

The Joy of Forgiveness

Psalm 32

In Psalm 51 presents David's confession after Nathan's rebuke, Psalm 32 presents his reflections on his pang's of conscience before that confession and his making good his promissory instruction to the godly (51:13-15). From his own experience David offers "godly sinners" **two choices**. They must choose between **either silence or stubborn resistance against God's blows of conscience and death or confessing sin and finding forgiveness and life**. There is not a third option. With continued resistance not to confess to God sin, even the godly will be punished; by trusting God to save them from punishment that they deserve, they will be surrounded with his kindness. God's grace to offer the "godly sinner" forgiveness and salvation calls for songs of loudest praise to I AM. The psalm would be fitting for Jewish Passover and Christian Ash Wednesday. (Translation and observations taken from Bruce K. Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Lament*, 104-121.)

<p>1 לְדָוִד מַשְׁכִּיל</p> <p>2 אֲשֶׁרֵי נִשְׁוִי-פָשַׁע כְּסוּי חַטָּאתָה : אֲשֶׁרֵי אָדָם לֹא יַחְשֵׁב יְהוָה לֹו עֹון וְאֵין בְּרוּחֹו רְמִיָה :</p> <p>3 כִּי-הִחַרְשֵׁתִי בְּלִי עֲצָמִי בְּשִׂאנְתִי כָּל-הַיּוֹם :</p> <p>4 כִּי אִיוֹמָם וּלְיַלְתָּה תִּכְבֵּד עָלַי יָגֵד נִהְפָד לְשִׁרְי בְּחִרְבְּנִי קִיץ סִלָּה :</p> <p>5 חַטָּאתִי אֹדוּיָךְ וְעוֹנִי לֹא-כִסִּיתִי אָמַרְתִּי אֹדָה עָלַי בַּשָּׁעִי לִיהוָה וְאַתָּה נָשָׂאתָ עֹון חַטָּאתִי סִלָּה :</p>	<p>1 By David. A maskil.</p> <p>Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.</p> <p>2 Blessed is the man (<i>human</i>) whom I AM does not reckon as guilty and in whose spirit is no deceit.</p> <p>3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.</p> <p>4 For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my vigor was turned as in the dryness of summer.</p> <p>5 [Then] my sin I confessed to you and my guilt I did not cover up. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to I AM." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.</p>	<p>I. Forgiveness (1-5)</p> <p>A. The blessedness of forgiveness (<i>ashrei</i>)</p> <p>3 terms for the full dimensions of human evil transgression – brazen defiance of God's law <i>sin</i> – missing the mark, "fall short" <i>guilt</i> – the twisted wreckage sin leaves in its wake</p> <p>3 terms that indicate the complete cleansing from evil that makes happiness possible</p> <p><i>forgiven</i> – "to lift up" "take away" (scape goat) <i>covered</i> – removed from sight of the Holy One whose fierce anger blazes against sin. <i>does not reckon as guilty</i> – the human being is reckoned according to grace for what he is properly not.</p> <p>B. The conditions for forgiveness: "no deceit"</p> <p>1. The results of silence "in the case of sin, silence is not golden; it is killing...a repressed conscience wastes the body away...ironically, because he did not cry out to God, he cried out loud in misery." God pursued David relentlessly so that his life abruptly withered from lack of moisture to drought</p> <p>2. Open confession – the deadlock is broken By <i>not covering</i> his sin, David's sin was <i>covered</i> "The manifold resolve to confess suggests that a half confession is no confession."</p>
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6 על-זאת יתפלל כל-חסיד | אליך

לעת מצא

רק לשטף מים רבים

אליו לא יגיעו :

7 אתה | סתר לי

מצר תצנני

רני פלט תסובבני סלה :

8 אשכילך | ואורך

בדרך-נו תלך

אינני עיני :

9 אל-תהיו | פסוס

כפרד אין הבין

במתג-גרטן עדנו לבלום

בל קרב אליך :

10 רבים מכאזבים לך ששע

והבוטח ביהוה

חסד יסובבנו :

11 שמחו ביהוה וגילו צדיקים

והרנינו כל-ישרי-לב :

6 Therefore, let all the godly pray to you

at the time you may be found;

Surely, at the time of a torrent of mighty waters,

they will not reach them.

7 You are a shelter for me;

you protect me from trouble

and surround me with ringing shouts of deliverance.

8 I will make you prudent and teach you

in the way you should walk;

I will counsel [you] as my eyes are upon you.

9 Do not be like a horse

or [even] a mule, which have no understanding—

with bit and bridle, its trappings, to control them,

or they will not come to you.

10 The wicked have many woes,

but as for the one who trusts in I AM,

loyal-love surrounds him.

11 Rejoice in I AM and celebrate, you righteous;

Shout out, all you who are upright in heart!

II. Prayer and Instruction to the Godly (6-10)

A. Pray to escape judgement

1. Don't delay: God's patience has limits

2. You'll be safe when judgment comes

torrent of mighty waters – utilizes the mythic imagery of the sea as an unruly destructive force that threatens life

3. Be encouraged by the king's confidence

Instead of being encompassed by the mighty waters, the king is encompassed by shouts of praise.

B. Turn to God now to escape judgment

1. Take advantage of being taught by the king
prudent – “the ability to grasp the meanings or implications of a situation or message, the ability to understand practical matters and interpersonal relations and make beneficial decisions” (Michael Fox)

my eyes - the shepherd king's eyes watches over his flock to protect them

2. Parable: Don't be stubborn like a mule

Do not be without understanding of the disastrous judgment coming upon sinners
Do not need prolonged pang's of conscience to do the right thing
Do not resist drawing near to God in faith

C. A proverb grounds the parable

1. Pains for the wicked

2. God's loyal-love surrounds those who trust I AM

D. Call to praise

The praise of the righteous escalates from inward rejoicing, to outward celebration in shouts of joy, to loud shouts that make the temple ring. Praise is their right and duty.

Conclusion¹

Psalm 32 is like a cargo ship carrying a heavy and precious load of theology: the doctrine of sin; the doctrine of God's forgiveness; and the doctrine of double agency.

Doctrine of Sin

The doctrine of sin in Psalm 32 includes its nature, its universality, and its punishment. The doctrine of forgiveness cannot be understood without first understanding the doctrine of sin. As for its nature, the three words for sin (see verses 1–2, 5) all entail a standard that has been broken, more specifically, God's standard. "Transgressions" are deliberate acts of rebellion against God and his standard; "sin" means to fall short of God's standard in connection with a superior wronging an inferior, and *guilt* adds to both, the notion of punishment.

As for its universality, all humans, including those whom Scripture calls "the godly," sin. The oxymoron "godly sinners" expresses a profound truth. As Solomon noted: "there is no one who does not sin" (1 Kgs 8:46). The godly—who embrace God's covenants with Abraham, Israel and David—sin. David, a man after God's own heart, murdered and committed adultery. The psalm's beatitudes are proclaimed upon law-breakers. Augustine said: *intelligentia prima est ut te nôris peccatorem* ("the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner."² Luther loved the psalms because they show "the heart of all the saints,"³ and that includes their sinful nature.

As for sin's punishment, it may be comforting to know that even the most pious, apart from our Lord Jesus, are sinners, that none of us are masters in our own houses, but let us not take comfort that we are so fashioned by nature.⁴ Paul warns the Church: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. People reap what they sow" (Gal 6:7).

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston & Erica Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament, a Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 119-121.

² Cited by Delitzsch, I. 474.

³ Peter Jenson, "Psalm 32," *Interpretation*, 332 (1979) 172-176.

⁴ Waltke and Houston, *Psalms as Christian Worship*, pp.??

In Psalm 32 David threatens the godly with punishment if they do not confess their sin.

His implicit admonition that the godly pray while God may still be found implies God's patience has limits. Like the farmer who must reckon with the seasons of the year, the godly must reckon with the time of favor and the time of judgment (Isa 49:8; 2 Cor 6:2).

Doctrine of Punishment

The psalm assumes that if the faithful do not humble themselves under God's mighty hand of guilt, they will suffer under his rod. Proverbs 11:30 says as much:

If the righteous person is repaid in the earth/land
how much more the wicked and the sinner! (Prov 11:31)

Regarding sin's punishment, we need to distinguish historical guilt, sin's built in consequences, and, as in Psalm 32, God's intervening judgment. Historical guilt pertains to the irreversible consequences of sin. Though forensically forgiven, David could not reverse the historical consequence of his sin. He could not restore purity to Bathsheba or life to Uriah. Closely related to this notion is that of the built in consequences of sin within the moral order God established and upholds, such as sexual promiscuity and venereal disease. Paul says: "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins people commit are outside their bodies, but those who sin sexually sin against their own bodies" (1 Cor 6:18).

God's intervening judgments refers to judgment beyond and/or apart from sin's built-in consequences. As God intervenes into history to save his people, he also intervenes to punish sinners. The a-godly wicked do not necessarily experience their just deserts on the earth (i.e., within their own lifetimes), but certainly will be punished eternally when they are finally torn from the land (Prov 2:21–22; 10:30).

On the other hand, godly sinners may be punished temporally within history. Peter, using the LXX version of this proverb, comments: "For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "if it is hard for the

righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" (1 Pet 4:17-18).

Even Moses and Aaron, though undoubtedly they will be rewarded in the glory of an eschatological future for their life-times of faithful service, for their incidental disobedience were denied leading Israel into the Promised Land (cf. Num 20:12). The disobedient prophet from Tekoa was killed by a lion (1 Kgs 13:2-24); Hezekiah's pride cost him his treasury (Isaiah 39:1-9); and Solomon's loss of wholehearted commitment to I AM cost him more than half of his kingdom (1 Kgs 11:9-11). Paul commanded the church at Corinth: "Hand this [sexually immoral man] man over to Satan for the destruction of the sinful nature so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:4-5). Handed over to Satan he will suffer in the flesh even as Job suffered when God removed his protective presence. The inspired apostle also interpreted the weakness, sickness and death of many Corinthians as due to their eating the Lord's supper in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:29f). All of these were godly/saints but suffered pain.

Nevertheless, it is also true: "if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim 2:13). Just prior to his death Paul said: "God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness'" (2 Tim 2:19).

Doctrine of forgiveness

The doctrine of forgiveness as taught in Psalm 32 includes the nature of forgiveness, the basis for forgiveness and the conditions for God's forgiveness. As for the nature of forgiveness in general, the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* notes: "the key to understanding the imagery of forgiveness is that it views sin as *something that needs to be eradicated or removed* (emphasis not mine). Complementing this motif is one that focuses on *disrupted relationships between people that need to be restored* (emphasis not mine)."⁵ God's removal of sin and restoration to fellowship are like the light and heat of the sun; they are

distinct notions, yet inseparable. This imagery fits the nature of forgiveness in Psalm 32. Its metaphors for forgiveness, "being lifted up" or "being hidden from sight" pertain to the removal of sin. Yet the removal of sin does not occur apart from open confession that removes the barrier of a guilty conscience and so re-establishes a relationship with God. In that restored relationship the righteous shout for joy.

As for the basis of forgiveness, God's forgiveness is not based on human effort or on human merit. God does not reckon to the blessed forgiven the guilt that they properly own. Paul uses the psalm to teach that God grants forgiveness as a gift to those who trust God, not as a wage they earn (Rom 4:4-9). Craigie aptly summarizes this grace theology:

The psalm establishes (as St. Paul was later to write) that justification and forgiveness for mankind are not achieved on the basis of law, or of circumcision, but on the basis of the divine grace, which flowed in response to the faith of the one confessed and sought forgiveness (Rom 4:6-9)...The psalm is thus central to the gospel and points out the path of true happiness to sinners aware of their need for forgiveness.⁶

"They only are blessed who rely upon God for mercy," says Calvin.⁷

Psalm 32, however, is silent about God's justice in not reckoning the guilty as guilty. That concept is handled in the priestly liturgy of sacrifice that points to the vicarious sacrifice of Christ to satisfy God's justice. But that doctrine is not the concern of Psalm 32, a pastoral psalm to restore sinners to God and so find the psychological-spiritual removal of sin.

⁶ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 268.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Reprinted by Baker Books, 2003), 524.

⁵ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 1998), 302.