

Reflections on Psalm 32

Introduction

Psalm 32 introduces us to a unique subcategory of the psalms of lament, a group of psalms referred to as the “penitential psalms” from the word “penitence” meaning contrition or remorse for sin (*the other penitential psalms are Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143*). These psalms describe the weakness and sinfulness of the psalmist who comes to God for forgiveness and deliverance. As we have seen, often the psalmist takes the stance of innocence when under attack by enemies; he suffers “unjustly” and asks God to deliver him because of his integrity and righteousness (see Psalm 7:3-9). Those psalms provide the true laments. However, other psalms describe times of trouble which came about as the result of sin. These psalms are still laments, but there is a sense of expected judgment, God’s “heavy hand.” Yet there remained the hope of deliverance because of God’s continuing, covenant love and mercy.

Psalm 32 is another psalm of David. As with Psalm 24 last week, we are not told the exact circumstances in which David wrote this psalm, but it is generally believed that it has its origin in David’s response to God following the infamous affair with Bathsheba and the death of her husband (2 Sam. 11). This same context is explicitly stated in the superscription of Psalm 51, the most well-known penitential psalm, but it is not unlikely that more than one psalm arose out of this sordid and horrific episode in David’s life. Psalm 32 probably presents his later reflections on the pangs of conscience before that confession expressed in Psalm 51, and his making good on his promise to instruct the godly (Psalm 51:13). This event at least provides a vivid example of the kind of sin that David has in view in Psalm 32.

Take time to recall the depth of David’s sin in these events (his lust and adultery, his abuse of power, his deceit and attempts to cover up his sin, his manslaughter, his unrepentance for at least nine months!).

But also recall how the Lord pursued David (part of His love—He would not allow David to continue in sin and hypocrisy). Through the clever confrontation of the prophet Nathan, David was made to see and feel the ugliness of his sin, leading him to repentance. He then heard the sweetest (dare we say most outrageous!) words imaginable: “Yahweh has caused your sins to pass away; you shall not die” (2 Sam. 12:13). Is it any wonder that David would write a psalm like Psalm 32?!

Read Psalm 32:1-11

In this penitential psalm David is not pleading to God for forgiveness and deliverance, but describes his painful experience of unconfessed sin and his exuberant happiness in experiencing God's forgiveness upon confession of his sin. But that's not all, much like the wisdom literature of the Bible, David goes on to exhort all believers to pray to God to experience the blessing of forgiveness, protection, counsel and lasting joy. The short psalm has several movements that can be categorized under three stanzas or units of thought:

1. The blessing of forgiveness and the misery of guilt (v. 1-5)

The first stanza develops the theme of forgiveness in two movements: the blessedness of forgiveness (v. 1-2) and the conditions for it (v. 3-5). It's almost as if David wrote the psalm backwards and began with the conclusion—the truth of forgiveness is so glorious that he must state it first and then describe how he came to experience it and exhort others to do the same. “Blessed in the one...” is the same word that begins the Book of Psalms (Psalm 1:1). It is a term of strong, explosive meaning, “O the manifold happiness of!” It seems appropriate that this term be used for both the righteous, law-keeper (Psalm 1) and the forgiven law-breaker (Psalm 32). David multiplies words for sin (“transgression”, “sin”, “iniquity”) to specify the full dimensions of human evil—the treason of sin, the failure of sin, the twistedness of sin. These three terms are matched by the three terms of God's complete forgiveness: sin is “taken away” (word for “forgiveness” – born away like the scapegoat); sin is “covered” (out of the sight of the Holy One); and sin is “not reckoned” (not charge to one's account, not liable). “Yahweh meets the anatomy of sin with the vocabulary of forgiveness: it is relief from burden, the hiding of a record, the dismissal of guilt” (Dale Ralph Davis).

But notice that the blessed person who enjoys God's forgiveness is also described as the one “in whose spirit there is no deceit.” This fundamentally marks the broken and contrite of heart; there is no attempt to cover up or excuse one's sin. There is deceit in the spirit of the person who merely admits with his mind that he sins but feels no revulsion in his heart at those sins. Sin is repulsive and horrid in God's eyes and out to be hated and shunned. The foundational condition for divine forgiveness and the cleansing of the guilty conscience is confession of sin with utmost candor in the presence of God, which includes rejecting our sin as repulsive.

This leads David to write of his own agonizing experience of sin and deceit, and the relief of confession and forgiveness (v. 3-6). David depicts his misery over unconfessed sin in bodily terms. His refusal to acknowledge and confess his sin (“kept silent”) caused his “bones to wear out” (severe distress) and his “life juices were to turn into the droughts of summer” (withering from moisture to drought – he vitality was sapped!) which led to groaning all day long. David gives us a picture of the misery and destructiveness of guilt. But David understood that this

was “the heavy hand” of God upon him; Yahweh was ultimately causing and aggravating his misery. There was a hidden mercy in this misery! God was pursuing his wayward servant, not allowing him to be comfortable and happy in his sin. The misery of sin can be a gift from God. Indeed, it led David to acknowledge and confess his sin to the Lord. He no longer attempted to “cover” his sin, but in confessing it, the Lord “covered” it (same word in v.1 and v.5). Though he had sinned against many people, David knew his sin was ultimately against the Lord, so he confessed his sin to the Lord. You can almost hear the wonder and joy in David’s voice when he declares “and YOU forgave the guilt of my sin!”

2. Instructions to the godly on the basis of David’s celebrated experience (v. 6-10)

In light of David’s own experience of sin, confession and forgiveness, he now draws lessons and instructions (“therefore”) for the godly in the second half of the psalm. Again, it comes in two movements. In the first, David is still addressing the Lord; in affect he is praying to the Lord that the godly would pray to the Lord—it is both a prayer and an exhortation. He encourages the believer to enjoy the open confession-forgiveness relation that he has experienced, and thus escape sin’s inevitable judgment. The one who prays and confesses his sin to God is blessed not only by forgiveness and peace of conscience, but also by being preserved from trouble and being surrounded with songs of deliverance. God is not only *not* against him, but is mightily for him! With a reconciled relation comes a certain security; an overall stability to a believer’s life.

In the second movement David as the king (or shepherd) now instructs his people directly (*I think the “I” in v.8 refers to David and not to Yahweh*). He underscores the importance of what he is about to say by using three synonyms: “I will instruct you,” “I will teach you,” “I will counsel you.” He gives his counsel with passionate concern for them, as a shepherd-king keeping watch over his flock. His instruction comes in the form of a parable: *don’t be like a stubborn mule*. David speaks from experience! The three clauses that modify the command explain the parable: (1) don’t be without understanding of the disastrous judgment coming upon all sinners; (2) don’t require prolonged pain to do the right thing—why should God have to break you?; (3) don’t resist drawing near to God in faith and repentance. Or to put it positively, display a willing spirit, a tender conscience, an eagerness to pray and confess sin without deceit, and delight in God’s instruction. As David said elsewhere, “a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:17). A proverb grounds the parable (v. 10) by contrasting two universal truths: the wicked will experience many pains, but the one who trusts in Yahweh will be surrounded by his covenant love

3. A call for all the righteous ones to be glad in Yahweh (v. 11).

The psalm ends as it began—the manifold joy that is to characterize the righteous ones, that is, those whose sins have been forgiven, who are upright in heart, who trust in Yahweh. Their praise escalates from rejoicing with their whole disposition, to celebrating with outward shouts of joy that make the temple ring. It is their delightful duty. How could it be otherwise? The unending streams of God’s mercy “call for songs of loudest praise!”

Pastor Mark

Questions for Reflection:

- Do you cherish the “blessedness” of forgiveness? What might hinder us from feeling this “manifold happiness? How might we cultivate a deeper sense of the joy and amazement of our forgiveness?
- How is the misery of sin a gift of God? How is it an aspect of His mercy? Have you ever experienced the vitality-draining guilt of unconfessed or hidden sin?
- David sinned against many people, and yet said his sin was against God (cf. Psalm 51:4). How do we explain this? How is all sin ultimately against God?
- As Christians, we know that all our sin (past, present, future) is forgiven by God through the death of Christ, so why is it important that we continually confess our sin? Is there any form of God’s “judgment” that Christians may experience as result of continued, unrepentant sin?

Fulfillment in Christ:

- Why is Psalm 32:1 so remarkable in an Old Testament context? Do you view God’s forgiveness of David as outrageous or unfair? Why would the forgiveness of sins by God be “the profoundest of problems?” (John Stott)
- What is the ultimate basis for Psalm 32:1? Review Romans 3:21-26. How does it solve the “dilemma” of God’s forgiveness of sinners?