

Restoring Your Soul Through Psalms
Sacrifice with Shouts of Joy
Psalm 32

First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

November 15, AD 2020
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I have an Italian Greyhound who might as well be a sociopath. He feels no guilt. Any remorse he shows is simply to get out of trouble. But otherwise he is devoid of conscience. While I'm cleaning up a puddle, his eyes say, "What?! Look, I had to go. It takes less time for you to clean this up than it does to take me out on the leash. What's the big deal? I did you a favor."



By contrast, growing up we had a German shepherd with a highly delicate conscience. On most days, she'd greet us with loud barking and jubilant jumping as we came in the door. But some days, we'd be met at the door with silence. She was nowhere to be seen. The shredded garbage on the floor was the clue. Somewhere a very guilty dog was hiding. How sorry she was that her appetite got the better of her! If we scolded her, she tried to sink her head beneath the floor. She felt guilt that ran deeper than fear of punishment. But oh how great was the joy of restoration! When I forgave her, and praised her, and patted her, she'd dance with delight. The joy overflowed. Reconciliation was life.

That's what we're hearing in Psalm 32. The misery of having done wrong and hiding. The joy of coming clean and being restored. Let's walk through how this psalm unfolds.

First, we note that this is a teaching psalm. It weaves an intimate personal experience with a wisdom that applies to everyone. David begins "Blessed is the one whose sin is forgiven." When David says "blessed," he's talking about "well being," "good living," "feeling fulfilled." He means "In a good place is the one forgiven." or "Living a healthy life is the one whose sin is forgiven." Succinctly, "Happy is the one whose record is made clean." This is a wisdom psalm. It answers the very question underlying every philosophy: what makes for the good life? What's a growthful, fulfilling path for us? David replies, "I'll tell you, at the heart of every fulfilled life is knowing that your sins are forgiven."

Now that's not a title you see frequently in the "personal growth" section of books on Amazon. In fact, it sounds a bit ridiculous in a secular age. What makes for a good life? Knowing that you have transgressed the law of God and discovering that God forgives you anyway. Wait, who are you to tell me what the law of God is? And really, who are you to judge me that I have broken some law of God? What makes you think I need forgiveness anyway? What an insult!

Offensive it may be, yet David is relentless in pressing that forgiveness is essential to the good life. In verses 1 and 2, David actually made three statements in a row about sin and forgiveness: Blessed is the one whose *transgression* is forgiven: those who have crossed God's boundaries. Blessed are those whose *sin* is covered: those who have missed the mark of God's desires for us. Blessed are those whose *iniquities* are not counted: those whose very hearts seek the wrong things. We might well expect verse 2 to end with a fourth way of saying this to complete the pattern.

But instead, we get a surprise. The second half of verse 2 declares, "Blessed is the man in whose spirit there is no deceit." The good life requires forgiveness from God. But experiencing forgiveness requires having a conscience that rings true. It requires a relentless honesty. And that requires a true knowledge of who God is and a true knowledge of oneself. It means passing through guilt in order to receive forgiveness. This Christian realism is absolutely essential to a fulfilled life.

But we don't come to it easily. So David makes it personal:

For when I kept silent about my sin,
my bones wasted away through my 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.

David the King saw the beautiful Bathsheba bathing. Lusting after her, David took her as his own. Bad enough. But there was this problem of her husband, Uriah, who had been off to war. David ordered him moved to the front lines, where he was killed. Adultery. The blood of a husband. David had some guilt. And he kept quiet about it for months. During that time he continued to rule as King. He played the role of being God's anointed one. It took a confrontation with Nathan the prophet before David would declare, "I have sinned against the LORD." And in Psalm 32, we learn that inside, David had not actually been getting away with it all those months. The guilt was eating him up. The hiding was sapping him dry. He plodded through his days under the weight of God's displeasure.

Why didn't David come clean sooner? Indeed, why don't we confess our sins? I heard a lot of answers that rang true this week. We don't confess because we're not ready to give up what we're doing that's sinful just yet. I might like nursing this grudge; I still think I enjoy wasting my life taking substances; I can't give up the validation that comes from this affair; I like the thrill of siphoning the company's funds into my account. Or, we don't confess because of pride. I don't want the humiliation of admitting I knew better all along and kept on anyway. I don't want to own how pathetic I am, how foolish I have been, how wrong I was. I'm going to old out a while longer blaming others, barking at any who criticize me, dancing around the emptiness of the truth. Or, I don't confess because I think I can fix this. I can work it off. I can untangle the mess without admitting wrong. I can make it up when I'm too stubborn to give in and apologize. And of course there's fear. What will God think of me that I've deliberately done this, felt this, neglected this? After I promised to be different? Again I've fallen and I'm just scared he won't take me back. How could God possibly want me now?

Desire. Pride. Fear. I kept silent about my sin, and it sucked the life out of me. Living a lie is exhausting. Spinning a web of denial fogs your soul and gloms up every relationship. There is no well being down that path. No blessing. No rest. The wind of God's Spirit blows steadily against the Christian who will not confess her sin. When people feel far from God, one of the first diagnostic questions that must be asked is "Might you have unconfessed sin in your life? What might you be hanging onto that needs to be released to the Lord? What is it you need to own and offer?"

Confessing sin is always tricky to talk about in a big group. Because people can tend to go two different ways. Some folks just don't realize the severity of our sinfulness. It goes like this: "Since God is merciful, why worry about it? He doesn't really mind a little white lie. He doesn't want us all to be prudes. Or never have any fun. He knows I didn't really mean any harm. We're only human. Nobody's perfect. After all, you can't take all this Bible stuff too literally." So we live in the shallows. We never go very deep with God or our own growth. We're meaner than we think we are. More self-centered than we know. More unaware of opportunities to love and to serve. *When we trivialize sin, we become trivial Christians.* John Calvin said, "Without true knowledge of self, there is no true knowledge of God." To put it bluntly, there is deceit in our spirits which creates a deceived view of God.

Others, though, have a hyper active conscience. We can feel that God is angry with us all the time. We're wrapped up in legalism, obsessed with keeping

every jot and tittle of the law. We're sure everything is always our fault. We believe God can't wait to point that out. We work like crazy to prove ourselves worthy. We try to be meek and humble and kind and good all the time. But an over active sense of guilt can make us mean, too. We resent those who do what they want and seem to feel no remorse. We judge people all the time because we're always judging ourselves. We live under the fear that if we're not perfect, if we don't confess everything, we won't be accepted. And John Calvin has a word for us too: "Without true knowledge of God, there is no true knowledge of self." If you think God is out to get you, you can never admit who you really are. So you'll always be living a lie, and always feeling you don't measure up.

One of Tim Keller's most famous quotes takes us to the heart of how we solve this dilemma. It bears frequent repeating and constant meditation. "The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope." Look how this gospel formula contains both true knowledge of self and true knowledge of God. It gives us freedom to embrace both.

True knowledge of self: I am way worse than I could ever admit. True knowledge of self, that I am more sinful, not less, than I've yet known leads me to cry out for a savior. It leads me to realize I can never work, earn, or prove my way out of this sense of always falling short. No God who judges me based on my merit will be able to help me. I need the one true God who alone is full of steadfast love and mercy.

True knowledge of God: I am infinitely more loved than I would ever dare to hope. God already knows the truth of me. In high definition. God's HD knowledge of me extends to the earliest impulses towards violence. It reaches the deepest, earliest wounds that have led to the most destructive strategies to keep ourselves safe from further harm. It illuminates the raw, infantile positioning of ourselves at the center of the universe. Though who we really are is glaringly apparent to the God who made us, he still loves us absolutely. He is the Father of the prodigal son who runs down the road to embrace his filthy, broken boy and welcome him home. He is the Son of God whom Paul wrote about when he said, "While we were yet enemies, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5: 10). Knowing full well who we are, the Son of God gave himself utterly to redeem us. This knowledge of God's true heart towards us in Christ frees us to admit who we are, in all our broken, wounded, prideful sinfulness. We don't need to hide, because all is known. And it is not overlooked, but it is atoned. Accounted for. Paid for. Reconciled. Redeemed.

David finally took the risk and came clean. “I have sinned before the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:13). So he could pray in our psalm, “I acknowledged my sin to you...and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” He owned his sin and discovered the freedom of forgiveness. He came into the light and the darkness of shame was dispelled. He was not rejected. He was forgiven. The weight was removed.



Living in this reality, the dual truth of his sin and God’s love, David recovered the joy that had been so long absent from his life. He said to his merciful Father: You surround me with shouts of deliverance. I can hear the voice of the Father in Jesus’ parable: “He’s home! He’s home! Fetch a robe. Start the feast. My boy was dead and he is alive. He’s home!” I can hear the voice of Jesus on the cross. In Mark’s gospel we read, “And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last” (Mk. 15: 37). In spite of the exhaustion and suffocation of crucifixion, Jesus summoned his life’s last energy to shout from the cross as he died. John’s gospel gives us the words contained in that shout. “It is finished!” (Jn. 19: 30). Complete. Concluded. Atonement accomplished. Forgiveness secured. The veil in the temple ripped in two. No more separation. With a shout of deliverance Jesus reconciled God and humanity.

There is no need to stay in the dark any longer. No need to keep running. No need to be ducking out on God. When I kept silent about my sin, life dried up. When I confessed the truth, I discovered anew that God forgives sin. The way to the good life, the life of well being, is to enter this gospel dynamic day by day. The gospel becomes a way of life and the Spirit takes us deeper into knowing ourselves and knowing God. We are far worse than we ever knew. A half century into following Christ, I’m still uncovering the depths of my depravity. Yet, we are far more loved than we can ever imagine. God already knows the full extent of me. He loves me all the way to the DNA of me. Always has. And he loves me more than I could dare hope. Loves me enough to give his Son for me. And you. Every day we press into both truths, and they lead us onward.

So David could conclude, “Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy all you upright in heart.” Christ uttered a mighty shout of deliverance for you on the cross. His love reaches even to the unknown depths of you. Come clean before him. Admit all. Omit nothing. And receive the good news of the gospel. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners! He welcomes us to echo his shout of deliverance. Shout for joy, you sinners forgiven. Shout for joy,

you prodigals come home. Shout for joy, you enemies made sons and daughters.
Shout for joy, all who have heard Christ's cry in your hearts, "It. Is. finished!"