

The Experience of Forgiveness

Psalm 32

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The algorithms on social media are strange, and I don't fully understand how they work. Recently, my algorithm decided that I would like to watch videos of rugs being cleaned. I think I watched one once, so now I see lots of them. Admittedly, it is kind of fun to see something that is black with dirt and grime from years of neglect be made new in just a few short minutes. It's amazing to see the beauty that is revealed when all the dirt and grime is taken away.

In some sense, I think that's what Psalm 32 celebrates as well. It is a celebration of the Lord's forgiveness and a call to its readers to embrace and experience that forgiveness for themselves. David recognizes that the Lord's forgiveness is even more satisfying than seeing a carpet that is unrecognizable be made clean once more; he reminds us that the Lord cleans our very souls and reveals the beauty of who He made us to be.

Many have suggested that Psalm 32 may be related to Psalm 51, which was David's psalm of lament and repentance after his sin with Bathsheba. In that psalm, he says he will teach other sinners the Lord's ways. Some think that is why Psalm 32 was written—as a way of instructing others in how to seek God's forgiveness. In the introduction, many translations explain that this is a “maskil” of David, and most believe this word means a psalm of instruction. This psalm was intended to instruct others in the same lessons David had learned through his own experience.

The Reality of Sin

David begins with what can rightly be called a beatitude. In Jesus' sermon on the mount, He began with several such statements, which each started with “blessed are those...” David begins his psalm in a similar fashion.

¹ Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! ² Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty! (Psalm 32:1-2, NLT)

If you look carefully at these opening lines, it may seem like David is repeating himself. It is easy for us to just dismiss that as something that happens in poetry, but David chose his words carefully. In the underlying Hebrew, David uses three different words to describe sin in these first two verses. I think this is to help us see the breadth and depth of sin, because it is only after we grasp this that we can celebrate the fullness of God's forgiveness.

First, he talks of our disobedience. All sin has disobedience at its core. We tend to frame our sin as something less than this. We imagine that we simply “messed up”, but the truth is sin is a conscious choice to ignore God's instructions and go our own way.

Second, David just uses the word sin. The word here is similar to the word used in the New Testament to describe sin, and it is an archery term. Literally, it means to miss the mark. So, it means not hitting the target we were aiming at. If you miss a target that's a long way off, it's easy to think you were pretty close. It isn't until you get to look closely that you realize how far off you were. That is our experience with sin. We think we're doing pretty good, but in reality, we miss the target by a mile.

Finally, he talks of our records being cleared. The word used here is an accounting term. In essence, David is describing how our sin builds up a debt against us. Each time we sin, we add to that debt. It creates a massive burden that will crush us under its weight.

Until we understand the various facets of our sin, we will not fully appreciate the joy of forgiveness. David points us to the completeness of God's forgiveness. He doesn't just deal with one aspect of our sin, but all of it. Once we understand the greatness of our sin, then the greatness of God's forgiveness leads to great joy. The one who thinks they have been forgiven little feels little gratitude, but the one who sees that they have been forgiven a great debt should have great joy. This is what David wants us to see.

Confession

David recognized, however, that forgiveness doesn't just happen. There is a process that must be undertaken before forgiveness can be received.

³ When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long. ⁴ Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat. ⁵ Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the Lord." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. (Psalm 32:3-5, NLT)

David describes what it is like when we refuse to confess our sin. He said that the Lord's hand of discipline was heavy upon him, and his strength evaporated like water in the summer heat. That image may be hard for us to picture in the Midwest (where we have high humidity in the summer), but if you've ever spent much time in the deserts of the southwest, you know that if you pour water on the sidewalk in the middle of the day, it will disappear almost instantly. This is how David described himself. When he had unconfessed sin in his life, he was constantly sapped of his strength, and exhausted by the weight of it all.

You may have experienced this. Trying to hide your sin from others is exhausting. You have to keep track of what people know and consider how to make sure they stay in the dark. If you've told lies, you have to remember what lies you've told to what people. You have to keep track of the story you've constructed and make sure it fits and explains all the pieces. It requires far more effort than telling the truth.

David also points out that unrepentant sin brings the Lord's hand of discipline upon us. We are God's children, and He does not want to harm us, but as any parent knows, simply allowing your child to run amok isn't good for them either. A good parent

disciplines their child, sometimes choosing to make life significantly more difficult for them so they learn that their rebellion has consequences. Discipline is actually designed to protect your child from far greater consequences down the road.

The Lord does the same for us. He loves us too much to let us persist in sin. So the deeper we descend into sinful behaviors and the longer we persist in them, the greater the pressure the Lord will bring to bear on us. He will make us miserable to help us see our need to change. This is not an act of anger, but an act of love.

David describes what happened when he confessed his sin and stopped trying to hide his guilt. There was freedom! The Lord granted him forgiveness. But that freedom could not come until he had confessed his sin and repented before the Lord. So, what is needed for us to experience this same relief? It's really a two-step process.

First, we must acknowledge our sin for what it is. I find it amusing to read corporate apologies, because they usually do not admit doing anything wrong. They speak of "errors in judgment", or "unfortunate incidents." These companies aren't sorry they did something wrong (because they don't think they did). Such apologies are usually nothing more than, "I'm sorry what I said offended you." Which isn't an apology at all! They aren't sorry for what they've done, they're sorry it's costing them money.

If we want to experience the freedom of forgiveness, we must first see our sin for what it is. We cannot simply be sorry for the consequences of our sin; we must grieve because we know it is wrong. The goal is not to avoid punishment, but to own up to our fault. We must not make excuses (I know this was wrong, but...) but must take responsibility for our actions. We must also acknowledge the different layers of our sin.

We must see our rebellion against the Lord—we made a conscious choice to ignore God's commands and go our own way. We must seek forgiveness for that attitude. But we must also see how our actions affected others. How did your rebellion change things in their life? Did it make them feel unvalued? Did it put them in a difficult situation? Did your actions deprive them of something they wanted or cared about? We must admit all these things and seek forgiveness for them.

Second, we must desire to turn from our sin. This step is called repentance. It's not enough to simply ask for forgiveness; if we truly recognize our sin as a mistake, we will work to turn from it going forward.

Sometimes we ask the Lord to forgive us of something we have done, but we fully expect to come back tomorrow with the same request. We have no intention of changing. I contend that true repentance always has a desire to go in a different direction. There may be a high likelihood that we will fall into a particular sin again in the future, but we must always want to leave it behind for good.

Sometimes it is hard to want to change though. One of the things that is often true of addicts of any sort is that they cannot envision a life that doesn't include their sinful

behavior. An alcoholic cannot imagine a life where they never have alcohol again. A smoker cannot picture never smoking another cigarette. Someone addicted to sex cannot imagine a life where they don't indulge their sinful desires. This is a major hurdle to healing and freedom.

But it's not just addicts who struggle with this. We are all addicted to sin, and it is hard to imagine a life where we don't get angry, or curse, or think negatively about others, or hold our tongues. But repentance is about a continued desire to go a different way. It's hard because it's new and not the well-trodden paths we're used to, but we do not blaze that new trail alone. The Lord will help us. Repentance means asking God to help us leave those sinful patterns behind and go in a new direction. If we ask for forgiveness but have no intention of changing course, we cannot experience the joy of forgiveness David speaks of in these verses.

The good news is that for those who genuinely repent and seek forgiveness, the slate is wiped clean! The burden is lifted and we are free to go forward without the crushing weight of our past. God no longer holds our past sins against us (even though there may still be consequences from them) but restores us and makes us righteous in His sight. What joy for those whose sins are forgiven!

Call to Action

David doesn't just leave us with this hope of forgiveness, he calls his readers to action.

⁶ Therefore, let all the godly pray to you while there is still time, that they may not drown in the floodwaters of judgment. ⁷ For you are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of victory. (Psalm 32:6-7, NLT)

David says the godly should pray to God (for forgiveness) while there is still time. These words hide a deep, but important truth: the Lord's mercy will not last forever. David says that if we do not seek the Lord's forgiveness, we will drown in the floodwaters of judgment. That statement should bring to mind the flood of Noah's day. The Lord has promised that He will not flood the earth again, but He has also promised He will punish sin. Those who do not enjoy the Lord's forgiveness will endure His judgment.

David calls his readers to take stock of their current condition and take action while they still can. He says that the wonder of God's forgiveness is worth the uncomfortableness of acknowledging our sin and failure and seeking to go in a different direction.

He brings one more reminder of this in verses 8-9,

⁸ The Lord says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. ⁹ Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control." (Psalm 32:8-9, NLT)

He reminds us that the Lord will guide us. For those who are believers, the Lord promises to lead us along the best pathway for life. But we have an option of how that process will go. If we stubbornly hold onto sinful thoughts, behaviors, and patterns in our lives, we should not be surprised when the Lord's correction is severe and painful.

David uses the image of a mule or horse that doesn't want to follow its master. The master puts a bit and bridle on its head, so that as soon as they try to go in a different direction, the master forcefully redirects them along the right path. In other words, David is saying we each face a choice of whether we want to do things the easy way or the hard way. Believe it or not, the easier way in life is to own up to our sin and leave it behind. David calls us all to live this way. He saw the hard way in his own life, and he calls us to learn from his mistakes.

Return to Joy

In the concluding verses of this psalm, David returns to the theme of the joy that is found in obedience to the Lord.

¹⁰ Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord. ¹¹ So rejoice in the Lord and be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure! (Psalm 32:10-11, NLT)

David's conclusion is that there is unfailing love for those who seek the Lord. Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son, which paints a beautiful picture of God's unfailing love. The prodigal son had not only run away from home, but had shown great disrespect to his father, showing that he only cared about his money. He believed he knew better and went off on his own, and quickly squandered everything he had. He finally came home broken and asking the father for a job (knowing he didn't deserve to be welcomed back as a son). While the son was still a long way off, the father saw him and went running to him, wrapped his arms around him and welcomed him home. He was waiting for the day when he saw his son's silhouette on the horizon, meaning he was coming home. This is a picture of how our Heavenly Father views us. He is gracious, and desires for us to return to Him. He does not want to punish us but wants to set us free! He sees the burden of our sin; He is simply waiting for us to recognize it as well.

David speaks as the voice of experience, recognizing the joy that belongs to those who have been forgiven. Their accounts are made right, and they are relieved of the burden of continuing to carry a weight they were never meant to, and they are free to walk a different path, knowing the Lord will be by their side. This is what David desires for each of us as well.

Conclusion

This psalm is designed to teach us about the wonder of forgiveness, but it also calls us to action. Most of us don't have to think too hard to know what needs to change in our lives. Most of us have certain sins we are ashamed of, that we wish weren't there, but for whatever reason, we keep returning to. Today is the day to do something about it. Let me give you some steps to get on the right path.

1. **Stop making excuses.** We are great at coming up with reasons our sin is justified. We blame others, we blame our upbringing or our genetics, we blame God (by saying that's just the way I am!) None of those things are true. You bear responsibility for the decisions you make. Admit that the reason you keep sinning

is because you keep choosing to rebel against God. Until you do that, you will never be free.

2. **Admit that sinful attitude to the Lord.** Repent of the lies you've been telling yourself: that you are helpless, that you cannot change, or that you're not hurting anyone. Acknowledge that you've chosen to believe those lies because they're easier than owning up to the truth, that you are guilty.
3. **Ask for His forgiveness.** Be thorough. Recognize that your sin is against Him, but it also has a ripple effect. Choose to see the hurt your actions are causing. Rather than hiding from it, choose to see it honestly. Ask the Lord to help you to see those things too and allow yourself to see how your sin affects others.
4. **Seek forgiveness from those you've hurt.** Own up to the ways you have wounded others. Don't try to excuse or diminish what you've done, but show them you see the hurt you've caused and ask their forgiveness. Even if they are unwilling to forgive, this step is a huge step toward healing.
5. **Ask for God's help to go in a different direction.** The Lord will forgive us if we come to Him. He will also lead us if we will follow. The idea that you cannot change is false. Nothing in the world is more powerful than our God, even your most deeply ingrained habits. Ask for His help to blaze a new path. Ask Him to help you battle the temptations that will inevitably arise. You may have to ask for His help every hour (or maybe even more!) but He will give you what you need to go in a different way.
6. **Confess your sin to others.** Find a trusted Christian friend and admit your sin to them. Ask them to keep you accountable as you strive to go in a different direction. The battle is always easier when it isn't fought alone.
7. **Repeat!** You are going to fail. Even when you've decided you're done and will never return, you may still fall again. But all is not lost. Remember the story of the prodigal son. God doesn't want to destroy you; He wants to restore you! So run to Him, over and over again if necessary, knowing His forgiveness and His guidance will always be there for you.

David's intent in this passage (and mine in this sermon) is not to make us feel bad, *per se*. But David also recognizes that until we are honest about the reality of our sin, until we accept responsibility for it, until we see just how deeply it affects us and others, we cannot possibly appreciate the forgiveness the Lord offers us.

My prayer is that you will learn the lessons David did, but without having to go through some of the trials he had to experience. David rejoices in the grace and mercy of a God who offers complete and total forgiveness, even though we do not deserve it. May we be people who do not feel the need to hide our sin, to explain it away, or to pretend it doesn't exist. Instead, may we be honest about our failures, and also honest about the grace of our glorious God.

Like a carpet that has been ignored for far too long, Jesus promises to make us clean. But that cannot happen until we're willing to let Him get to work on us. So run to Him today, because He's waiting with open arms.

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