

“Blessed Is the One”

A Sermon on Psalm 32

Texts: Psalm 32:1-11; Romans 4:1-8

There is nothing worse than to feel the conviction of sin—that miserable sense that you’ve done wrong and that your actions displease God because they violate his commandments. The Psalmist describes this feeling as akin to the oppressive heat of a hot and sweltering day. On the other hand, there is nothing better than to know the forgiveness of sin—the sense that the guilt of our wrong-doing has been forgiven, and that we are now considered righteous, as though we had never broken a single one of God’s commandments. The Psalmist describes this sense as a safe hiding place in times of trouble. This then, is the theme of the 32nd Psalm—where and how to find true happiness and peace stemming from the knowledge that our sins have been forgiven, and that we are counted as righteous before God. When someone once asked Martin Luther which of the Psalms he liked best—he said the Psalms of Paul (the 32nd, the 51st, the 130th, the 146th) because they teach that the full forgiveness of sins comes without works to all who believe.¹ John Calvin says that in this Psalm we are reminded, “what a miserable thing it is to feel God’s hand heavy on account of sin,” but that “the highest and best part of a happy life consists in this, that God forgives a man’s guilt, and receives him graciously into his favor.”² Indeed, “blessed is the one.”

As we continue our series on select Psalms, we now consider the 32nd Psalm, which is quoted by the Apostle Paul in Romans 4, and used by the apostle as an important proof-text for the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. This Psalm is often considered a “penitential Psalm”—the prayer of someone deeply affected by the guilt of their sins. This is the second of seven so-called penitential Psalms in the Psalter, and the second such Psalm to appear in Book One of the Psalter. But this Psalm is much more than a penitential Psalm. It includes thanksgiving on the part of David—the Psalm’s author—as well as an appeal to divine wisdom, wisdom which is revealed by YHWH. The Psalmist gives thanks for this wisdom, which he has received through the “instruction,” “teaching” and “counsel” mentioned in verse 8. Having gained this wisdom from God, the Psalmist is moved to confess his sins and gives thank to YHWH for this wonderful blessing. Made wise by God’s wisdom, the Psalmist describes the contrast between the misery of the conviction of sin and the joy (indeed, the happiness) of knowing that he is forgiven.³ The Psalmist can describe this sense so well because he has lived it.

The 32nd Psalm is structured as follows. In verses 1-2, the blessing under consideration is described against the backdrop of the conviction of sin and the desire to seek forgiveness in verses 3-5. This, in turn, leads the Psalmist to find refuge in the Lord (vv. 6-7), where he is given instruction (vv. 8-10). The Psalm concludes with a call for God’s people to rejoice in the Lord who has heard their confession of sin,

¹ Cited in Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, Vol., 1, 86.

² Calvin, John, and James Anderson. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010.

³ VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5., 310.

and then graciously granted them the blessedness of knowing that the guilt of their sin has been taken away, that they are “covered,” and that YHWH remembers their sin no more.

The 32nd Psalm has a chiasmic structure—this is a common Hebrew literary device in which the various premises of a sustained argument simultaneously work back from the beginning and the end of a biblical passage, toward the center, in which we find the conclusion (or main point)—which, in this case, is the promise of God’s wisdom in verse 8. The conviction of sin and the assurance of forgiveness are things rightly understood only when one seeks the wisdom of God. The person who seeks this wisdom learns that their own sin is not some minor or incidental thing, and that the forgiveness they presently enjoy comes only because God provides for that forgiveness through a sacrifice which he institutes and which is acceptable to him.⁴

To put it another way, when we see things from God’s perspective as revealed in his word (i.e., in the light of God’s wisdom) we know that our sins are ultimately sins against the holy God, and that the forgiveness we now enjoy has been purchased for us by the doing and dying of Jesus Christ upon the cross, for us, and in our place. Through the lens of Scripture we see things from God’s perspective (true wisdom)—our sin is a violation of God’s holy law as well as an affront to his holiness. Forgiveness is costly and requires the shedding of the Savior’s blood. Apart from Scripture (and the wisdom of God), sin is no big deal, and forgiveness comes by merely saying we are sorry.

The 32nd Psalm is the first of a series of Psalms (33-41) which speaks of the blessedness of the knowledge of forgiven sin. Both Psalm 33 and 34 speak of the joy of those who know that YHWH is Lord, and who know that God is their refuge. These Psalms encourage YHWH’s people to trust in the Lord, to seek his divine protection, and to know that God’s love surrounds them even in times of trouble. So then, the 32nd Psalm stands at the head of a brief series of Psalms which extol the wisdom of the Lord, while at the same time, this Psalm speaks of sorrow for sin and the joy which comes when we confess our sins to the Lord who then forgives us.

With this bit of background in mind let us turn to the text of the 32nd Psalm. The Psalm opens in vv. 1-2 with the two-fold repetition of a blessing enjoyed by the people of God. *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”* The word “blessed” (*’ašerê*) can just as easily be translated “happy.”⁵ “Happy” is the person who knows that their sins are forgiven, who knows their sin is covered, and against whom the Lord does not count the guilt of their sins. The person is happy because their sins have been removed and hidden from sight. The willingness to confess one’s sins is reflected by the fact that they have no desire to hide things from God (deceit)—as if we could hide things from God. Nothing is more futile and self-defeating than to act as though God does not know what we think, what we feel, or what we have done.

The word translated as “transgression” refers to an act of rebellion—is not all sin rooted in human rebellion? The word “iniquity” comes from a root meaning to be “crooked,” and refers to the intention to do wrong. “Sin” is something that misses the mark, by falling short of what is expected of us—like an arrow not reaching the target. By repeating three times the nature of human sin, the Psalmist is striving

⁴ VanGemeran, Psalms, Vol. 5., 310-311.

⁵ Kidner, Psalms 1-7, 133.

to remind us of the gravity of our sins—because our sins renders us guilty before God, it offends his holiness, and we must realize that our sin is self-destructive and damages others. We cannot begin to appreciate what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, until we understand what Adam has done to our race by rebelling against God and plunging the human race into sin and death.

If it is vital that we understand the gravity of our sins, it is more important that we understand the blessedness (happiness) of knowing that our sins have been forgiven—that we live and die in the assurance of God’s favor. As the Psalmist used three words for sin, so too he uses three words for forgiveness. The word translated “forgiven” refers to the act of carrying away (“removing”) the guilt of sin, and even the remembrance of it. The Psalmist also speaks of our sins as “covered.” This refers to the satisfaction of God’s wrath so that our sin is no longer a ground (or basis) of God’s anger toward us. Third, our sins—once satisfaction has been made—no longer count against us.⁶ It were as though we had never committed them—even though the consequences of our sin may remain.

In Paul’s letters (in the New Testament) the apostle often makes a theological point, but follows it up with an example from the Old Testament to clarify his point, as well as to prove to his Jewish readers that the apostle is not making his “gospel” up as he goes along. Paul preaches Christ, but the same Christ Paul preaches is hidden in the types and shadows of the Old Testament. Paul does this in Romans 4:5-8, making the theological point in verse 5, that “*the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.*” God justifies, or counts as righteous, wicked people who trust in Jesus. To prove his point, Paul cites directly from this Psalm in verses 6-8 of Romans 4. *David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.’*” Paul’s point is that there is one gospel, found in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Psalmist speaks of things God’s people know and understand. We have all transgressed, sinned, and are filled with iniquities. But God forgives, covers, and no longer counts our sins against us. In light of this three-fold repetition of our sin, and the three-fold repetition of what God does so as to forgive us, John Calvin points out, “the two reasons for which the Psalmist insists so much on the subject of the forgiveness of sins are these—that he may, on the one hand, raise up those who are fallen asleep, inspire the careless with thoughtfulness, and quicken the dull; and that he may, on the other hand, tranquilize fearful and anxious minds with an assured and steady confidence.”⁷ The thought of remaining in our sins apart from Christ should absolutely terrify us. God intended his commandments (the law) to do this very thing—convict us of our sin. Although we don’t often think of the forgiveness of sins in terms of tranquilizing fearful and anxious minds, that is a great way to put what the gospel does. If we know that our sins are forgiven, then our consciences are quieted, and we can live and die in the light of God’s favor, and live and die without fear of God’s wrath.

In verses 3-5, the Psalmist describes the blessedness of the forgiveness of sins in light of the miserable condition we are in before we confess them. The Psalmist writes from personal experience—and we can all relate to the misery he describes. “*For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my*

⁶ VanGemeran, Psalms, Vol. 5., 310-311.

⁷ John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010).

groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. 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." The Psalmist knows first-hand the misery of unconfessed sin. We've all seen people who are "skin and bones" and have a gaunt look, lifeless eyes, and the pallor of sickness. Such people seem spent, they are weak in body, suffer from various maladies, and often have no joy or sense of purpose. David speaks of unconfessed sin as creating a similar condition. Unconfessed sin robs us of our vitality, we feel as though we were wasting away.

David also speaks of groaning (likely inwardly, but not necessarily in silence) all day long. Day and night he describes the sense that God's hand was heavy upon him—never relenting, never easing up, granting David no peace or relief. Like someone whose strength and energy departs from them on a sticky, hot summer's day, so too the person with unconfessed sin plods along without relief, with little joy, and every task, even the small ones, seem like an ordeal. Nothing seems right. Nothing works out as it should. Everything feels more difficult and tedious than it really is. This is what unconfessed sin, the corresponding guilt, and the sense that we under God's judgment (and his displeasure) does to us. No relief will come until David confesses his sins and pours out his soul unto his Creator-Redeemer.

But in verse 5, David does exactly that. He acknowledges and confesses his sins to YHWH. The same three words for sin he used in vv. 1-2 he uses again, only now in a different order. The words he used for forgiveness are replaced by three verbs related to the confession of his sins. First, David acknowledges his sin, i.e., he takes full and personal responsibility for them and makes them known—although YHWH already knew them. Second, David does not cover them up—his sins are now exposed. Third, he confesses his sins to YHWH, who, the Psalmist says forgave him. There is a basic and fundamental principle here. When we confess our sins, God forgives us.

Now forgiven, and aware of the blessedness of the assurance of God's favor toward him, in verses 6-7 the Psalmist exhorts all of God's people to do the same. *"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. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance."* The sense here is that suffering the consequences of our actions is a form of discipline. We may feel YHWH's absence from us—although he never abandons his people, even if he lets us feel like he has departed from us for a time. Or, we may feel the hot breath of his anger—the conviction of sin and the sense of God's displeasure with us. That is too is a form of chastisement, but not the total abandonment of the sinner to final judgment. A Christian who has not confessed their sins and stubbornly refuses to do so may feel just as the Psalmist describes—like our bones are wasting away, like God's hand is heavy upon us, and as though our strength is sapped on a hot summer day.

Notice too that David's exhortation to the people of God to confess our sins makes clear that although YHWH is always near to his people, there are special times when YHWH may "be found"—i.e., he gives us wisdom to figure out that not confessing our sins leads to the aching bones and summer lethargy described previously. This is why those who trust in Christ (the "godly") should not delay in confessing their sins, and this is why we should realize that simply continuing on needlessly in the misery which comes from not confessing our sins is utter foolishness. The Psalmist's words recall to mind the words of Isaiah 55:7-8. *"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."* When we seek the Lord, we will find him because he wants to be "found." This is especially true when it comes to confession of our sins.

As the Psalmist points out, there are times when the consequences of our sins, or the effects of the sins of others, or even the mysterious providence of God, circumstances threaten to overwhelm us like a rush of mighty water—in David’s age this was certainly a reference to a flash flood coming down one of the narrow desert valleys (wadi) brought on by a sudden rain. The rapidly rising flood waters will not reach those who pray to YHWH when he is “found” (i.e., when he reveals himself to us). YHWH is our hiding place. YHWH preserves us from trouble. YHWH’s faithfulness produces shouts of joy (deliverance) from his people.

In verse 8, we come to the main point of the Psalm (the middle of the chiasm). After realizing his sins, confessing them, receiving forgiveness, and then calling others to do the same, it is easy to overlook the fact that the speaker, the “I,” is no longer David, but YHWH. *“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”* David quotes these words of YHWH, who now reveals himself as the source of all true wisdom. With the sense of YHWH’s heavy hand removed (the conviction of sin), YHWH graciously instructs his people, teaches his people, and shows us the way we should go—in other words, he give us true wisdom. YHWH will counsel us through his word, and metaphorically, he will keep his eye upon us (God doesn’t have eyes). God is ever vigilant in keeping watch over his people. We may sleep, not pay attention, or lose interest, but YHWH never sleeps.

God’s wisdom reminds us not to behave like brute beasts. David exhorts us in verse 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.”* Animals have to be steered and guided to perform useful tasks. To get them to stay on the path you must stick a bridle in their mouths so as to keep them from going off the path. Those who seek and find God’s wisdom do not need bits and bridles. We now have understanding so as to stay on the right path and not wander off into danger.

In verse 10, the Psalmist returns to the theme of misery found earlier in verses 6-7. David says *“many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.”* Those who confess their sins and experience the joy of forgiveness are completely unlike the wicked who ultimately know only sorrow. As Calvin spoke of the forgiveness promised in the gospel as the tranquillization of the conscience because of confidence in God’s promise of pardon, our contemporaries see things much differently. Some actually seek to tranquillize their guilty consciences with tranquillizers. Calvin used the metaphor in terms of someone becoming tranquil (or at peaceful rest) because their conscience was unburdened by sin. Other than alcohol, Calvin knew nothing of modern forms of avoiding a burdened conscience: self-medication, prescribed medication, constant activity, out and out denial of the voice in your head which tells you that all is not right with God. May attempt to drown out the voice of conscience through the endless pursuit of pleasure, and the avoidance of the realities of life which characterize so much of our culture.

Calvin also knew nothing about the modern phenomena of secularization, wherein people can live their entire lives apart from any sense of God’s existence, without feeling even the slightest hint of conscience that they have sinned against either God or neighbor. The words of the 32nd Psalm ring hollow to people who have never stopped to think about God, that he created them, or that they owe him obedience and that they have sinned against him. Our modern world and all of its technological wonder has created the illusion that there is no God, so people think they have done nothing wrong—so long as what they do doesn’t hurt others. In the minds of such secularists, the only thing which creates the sense of weary bones, a lack of strength and energy which the Psalmist connects to sin, is when their cell phone goes dead or their internet connection goes down.

But let calamity come, and the secular illusion will immediately vanish in the light of the reality of a sovereign creator-redeemer who has revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ. With that reality will come the frightening realization that human misery is not that one's electronic gadgets don't work or that instant gratification and pleasure will be delayed, but that the one who created all things demands perfect obedience of us and that we have sinned against him. Then the true misery of which the Psalmist speaks will confront them, and the blessedness of which the Psalmist speaks (and which we so easily take for granted) will become the great desire and the goal of human existence. The only place where the misery of human sinfulness can be satisfied is to be within bounds of the steadfast love of God which comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

We know this to be true because as we saw from our time in Psalm 19, God has revealed his glories and perfections to all, and people can suppress the truth in unrighteousness for only so long. People can ignore the world, its creator, and their sin, until reality hits them in the face. As Paul tells us in Romans 2:14-15, *"For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them."* We can live as though there is no God and ignore what our conscience is telling us, but Francis Schaeffer was right when he said we cannot make our own world and then live in it. We live in the world God has made, and so our make-believe world will inevitably collide with his, and his world will win, because his is the world that is (reality).

The lament of Psalm 32, and the thanksgiving which arises from the knowledge that our sins are forgiven, may not mean much to the secularist, but to anyone who has been convicted of their sins by measuring themselves against God's law, David's words reveal the wisdom of God, the key to a life well-lived. The people of God are assured through God's word that we are surrounded by the love of God which is revealed to us through the promises of the gospel. *"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"* (1John 4:10). When we consider the fact that God's love for us is prior to our love for him, the exhortation David gives in verse 11 resonates with us at the deepest level of human existence. *"Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!"* What else can those who love God's wisdom do, but rejoice in the blessing of the forgiveness of sin, which are our gracious God has bestowed upon us.

As we conclude, we turn again to our New Testament (Romans 4:1-8), where Paul explains how it is that we are to understand the 32nd Psalm in light of the coming of Jesus Christ and the good news of the Gospel. After discussing how Abraham was reckoned righteous before the Lord—through faith, apart from works—in verses 4-5 Paul speaks of the way in which the forgiveness of sins comes about. *"Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."* Those of us whose sins are forgiven, are those who have given up trying to save ourselves by our own good works, and who instead look to Jesus Christ, believing that he will forgive us and reckon us righteous. Those who do this, Paul says, are the ungodly, who know our sins and our need of a Savior.

To illustrate what he means, Paul quotes verses 1-2 of the 32nd Psalm. *"Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.'" Our sins are forgiven, covered, and not counted against us when we trust in Jesus Christ. In fact, God reckons any one of us who believes in Jesus as righteous, and upright before the Lord, people who from a grateful heart seek God in times of trouble, who offer shouts and songs of*

deliverance, who are glad in the LORD, and rejoice. God justifies the ungodly, but he doesn't leave us there. His specialty is turning the ungodly into the godly.

There is nothing worse than the conviction of sin—which is why people go to such lengths to ignore the misery unconfessed sin brings upon us. There is nothing better than to hear the words of David as explained by the Apostle Paul, *blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity.* Indeed, blessed is the one.