

David, caught in his own web of lies, confesses his guilt to God and God forgives him. There were consequences, however, as the baby Bathsheba bears dies, but David is forgiven and restored by God who remains faithful to the promises made to David as Israel's king. Psalm 32 is David's expression of the lessons learned and of God's forgiveness experienced.

The psalm begins with a blessing: *Happy are those whose sin is forgiven* (in some versions, it reads "Blessed are they..."). There are three words used for sin in the first two verses. "Transgression" speaks of those who knowingly rebel against God or choose to break with God. "Sin" speaks of those who wander from God's ways or unintentionally miss the mark as disciples of Jesus. "Iniquity" speaks of those who commit some morally depraved or ethically corrupt act. These three words cover all types of sins: intentional or unintentional, against God and against one another, big sins and little sins. All kinds of sins are encapsulated in the psalm, and happy are we when God forgives ALL our sins.

Interestingly, the Bible speaks of three ways that God offers us forgiveness. John the Baptist, speaking of Jesus, exclaims, "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29). Forgiveness lifts the burden of sin from our shoulders. Sin may also be forgiven as a lender forgives a debt (2 Samuel 19:19). God may forgive the debt of our sin and no longer hold us accountable for it.

In Psalm 32, sin is forgiven because God covers it up, not to mask it or hide it, but to cover it over, blot it out, and make it as if it never happened. Any sin is an affront before God. Sins committed against God's creation are to be considered sins against the Creator. When the Psalmist speaks of God as his "hiding place" (32: 7), he is expressing the idea that God can cover over our sin and make it disappear because God is both the offended and the judge. Only God, as the offended party, can offer forgiveness, and only God, as our judge, can decide our punishment. Happy are those, says David, for whom God offers the forgiveness that covers sin, wipes it out, and offers mercy in its place.

Happy, too, are those in whose spirit there is no deceit. David learned that nothing is hidden from God. Before God our sins are glaringly obvious. There's no point in lying to ourselves or to God, for God will find us out. In verses three and four, David explains what happened to him when he tried to deceive God. He says while he kept silent about his sin, his body wasted away. The guilt gnawed at him. He may even have become physically sick, "*groaning all day long*." He says his strength dried up "*as by the heat of the summer*."

In the original Hebrew, the word we translate as strength is "sap." David's vital juices, the Living Water within him, dried up as if evaporated by a fever.

David says it felt as if the hand of God's judgment weighed heavy upon him. Though David tried to hide from God, God would not leave David alone or abandoned. God's Spirit nurtured in David feelings of remorse for his sin so that he would return to God and seek forgiveness. David suffered, he complained, but this was not a prayer to God, and it brought him no relief.

Only when David acknowledged his sin and confessed his sin to God did David find relief. Those two words, acknowledge and confess (verse 5), are the necessary acts of a repentant person. First, we must acknowledge to ourselves the sin we committed, and then we must confess that sin to God who alone has the power to forgive it.

Acknowledging and confessing our sin is difficult. Owning up to our mistakes and making them public goes against every human impulse. The irony is that when we lay our sins bare in the light of God's love, those sins fade as shadows on a sunny day. Tertullian, the third century theologian and Christian writer, put it this way: "The less you spare yourself, the more God will spare you." [*"Quantum tibi non peperceris tantum tibi parcat Deus."*] Only when we stop trying to hide our sins from God will they truly be hidden by God's grace and forgiveness. When we acknowledge and confess our sins, God can and will forgive them.

John writes: "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:8-9). Verse 5, David sums up the whole pardon process: acknowledge your sins to yourself, confess your sins to God, and receive God's forgiveness. Setting these three elements in one sentence indicates that it is one continuous process. The forgiveness comes as soon as the acknowledgement and confession occur. God's pardon is immediate and absolute. David experienced this: he realized his sin, he confessed it to God, and he received God's forgiveness.

The only proper response to someone who receives God's forgiveness is prayers of praise. Here, David speaks directly to God as he exhorts God's people to offer prayers of thanks for God's deliverance from sin. He uses the image of finding safety with God amid the rising flood waters, saying that those who trust in God will be saved, hidden from danger, and preserved from their enemies (v. 7). What's more, God will surround God's people

with “*glad cries of deliverance*” (v. 7). This may refer to seeing occasions for joy all around us, or it may signify the people of God gathering together to sing God’s praises for God’s deliverance. Either way, the proper response to God’s faithfulness is prayer and praise. This is a powerful profession of faith from a man who has first-hand experience of God’s grace and mercy.

God answers David’s profession of faith. God, whose eye is upon us (v. 8), will instruct us and teach us in the way we should go. God admonishes us not to be like the horse or the mule, dumb beasts who must be forced to obey with bit and bridle (v. 9). If we will not draw near to God and obey of our own free will, then we lower ourselves and God will treat us as brute animals, taming our wild spirits. Instead, God invites us to have a teachable spirit, one open to God’s Spirit which will lead us in the right ways, God’s ways.

David contrasts the lives of those who oppose God and live in torment with those who live with and for God, surrounded by God’s lovingkindness (v. 10). The psalm ends with all God’s people rejoicing in the generosity of God who pardons us for our sins (v. 11). It’s reminiscent of Jesus’ words that all of heaven rejoices over the return of one soul to God (Luke 15:10).

We know that with God there is always forgiveness for those who repent and seek God’s grace. In Jesus Christ we have a Savior who came to show us a better way to live, and who died to make that new life possible, free of sin. Now, with God’s Spirit, we have opportunity to live as God’s people, for God’s people, and with teachable spirits turned to the God in whose lovingkindness we live. Happy are those whose sins are forgiven! Happy are those who claim Jesus Christ as their Savior. Happy are those who have God’s Spirit to guide them. Happy are we!

Prayer: Lord, I know that I am a sinner. Forgive me for the things I’ve done – knowingly and unknowingly – that hurt others and you. Guide me to become more like You. Help me to watch my words and actions, and guard me against future mistakes and errors. Thank you for sending your son, Jesus, to die for my sins. Thank you for giving me your Spirit to teach my heart your ways. Most of all, thank you for your love and forgiveness toward me. In the name of Your son Jesus, I pray, Amen.

Source: A. F. Kirkpatrick, editor. *The Book of Psalms* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1903), 161-165.

## The Joy of Forgiveness

Sunday, March 31, 2019  
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Psalm 32  
1 John 1:5-2:6

Augustine, one of the early church fathers, was a huge fan of Psalm 32. It’s said that shortly before his death, Augustine had the words of Psalm 32 painted on his wall as a reminder of his own sinful, human nature and of God’s amazing grace. Augustine is quoted as saying, “*intelligentia prima est ut te noris peccatorem.*” [“The beginning of knowledge is to know yourself to be a sinner.”] Psalm 32 is based on the premise that we are all sinners, but that our God is a forgiving God to those who seek God’s grace and forgiveness.

Psalm 32 is one of the seven penitential psalms of David (along with psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143). Scholars believe that King David wrote these psalms after his dalliance with Bathsheba. David wrote Psalm 51, for example, in the immediate aftermath of David’s sin with Bathsheba as a plea for God’s forgiveness. Psalm 32, by contrast, is written sometime much later, as David reflects on his experience of God’s forgiving nature. David had much for which to atone.

You know the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Boy sees girl. Boy wants girl. Boy hatches a stupid plan. Boy gets girl. Girl gets pregnant. Boy panics. Boy hatches another stupid plan. Boy shifts the blame. Boy kills her husband. Boy covers up his guilt. Boy is exposed. Boy admits he is stupid. God forgives boy.

David broke all Ten Commandments in this story. David allowed his desire for Bathsheba to become his god, the image of her engraved on his heart instead of God. David, as God’s chosen man and anointed king, abused his authority and took God’s name in vain when he lived like the Devil. David forgot that every day, Sabbath or otherwise, belongs to the Lord and is therefore holy; and he dishonored his heavenly father and his earthly parents by his bad behavior. By sending the order, David killed Uriah, an innocent man. By sleeping with Bathsheba, David committed adultery. By sending for Bathsheba, David coveted Bathsheba and stole another man’s wife. Finally, David tried to cover it up, bearing false witness to avoid his culpability in these crimes. Like I said, David has much for which to atone.