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THE BLESSINGS OF FORGIVENESS

Psalm 32

by

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Lesson 9: Psalms

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You have never been so tense in your life. You have been held in custody without bail on a murder charge. The courtroom battle has dragged on for weeks, draining your vitality and weighing upon you with increasing anxiety. Finally, the big moment has arrived. With your hands manacled, the bailiff leads you into the courtroom. The jury files in after several days of deliberations. The courtroom falls silent as the judge calls the court to order. He asks, "Mr. Foreman, do you have a verdict?" Your heart is pounding and your mouth is dry as you watch him rise. The rest of your life depends upon his words. "Your honor, the jury finds the defendant not guilty."

Not guilty! A flood of relief sweeps over you and tears of joy well up in your eyes. Not guilty! It's as if a heavy weight has dropped from your shoulders! The bailiff unlocks your handcuffs and you hear the judge declare, "You are free to go." Freedom from condemnation! Life suddenly takes on new meaning. You are free from confinement, free from the constant pressure of the charges against you, free to begin a new life, because you have been released from those charges. Can you imagine how that would feel?

I hope so! Every believer ought to know. David knew how it felt! Whether Psalm 32 stemmed from David's sin with Bathsheba or from some other incident, it shows that he knew how it felt to have God as his condemning judge. But he also knew the joy and relief of experiencing God's forgiveness. He instructs us (title, "maskil," a psalm of instruction) so that we can know the blessings of God's forgiveness.

The blessings of forgiveness should
impel us to confess our sins.

This psalm flows out of the great anguish of David's heart as he groaned under the load of his guilt. It teaches us that

1. To know the blessings of forgiveness, we need to feel the burden of guilt.

Whatever happened to guilt? I fear that it has become a forgotten emotion in our day. Rather than feel guilty when we sin, we psychologize the reasons for our actions. Recently a nationally-known pastor resigned, explaining to his congregation, "Along the way I have stepped over the line of acceptable behavior with some members of the congregation." He added that "he tried on his own to face unspecified childhood issues and had been involved in years of denial and faulty coping techniques" (*Los Angeles Times* [2/22/93], p. B1).

You'll notice that David does not say, "How blessed is he whose unspecified childhood issues are forgiven and whose denial and faulty coping techniques are covered. How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute stepping over the line of acceptable behavior." David knew that he had sinned and he felt deeply the guilt of his wrong actions. His guilt was making him feel physically ill (32:3-4; see Ps. 38:2-8).

A good case of guilt is a healthy thing when we have sinned. As I heard Garrison Keillor say, "Guilt is a gift that keeps on giving." Those who appreciate most the gift of God's forgiveness are those who have felt most deeply the guilt of their sins. The great British preacher of a century ago, Charles Spurgeon, went through five years as a child of feeling intense guilt before he was saved. He goes on for a whole chapter in his autobiography describing the agony of those years. Here is a brief excerpt:

When but young in years, I felt with much sorrow the evil of sin. My bones waxed old with my roaring all the

day long. Day and night God's hand was heavy upon me. I hungered for deliverance, for my soul fainted within me. I feared lest the very skies should fall upon me, and crush my guilty soul. God's law had laid hold upon me, and was showing me my sins. If I slept at night, I dreamed of the bottomless pit, and when I awoke, I seemed to feel the misery I had dreamed. Up to God's house I went; my song was but a sigh. To my chamber I retired, and there, with tears and groans, I offered up my prayer, without a hope and without a refuge, for God's law was flogging me with its ten-thonged whip, and then rubbing me with brine afterwards, so that I did shake and quiver with pain and anguish, and my soul chose strangling rather than life, for I was exceeding sorrowful. (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], 1:58.)

Today we'd probably take such a boy to a counselor to find out what was wrong with him! But God was preparing a man to preach the wonders of His grace. Until we feel the burden of guilt, we can't truly exclaim with David, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" The burden of our guilt should drive us to seek the blessings of forgiveness. Maybe some here this morning are tormented by guilt. Perhaps no one else knows about your sin, and although you are trying to put up a good front, deep down inside you are troubled. Don't shrug it off or explain it away. Let it drive you to the cross where you'll know God's boundless mercy!

2. The blessings of God's forgiveness are great.

Psalm 32 begins just as Psalm 1 does--with a plural which might be rendered: "Oh the happinesses" The Living Bible puts it: "What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven! What joys when sins are covered over! What relief for those who have confessed their sins and God has cleared their record."

There are many blessings or happinesses for the person who experiences God's forgiveness. Here are four:

A. The blessing of a clean conscience (32:1-2).

David uses four Hebrew words for sin and three words for forgiveness which help us understand what it means to have a clean conscience before God.

Words for sin:

(1) "Transgression" = Rebellion, refusing to submit to rightful authority. God has ordained certain limits for human behavior for our good and the good of society. When we go against those limits, we transgress; we refuse to be subject to God's rightful authority in our lives.

(2) "Sin" = To miss the mark. While transgression looks at the violation of a known law, sin looks at a coming short of that aim which God intended for us to reach.

(3) "Iniquity" (NIV, "sin") = from a word meaning bent or twisted. It has the nuance of perverting that which is right, of erring from the way. Any time you have done something crooked you have committed iniquity.

(4) "Deceit" = deliberate cover-up, falsehood, hypocrisy. Trying to present a false front so that you look good even when you know you're not.

Those words for sin condemn us all as guilty before God. But David's words for forgiveness show us what it means to have a clean conscience before God.

Words for forgiveness:

(1) "Forgiven" = To bear, carry off, or take away a

burden. Our sin is a burden which God Himself bears or takes away. You are all familiar with the term "scapegoat." A scapegoat takes the blame and everyone else goes free. The term comes from the Hebrew sacrificial system. The high priest would select a goat, lay his hands on its head and confess the sins of the people, thereby, in ceremonial fashion, putting their sins on the goat. The animal was then sent into the wilderness as a picture of how God carried their sins away from Himself.

The sacrificial system pointed ahead to Jesus Christ. He was the perfect and final scapegoat for sins. He bore our sins away once for all, so that when we put our trust in what Jesus did on the cross, our sins are gone.

(2) "Covered" = Out of sight. God puts our sins out of His sight, which means He will never bring up our sins as a matter of judgment between Him and us. If we're in Christ, our sins are covered by His blood!

(3) "Not counted" ("impute," NASB) = Not charged to our account. This is the verb used of God's dealings with Abraham: "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned (credited) it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). As Paul argues, this is the righteousness which comes from faith alone, not from works (Rom. 4:5-8).

It's as if I had run up a million dollar charge account bill at a department store and I didn't have \$10 to my name. There is no way I can pay the debt. But the store informs me that the charge number on my card actually charged the debt to another man's account, and that he was a multi-millionaire and was willing to pay it on my behalf. That's what God has done for us in Christ. We owed an unpayable debt for our sin. But Christ paid it on the cross. When we trust in what He did, God credits our account paid in full and even adds the righteousness of

Christ to our account!

Martin Luther said, "Sin has but two places where it may be; either it may be with you, so that it lies upon your neck, or upon Christ, the Lamb of God. If now it lies upon your neck, you are lost; if, however, it lies upon Christ, you are free and will be saved." If your sin is upon Christ, you enjoy the blessing of a clean conscience.

B. The blessing of having God as your refuge (32:6-7).

The same man who in verse 4 complained that he was oppressed by God's hand here declares God to be his hiding place. Whereas before he feared God as his judge, now he takes refuge in Him as his protector who surrounds him with songs of deliverance. The flood of great waters (32:6) refers to God's judgment. The man who has experienced God's forgiveness need not fear the flood of God's judgment. What a blessing that, instead of having to run from God, now we can run to God and know we are safe!

The story is told of a wagon train crossing the prairie, which came over a hill and was terrified to see a prairie fire racing in their direction. It seemed as if they would be engulfed by the flames. But the leader quickly rode to the rear of the caravan and lit the dry grass behind them on fire. The same winds blowing the flames toward them fanned this fire away from them. Within minutes they all moved to the burned-off area. As the heat and smoke became more intense, a little girl cried out, "Are you sure we're safe?" "Oh, yes," said the wagonmaster, "we're safe because we're standing where the fire has already been." If Christ has taken the fire of God's judgment, then we're safe if we take refuge in Him.

C. The blessing of God's instruction (32:8-9).

Some understand 32:8-9 to be David instructing his readers (see Ps. 51:13; title of Ps. 32, "maskil"). I prefer to take these verses as God speaking (because of the promise that His eye will be on us). Either way, we have the promise of God's instruction as one of the benefits of His forgiveness.

These verses are saying that God will teach and guide the person who is sensitive to Him. If we confess our sins and grow in sensitivity to His Word, He will direct us in His ways. We're not to be stubborn or self-willed, like a horse or mule, so that God has to put a bit and bridle on us to direct us. Rather, we are to be sensitive to His Spirit and His Word, developing a tender conscience. God will use those means to direct the forgiven sinner into paths of righteousness.

Is your conscience growing more tender toward the Lord? We're not pardoned to go our own way, but rather to go God's way. The person who understands forgiveness by God's grace won't continue in sin, but will grow more sensitive to the ways of the God who has freely pardoned him.

D. The blessing of God's joy (32:10-11).

David ends the psalm by contrasting the wicked, who have many sorrows, with the righteous, who are surrounded by the Lord's unfailing love. The righteous are not those who never sin, but rather those "upright in heart" because they have confessed their sins. The thought of God's mercy to sinners who don't deserve it causes David to break forth with joy (32:11). The Judge of the Universe has pounded His gavel and proclaimed, "Not guilty!" You're free from the weight of your sins, free from condemnation, because Christ has paid the penalty! There is no greater joy than that of knowing that

your sins are totally forgiven.

John Calvin sums it up: "David here teaches us that the happiness of men consists only in the forgiveness of sins, for nothing can be more terrible than to have God for our enemy; nor can he be gracious to us in any other way than by pardoning our transgressions" (*Commentary on the Psalms* [Associated Publishers & Authors, Inc.], p. 362).

Those are some of the blessings of experiencing God's forgiveness: we have a clear conscience before God, we have God as our refuge, we have His instruction, and we have great joy in Him. But how do we experience those blessings of His forgiveness?

3. The great blessings of God's forgiveness are experienced as we confess our sins.

The turning point in this psalm is verse 5, where David confesses his sin, and verse 6 where he exhorts his readers to pray to God while He may be found. This implies that there is a window of opportunity for repentance, when God is appealing to our conscience. If we refuse to turn to the Lord, we may be hardened beyond remedy (Prov. 29:1). Please note that David confesses his sins directly to the Lord (32:5), not to a priest; not even to the ones he had wronged at this point. Sin is first and foremost against the Lord, and so we must confess it to Him. What does it mean to confess sin?

- A. To confess means to acknowledge our sin to God.

The Hebrew word and the Greek word used to translate it in the LXX both have the idea of telling forth or acknowledging openly one's sins. If we uncover our sins before God, He covers them from His judgment. The New Testament word used in 1 John 1:9 has the nuance of agreeing together with God. Acknowledging our sin

means:

(1) We call sin "sin." We don't explain it away as "faulty coping techniques due to a dysfunctional family background." We don't excuse it "weakness" or "just human nature." We say, "Lord, I sinned." The sooner we confess, the sooner we experience God's blessing. So we ought to be in the habit of "fessin' 'em as ya does 'em."

(2) We see sin as serious. The closer you get to the Lord, and thus see sin from His perspective, the more serious you will see it. My sin put my Savior on the cross. And sin always causes damage: to the name of Christ; to others in His body; and, to me. Sin always erects barriers between us and God, and between fellow human beings. Thus we must take sin seriously. Confession must not be flippant!

(3) We see confessed sin as forgiven. "You forgave the guilt of my sin" (32:5b). No sin is too great to be forgiven. If I have truly confessed my sin and still feel guilty, it is not the Lord, but the accuser of the brethren who is troubling me (Rev. 12:10-11). The blood of the Lamb fully satisfied the demands of God's righteousness. We must rest in the promise of God, that He is faithful and just to forgive all our sins when we confess them to Him.

B. To confess means to accept responsibility for our sin.

Sin deceives us; confession means that we remove deceit (32:2b). We stop the cover-up attempt. We are open and honest about it before God. Accepting responsibility means being willing to forsake the sin in His strength. "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion" (Prov. 28:13). It's a sham to confess sin if you have no intention or willingness to forsake it. You

may not feel like forsaking it, and you may need to confess that fact. You may need biblical counsel to know how to forsake it. But you haven't truly confessed if you aren't seeking to put the sin away from your life.

Accepting responsibility for sin also means confessing to others you have wronged. David doesn't deal with this aspect here, but it is a part of the biblical teaching on the subject which cannot be ignored. If you have sinned against someone else, first confess it to God, but then go to the person and confess your sin to them and seek their forgiveness. That way your conscience is clear before God and man. You may need to make restitution if your wrong has deprived another person.

Thus, the great blessings of God's forgiveness are experienced as we confess our sins. Confession involves acknowledging our sin to God and accepting responsibility for it.

Conclusion

The forgiveness and freedom from guilt which Christ offers changes lives. I heard Ron Blanc, now a pastor in Phoenix, tell how he was called to visit a 14-year-old boy who was in a catatonic state in the psychiatric ward of a hospital. The boy was lying on his bed as stiff as a board. Nothing had helped. The nurse, thinking Ron to be a doctor, said, "I think the boy is suffering from too much religion." (Ron let her get both feet in her mouth and then told her he was the boy's pastor.) He went in and began to talk and the boy finally began to open up. He was under a pile of guilt.

Ron shared the forgiveness Christ offers. Before he could invite the boy to pray, the boy began to pray on his own. Ron bowed his head. The boy asked Jesus to come into his life and forgive his sins. When he finished praying, Ron looked up to find the boy sitting on the edge of the bed, freely swinging his legs. Ron asked, "What's this?" The boy exclaimed, "I'm free, man! Jesus has

forgiven me!" They walked out to a little patio area to chat some more. Ron got great delight in watching the surprised expressions on the nurses faces as they saw the boy moving around.

You can be free from guilt before God today and every day! There is no greater blessing than that of having your transgressions forgiven, your sins covered, and your iniquities not counted against you by the Lord. That blessing is available to you right now if you will confess your sins.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is guilt a major problem or not enough of a problem in our culture? Have we explained it all away?
2. How can we know whether our guilt is from God convicting us or from Satan accusing us?
3. Must confession involve contrition to be genuine? Cite biblical evidence.
4. How can we develop a tender conscience before God? Can our conscience be too tender?

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