

August 3, 2025

GOD'S FORGIVENESS: PSALM 32:1-11

Introductory Activity

Introduce: Ask the group what a pig, a spider, and agro-business have in common? You can give them a hint and explain that it was “some pig” and a very literate spider. Of course, the thing these three words have in common is *Charlotte's Web*, the book by E. B. White. Let's try a little more difficult one. What do a pig, Napoleon, and communism have in common? If you need a hint, the slogan “Four legs good. Two legs bad.” might help. This series of words finds its commonality in the political satire *Animal Farm*, written by George Orwell. In both of these books, the author uses farm animals to teach a lesson.

Transition: Today, we are going to study Psalm 32, in which David uses a farm animal to teach us a lesson. Psalm 32 is a penitential psalm. We looked at one of these last week. A penitential psalm deals with sin, confession, and forgiveness. In Psalm 32, David teaches the reader about the benefits of seeking forgiveness. At the end of the psalm, he is going to challenge us not to be like a stubborn farm animal who has to be controlled using a bit or bridle. Let's begin with this verse because it will help guide our thoughts on the psalm. Psalm 32:9 says, “Do not be like a horse or mule, without understanding, that must be controlled with bit and bridle or else it will not come near you.” In this psalm, David is going to show us how not to be a prideful mule and instead be a humble worshipper.

1. JOY (PS. 32:1-3)

Read or have someone read Psalm 32:1-2.

Explain: As I said before, this is a penitential psalm that deals with sinfulness and forgiveness. The penitential psalms usually have a sense of lament. Belcher contends that this psalm is a little different. From his point of view, “it is not a lament over sin [so much as it] is a thanksgiving for the forgiveness of sin” (Belcher, *Messiah*, 100 in Exalting, 239). The superscription and the circumstances of the psalm help us understand this. First in the superscription, we see that this psalm is “Of David. A Maskil.” The meaning of the word “maskil” is somewhat uncertain. The Explore the Bible Leader Guide agrees with others when it asserts that “the word ‘maskil’ means ‘instruction’ in Hebrew” (ETB LG, 102). So, it appears that David is writing this psalm to teach the reader something. The something he wants to teach is a hard lesson that he once learned. Commentators contend that this psalm and Psalm 51 are related to one another. The superscription for Psalm 51 tells us that David wrote it “when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.” Psalm 51 is a prayer of confession seeking the forgiveness of the Lord after

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Psalms Vol 1* (Preaching Vol 1)
- *Preaching the Word: Psalms Vol 2* (Preaching Vol 2)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 1-50* (Exalting 1-50)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 101-150* (Exalting 101-150)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 119* (Exalting 119)
- *Two Horizons OT Commentary: Psalms* (Two Horizons)
- *New American Commentary: Psalms 73-150* (NAC)

committing adultery and murder. That psalm does not contain the angst or lamentation we find in Psalm 32. Instead of showing us how David got to the point of confession, it simply records the confession itself. We also see true repentance because verses 10-12 reveal David's desire for God to change him. In verse 13 of Psalm 51, David declares, "Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and the sinners will return to you." Some scholars understand Psalm 32 to be David's attempt to keep the promise made in Psalm 51 to teach others (cf. Exalting 239). Psalm 32 reveals how David came to the place of confession and the benefits of confession. We should also note who David seeks to instruct. In Psalm 51, he says he will teach the "rebellious" and the "sinner." Verse 6 of Psalm 32 narrows this audience further. Johnston writes, "David is thinking primarily about believers when he writes this psalm... [He] is thinking of godly people like him who fall into sin." (Preaching, 333-334) So, what is the first thing David attempts to teach the rebellious, sinful believer? Verses 1-2 reveal that there is joy in forgiveness.

Examine: Ask the group to examine verses 1 and 2 and discover the words David uses to describe sin. (transgression, sin, and iniquity)

- Transgression connotes the idea of rebellion or defiance. It is a rebellion against the sovereign God of the universe. "We defect to the enemy. We ruin our lives and the lives of others. We live in rebellion against God." (Preaching, 330) The word transgression "describes our relationship to God. (Preaching, 330)
- Sin "conveys the idea of aiming at a target but missing the mark or falling short of it." If we imagine a person missing the target after aiming an arrow, we assume he missed it by accident. However, Akin points out that instead it is "missing, often with willful intent, the clear and expressed will of God" (Exalting, 239). Sin "describes our relationship to God's law."
- Iniquity "can mean crookedness, perversion, or waywardness...or even intentional sins." (Preaching, 330) In the Bible, the word can also be a word to refer to sin in general. It also provides us with a picture of the sinful person—crooked, perverse, wayward. He "they took a twisted, perverted path of disobedience and self-satisfaction. (ETB LG, 104) David's use of the word iniquity "describes the effect that sin has on us: we are crooked, perverse, and guilty before God." (Preaching, 330)

We said that David's first lesson for the reader is joyful. These do not sound like joy-inducing things. However, it is not the sin that produces joy. Instead, it is what God does with sin that produces joy.

Examine: Ask the group to examine verses 1 and 2 and discover the three words or phrases that describe God's actions related to sin. (forgiven, covered, does not charge)

Notes:

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- Forgiven “suggests lifting something up or carrying something off.” In Psalm 38:4, David describes sin as a heavy burden. In forgiveness, God will lift that burden from the hunched shoulder of the wayward believer.

Discuss: In what ways can sin be a burden for the believer? (Sin is a burden because it weighs on the spirit of the person who seeks to follow the Lord. It is a burden because it weighs on the relationship between the believer and the Lord. Just as a disagreement with a friend or family member can weigh on you emotionally and burden your relationship, sin can weigh on a person emotionally and burden their relationship with the Lord. God's act of forgiveness removes the burden.

- Covered carries the idea of atonement. “The blood of a sacrifice covered the sins of the people and restored their relationship with God.” (Preaching, 330)
- The phrase “does not charge” relates to accounting. “This is a bookkeeping word—it means to charge something to an account. When God forgives, he does not charge our sin to our account... In God's accounting, he leaves sin off the ledger and adds righteousness to the ledger.” (Preaching, 330-331)

Discuss: Considering what we learned about sin and the metaphors used to describe forgiveness, how do the reality of sin and the possibility of forgiveness relate to joy?

Summarize Transition: The word translated as joy is also translated as blessed. This is the first time the word blessed or joyful is found in the book of Psalms since its first appearance in Psalm 1:1 (cf. Preaching, 328). There, the joyful or blessed man is the one who does not walk, stand, or sit with the wicked. The first psalm points us to Jesus, the only Person who could do that perfectly. In other words, the Christ-like person is blessed. In Psalm 32, it is a different kind of person who is blessed. “The man of Psalm 1 is the perfect man, Jesus Christ. But Psalm 32 declares the blessing of a man who is far from perfect.” (Preaching, 329) And that “far-from-perfect man will manifest joy at being forgiven by the perfect man. The perfect man's blessing is imputed on the forgiven man. Jesus is the ultimate solution for sin—he carries it away, he covers it completely, and wipes the slate clean. However, something must come first. Let's look at David's journey toward blessedness.

2. FORGIVENESS (PS. 32:3-5)

Read (or have someone read) Psalm 32:3-5.

Explain: If verses 1 and 2 describe the blessed man, verses 3 and 4 describe the opposite. In Psalm 1:1, the Christ-like man “is like a tree planted beside flowing streams.” The man in Psalm 32:3-4 is a brittle, groaning, strained, and drained man. The reason for his condition can be found when we note the last two words in verse 2 and the inaction found

Notes:

“The parallelism [of verses 1 and 2] covers the full scope of our sin and the full spectrum of God's forgiveness.” (Preaching, 329)

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at the beginning of verse 3. Verse 2 tells us that the man blessed with forgiveness is one with no deceit. Verse 3 reveals that the man not yet blessed with forgiveness is one who is silent. These two ideas are related because they both concern the believer's inability or unwillingness to either recognize or admit his sin.

Last week, we talked about the corrective discipline of God. This is the discipline God exercises when a believer continues in sin and refuses to repent. Verses 3-4 paint a picture of a person suffering God's corrective discipline. The means by which a person avoids this discipline is speaking (not keeping silent) to the Lord and practicing honesty (no deceit) with the Lord. The means by which a person remains under discipline is by either trying to keep his sin secret from the Lord, that is, not acknowledging it to the Lord, or by not admitting his sin to himself.

Read James 1:8 (see Notes Box)

Reflection: The term *selah* appears at the end of verse 4. While scholars are not sure exactly what the word means, "most likely it indicates some kind of interruption or suspension of music, some kind of pause" (ETBC, 98). Ask the group to take a moment to pause and consider verses 3-4. Ask them to silently pray and ask the Lord to reveal any sins they need to confess or deal with.

Explain: Unacknowledged sin that becomes part of our lifestyle can lead to the Lord's discipline. The Bible is clear that all men are sinful, and we still struggle with sin after coming to faith in Christ. If we do not deal with that sin, we will, like David, be brittle, groaning, strained, and drained people.

However, that is not what God desires.

Read James 1:9 (see Notes Box)

In verse 5, David finally comes to the point of understanding.

Reread verse 5

Explain: We should note two things about David's confession. First, he took full responsibility. He did not hem and haw about his responsibility, nor did he try and blame someone else. Second, he took responsibility for the fullness of his sin. He uses the same three words as verses 1 and 2 to describe sin. We should also note the action of God. He "forgave the guilt of [David's] sin."

Reflection: Again, the word *Selah* appears at the end of verse 5. Let's again take a moment to pray to the Lord and confess any sins. Like David, we should be encouraged to take full responsibility for the full scope of our actions. We can also be assured that God will forgive us when we repent.

Summarize and Transition: As a maskil, this psalm is meant to teach the rebellious believer about sin, discipline, and forgiveness. David begins by extolling the joys of confession and forgiveness. He then begins to walk the

Notes:

"The 'deceit' does not have to do primarily with lying to others. This is about lying to yourself and to God." (Preaching, 331)

"The process began with David's stubborn silence. He would not confess his sin but kept on going as if nothing was wrong." (Preaching, 332)

James 1:8

8 If we say, "We have no sin," we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

James 1:9

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

"He called his actions what God called them: sin, iniquity, and transgressions." (Exalting, 242)

"The problem for most of us is not that the Lord is unavailable; the problem is we do not go to him." (Exalting, 242)

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reader through his process of experiencing the discipline of the Lord that led him to confession and repentance. The next passage includes some instructions for the reader.

3. INSTRUCTION (PSALM 32:6-11)

Read or have someone read Psalm 32:6-11

Explain: Verse 6 contains one of two commands in the psalm. The command begins with “therefore”—in light of verses 1-5, do something. David instructs the reader to pray to the Lord immediately. You might paraphrase verse 6 as, “Since the benefits of repentance are so great (vv. 1-2), since the discipline of God is so great (vv. 3-5), and since the forgiveness of God is so great (v. 5), for goodness’ sake, pray to the Lord.”

In the second half of verse 6 and all of verse 7, it seems that David changes topic by referencing the protection of the Lord. However, this is not a departure from the rest of the psalm. Instead, David is pointing out another benefit to repentance. “Probably he intends for us to understand that the blessedness of the forgiven man in verses 1 and 2 consists not only in his peace of conscience but also in the protection that God now gives him during troubles.”¹ “Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, [paraphrases 6b], ‘When all hell breaks loose and the dam bursts, we’ll be on high ground, untouched.’” (Exalting, 243)

Reflection: *Selah* appears at the end of verse 7. Let’s again stop and pause so that we can prayerfully reflect on the words of Psalm 32. Ask the group to silently consider troubles they might be facing. Ask the group to spend a moment silently praying verses 6b and 7 to the Lord. Ask the Lord to protect and secure them in the midst of trouble. If their troubles are due to their sin, encourage them to repent and call on the Lord for his mighty action regarding their troubles.

Reread verses 8-9

In verse 8, there is a shift in the psalm. All of the commentaries I read say the “I” in verse 8 is the Lord. It’s like God steps in and says, “Ok, listen up. David has told you his story of moving from discipline to blessing. Let me tell you how to avoid the trouble he went through. Instead of being the man who is blessed through repentance and forgiveness (Ps 31:1-7), be like the man in Psalm 1 who is blessed for Christ-like living.” God then give three verbs to describe His actions. God says that He will “instruct,” “show... the way to go,” and “give counsel.” As in Psalm 1:2, we are to “delight... in the Lord’s instructions.” However, it is our choice whether or not we follow the Lord’s instruction. He cautions us to not be stubborn like the mule. If we are, the bit and bridle of discipline will be employed

Notes:

“[He] is blessed not only because of what God does not do—namely, impute iniquity to him—but he is also blessed by what God does do—namely, *preserve* him from trouble and *surround* him with songs of deliverance.” (Piper)

“God is not only not against him, he is mighty for him.” (Piper)

“When David acted like a mule, God put the bridle of suffering on him and dragged him to the barn. A guilty conscience and all the agonies that go with it is a merciful gift to the unrepentant.” (Piper)

¹ John Piper, “Go to God in Prayer: How Not to Be a Mule” <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/go-to-god-in-prayer> accessed July 17, 2025

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by the Lord. As we saw last week God does to use the "bit and bridle" as judgements or out of cruelty. Instead, he does so out of love for His people.

The challenge to follow the Lord continues in verse 10. This reminder comes in two forms. First, the negative reminder in verse 10a that reaffirms the pain of sinful living. Second, the positive reminder in verse 10b that those who follow the Lord will experience His steadfast love.

Summarize and Transition: The psalm concludes with one last imperative. The reader is instructed to be glad and rejoice. This imperative returns to the main theme of the psalm. David has instructed the reader on the blessings of repentance, the sorrows of rebellion, the acts of confession, and the benefits of following the Lord. The concluding verse instructs the reader on what to do after repentance and the Lord's forgiveness. "This is a loud verse! When you fail and God forgives you, it makes you want to stand up and 'shout for joy!'" (Preaching 335). The time for gloominess is during the Lord's discipline. The time for sorrow is during the prayer of repentance. The time for joy and praise is in the aftermath of God's forgiveness.

CONCLUDE

Psalm 32 is David's attempt to instruct those who, like him, fall into patterns of sinful behavior. We should read this psalm with an appraising heart.

Challenge

- Do you need to return to the Lord's blessing through repentance?
- Do you need to humble yourself and follow the Lord's instructions?

Notes: