling the tongue in a similar manner:
<<*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits*>> (James 3:1-5a).

Else it will not stay near you. David understood this to describe his condition in his season of unconfessed sin, he was like a dumb animal that could only be guided through pain or severity. God allowed the Amalekites to devastate David and his men (1 Samuel Chapter 30), and God sent the prophet Nathan to speak sharply to David in his sin (2 Samuel Chapter 12).

¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

¹¹ Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Psalm 32:10-11

Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. David understood what it was to live, at least for a season, as the wicked do and the sorrows that came with it; after all he became one of them through his own unrepented sin. The repentant David then had a renewed experience of the mercy of God surrounding him.

Be glad in the Lord and rejoice. This psalm gives repeated and compelling reasons for the believer to be glad, to rejoice, to shout for joy. The psalm appropriately ends with a call for God's people to remember and respond to those reasons:

- Remember the blessedness of forgiveness.
- Remember the release of guilt and double-living.
- Remember the protection that God gives his people.
- Remember the guidance of the Lord's teaching.