

Augustine claimed this penitential psalm of thanksgiving was his favorite psalm.¹ He read it frequently and had its words inscribed on the wall by his sickbed.² He was both challenged and comforted by its message: “the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner.”³ The freedom to make such a claim rests in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Faith in God’s mercy, and not in our merit, gives us the freedom to acknowledge our sin and trust in God “who justifies the ungodly” (Rom 4:4). The apostle Paul used both Abraham and David to prove that we are justified by faith not works. He quoted Psalm 32 to make his case that “God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them’” (Rom 4:6-8).

Psalm 32, writes Patrick Reardon, “is the prayer of those who, standing at the foot of the Cross and forswearing all righteousness of their own, commit their lives and entrust their destinies entirely to God’s forgiving mercy richly and abundantly poured out in the saving, sacrificial blood of His Son, because ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them’ (2 Cor 5:19).”⁴

Beatitude-based Forgiveness

*Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the one whose sin [iniquity] the Lord does not count against
them and in whose spirit is no deceit.*

Psalm 32:1-2

The opening beatitudes recall Psalm 1 and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. True happiness belongs to those who are in true fellowship with the Lord. The pursuit of happiness guided by the living Word of God and the pursuit of happiness inspired by our sinful human condition are radically different journeys. Psalm 32 begins positively with a clear picture of what forgiveness means. Instead of transgressing God’s ways and living in lawless rebellion we are forgiven. Instead of failing to measure up and repeatedly falling short of God’s standard, our sins are covered. They are lifted up and taken away, so as to be hidden from both God’s sight and our sight. Instead of living with the memory of these sins, we are given the assurance that the Lord has removed these sins from our account. “When God forgives sin, the sin is removed. God will never bring it up again, nor in this life nor the world to come.”⁵ This psalm resonates with 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

¹ Penitential psalms include Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 140.

² Craigie, Psalms, 268.

³ Delitzsch, Psalms, 393.

⁴ Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 61

⁵ Ross, Psalms, 709.

Silence

*When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.'
And you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

Psalm 32:3-5

The contrast between silence and speech create a tension in this psalm. The painful inertia of quietude must be overcome before there can be wisdom and understanding. The acknowledgment and confession of sin is required before the songs of deliverance can be sung. Prayer must be voiced and forgiveness granted before ears can be open to the Lord's instruction and eyes can be open to the Lord's guidance.

As long as our sins are hidden, the Lord cannot be our hiding place. To remain silent is to be like the stubborn mule and to experience "the many woes of the wicked." But confession makes the heart sing, because the Lord in his mercy forgives our sins, restores our energy, and surrounds us with songs of deliverance.

The tone of Psalm 32, compared to Psalm 51, is more reflective and contemplative. The sin in question seems less extreme – the pathos less raw. Both psalms describe the sinful human condition: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). But Psalm 32 fits better the general malaise of moral apathy and spiritual indifference. The more subtle sins of pride and envy lurk quietly below the surface of a pleasant demeanor and a religious exterior. The silence is experienced personally but we have little difficulty imagining the collective impact of this silence on the body of Christ. Congregations can collude in a conspiracy of silence and turn a blind eye to various injustices including favoritism, racism, gender discrimination, and elitism. The church as a whole can experience the kind of fatigue experienced by the psalmist personally.

Nathan the prophet got past David's defenses and invoked in the unsuspecting sinner the deep repentance of Psalm 51. In Psalm 32, God's heavy hand was laid on David quietly, oppressively, and he describes himself suffering in silence. Like David, the ancient patriarch Job felt the heavy hand of the Lord, but unlike David, Job had no particular sin to confess. It was the silence of God that troubled Job as he pleaded to make his case to Yahweh (Job 23:2). Whereas Job gave free rein to his complaint, the psalmist stifled his conscience and refused to admit his sin. The heavy hand of God is a metaphor for spiritual depression, which in David's case was brought on by unconfessed sin. David's spiritual fatigue was self-afflicted. His unacknowledged sin and his cover-up of iniquity sapped all his strength and left him depressed and down.

The psalmist leaves unspecified the nature of the unconfessed sin that has drained his energy. His experience invites us to examine our hearts to see if there is any offensive way in us (Psalm 139:23-24). The apostle Paul described the impact of this unconfessed sin on the church at Corinth. Their failure to discern the body of Christ was both covered up and illustrated by their regular worship practices. Their insistence on keeping their old social class distinctions in the church robbed the church of their spiritual vitality. Paul insisted that this had physical repercussions. It was for that reason “why many among you are weak and sick and a number of fallen asleep” (1 Cor 11:30).

Detecting sin’s complex disguises and exposing our self-serving bias is on an on-going challenge for every disciple of Christ. Obedience falls victim to a thousand distractions and qualifications. Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard suggested that becoming aware of our sin is like trying to see our own eyeball. We have a natural inclination to pacify and placate our conscience. We tend to grade ourselves on a curve, like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, who looked down on the tax collector, and thanked the Lord that he was not like “this tax collector.”⁶

We excuse ourselves by judging others. The British abolitionists William Wilberforce warned that we have a “natural proneness to think too favorably of ourselves.” Selfishness disposes us to “overrate our good qualities, and to overlook or excuse our defects.” We are misled in our self-evaluation by “the favorable opinions of others” and by substituting good intentions for meaningful moral and spiritual change.⁷

An early advocate of self-examination was the great preacher John Chrysostom. As a pastor John John especially dreaded the temptation to vainglory, which he believed was intertwined with the quest for pastoral authority. He saw himself as all too vulnerable to the love of praise and the desire for honor. In order to win people’s favor he could see himself despising the poor, catering to the rich, watering-down doctrine, and pretending to be humble.

Puritan leader Richard Baxter in *The Reformed Pastor* (1656) hammered away at spiritual complacency among pastors. Acts 20:28 was his key text: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Pastoral integrity was Baxter’s driving concern. He described pastors who were “loath to misplace a word in their sermons” but made nothing of “misplacing affections, words, and actions, in the course of their lives. . . They that preach precisely, would not live precisely!” “Take heed to yourselves,” he pled, “lest your example contradict your doctrine . . .lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues.”⁸

Baxter focused special attention on the insidiousness of the hidden malignancy of pride. Pride chooses our friends, controls our mood, changes our voice inflection, ignites our ambition, triggers our insecurities, writes our sermons, and inspires our envy of gifted believers. Pride is a “constant companion,” “a tyrannical commander,” “a sly and subtle insinuating enemy,”

⁶ Lk 18:9-14

⁷ William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*, ed. James M. Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 114-115.

⁸ Baxter, 63.

tirelessly working to make us defensive, insecure, combative, competitive, and miserable. Pride makes our egos so sensitive that we cannot work together in team ministry nor accept honest criticism. We love those who praise us, but just let anyone find a flaw or fault and we become paranoid feeling that the world is out to get us. The proud care too much for what people think of them and the very proud couldn't care less. C. S. Lewis wrote, "The real black, diabolical Pride, comes when you look down on others so much that you do not care what they think of you."⁹

Baxter wrote, "We are so tender, that a man can scarcely touch us but we are hurt; and so high-minded, that a man who is not versed in complimenting, and skilled in flattery above the vulgar rate, can scarcely tell how to handle us so observantly," without offending us.¹⁰ Baxter warned that pride is a greater sin than drunkenness or prostitution. He went so far as to say that a person "may as certainly, and more slyly, make haste to hell, in the way of earnest preaching of the gospel, and seeming zeal for a holy life, as in a way of drunkenness and filthiness. For what is holiness, but a devotedness to God and living to him? And what is a damnable state, but a devotedness to carnal self and a living to ourselves? And does any one live more to himself, or less to God, than the proud?"¹¹

Psalm 32 challenges our silent complicity in the sins that rob ourselves and the church of the Spirit's vitality, maybe not the big, bold sins of adultery and murder, but the quiet sins of pride, envy, and selfishness that we may have even hidden from ourselves. When did it finally dawn on the psalmist that he was contributing to his own demise? Educator Parker Palmer observes, "No punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment."¹² The transition from silence to confession is not explained by the psalmist. The move from feeling the heavy hand of God to feeling the relief of God's forgiveness is simply expressed in a statement: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover up my iniquity" (Ps 32:5).

The three words for evil used in the verses 1-2, "sin," "iniquity," and "transgressions," are repeated in verse 5, forming an inclusio with the opening beatitudes. The psalmist's sins are acknowledged and confessed. He has nothing to hide and in exchange he has received the joy of forgiveness, the focus of the rest of the psalm.

Joys of Forgiveness

*Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them.
You are my hiding place;
you will protect me from trouble
and surround me with songs of deliverance.*

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper San Francisco, 1952, 2001), 126.

¹⁰ Baxter, 141-142

¹¹ Baxter, 145

¹² Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 171

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.
Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.*

*Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!*

Psalm 32:6-11

Forgiveness is not the end of the matter; it's the beginning. The imputed righteousness of Christ redefines the identity of the person. The forgiven are described as faithful (godly, devout), righteous, and upright in heart, not because of anything they have done, but because of the love and grace of Yahweh. The psalmist offers a quick sketch of powerful images capturing the joys of forgiveness. Communion with God through prayer is the first picture. All those who are forgiven in Christ are invited into fellowship with the Father. We are able to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. . ." All God's children can cry "Abba, Father."

Divine protection in the midst of the raging torrent is the second image. Sheltered from trouble in God's hiding place and surrounded by songs of deliverance is the third image. We are like the wise man in the Sermon on the Mount who built his house on the rock so that when the winds blew and beat against the house it did not fall, "because it had its foundation on the rock" (Matthew 7:25).

The fourth image pictures Yahweh teaching the forgiven: "I will instruct you / I will teach you / I will counsel you."¹³ The psalmist captures God's counsel through the glance of his loving eyes. God's forgiveness makes possible the move from a silent, sullen conscience to the quiet guidance of God's intimate fellowship. Calvin pictured David as the instructor, directing his instruction to every person singularly. He observed "that we are reconciled to God upon condition that every one endeavor to make his brothers [and sisters] partakers of the same benefit."¹⁴ However, most commentators see the Lord as the speaker. It is his loving eye that guides the forgiven. "We are not pardoned that we may henceforth live after our own lusts, but that we may be educated in holiness and trained for maturity."¹⁵

The contrasting fifth image pictures a stubborn mule that won't budge. The metaphor seems more comedic than accusatory. The beastly indifference and stubbornness of the past are behind the forgiven sinner. The sixth image is a wide-angled shot of "the woes of the wicked" set in

¹³ Whether Yahweh is speaking or David is speaking we know the instruction is coming ultimately comes from God (See Ross, Psalms, 717).

¹⁴ Calvin, Psalms, 534-5.

¹⁵ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 32. <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps032.php>

contrast to a seventh image, a self-portrait with “the Lord’s unfailing love surrounding the one who trusts in him” (Ps 32:10). The joys of forgiveness flow from the Lord’s unfailing love and cover the spectrum of our human longing for communion, protection, guidance, and fellowship. Reardon rightly sees this psalm as “a call to gladness. Joy is not just an option for the Christian; it is an imperative.”¹⁶ “Wherever faith is lively,” wrote Calvin, “this holy rejoicing will follow.”¹⁷ The only way we’ll ever be surrounded by songs of deliverance and the glad rejoicing of all those who are upright in heart is if we experience the forgiveness of our sins and the removal of our guilt. The joy of forgiveness is our strength.

¹⁶ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 62.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, 536.