

BLESSED ARE THE FORGIVEN

Psalm 32

LENT 2

March 17, 2019

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

On this second Sunday in Lent, we come to the second of so-called “penitential psalms” — Psalm 32.

However, our featured psalm for this day might be better called “a psalm of instruction.”

If you were reading this psalm from the New Revised Standard Version pew Bible, in the rack before you, underneath the title “Psalm 23,” you would see the bold-faced inscription “**The Joy of Forgiveness,**” followed by two descriptive phrases — “**Of David,**” ascribing the psalm’s author, and “**A Maskil,**” a Hebrew term meaning “the giving of instruction.”

Psalm 32 is the first of twelve psalms that bear this subtitle.

Biblical commentators suggest that Psalm 32 should probably be interpreted in connection with Psalm 51, which is David’s great psalm of repentance, and the psalm traditionally prayed or recited responsively on Ash Wednesday.

Psalm 51 refers to David’s sinful adultery with Bathsheba, and the arrangement to have her husband, Uriah, a soldier, killed in battle.

David had tried to ignore or hide his sin for some time.

But, when the court prophet, Nathan, came to challenge David and expose the transgressions, the repentant king confessed it and was restored.

Psalm 51 is the expression of that confession and restoration.

Psalm 32 seems to have been written later than Psalm 51, after some reflection, and may also have served as the fulfillment of the vow contained in Psalm 51, verse 13: “*Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.*”

That “teaching” may be the “*maskil*” which is Psalm 32.

This psalm certainly functioned as instruction, because Paul later quoted its first two verses in Romans, Chapter 4, Verses 7 and 8 to add David’s testimony to support Paul’s own teaching that justification is by grace through faith alone.

It also does not come as a surprise that Psalm 32 was St. Augustine’s favorite psalm.

He had it inscribed on the wall next to his bed before he died, to better meditate on it.

He liked it because he believed the beginning of knowledge was to know oneself to be a sinner.

The first two verses of Psalm 32 begin on a jubilant note, expressing the joys of the person whose sin has been forgiven.

This is only the second time in the Book of Psalms (or the Psalter), that a psalm has begun with the word, *Blessed*.

In Hebrew, this word appears in plural form, thus literally reading “*blessednesses*.”

The first use of this word was in Psalm 1.

But the happiness of the person speaking in Psalm 32 is greater than the one speaking in Psalm 1.

In Psalm 1, that person is described as being **blessed** who walks in God’s way, which none of us do.

In Psalm 32, the word is reserved for the person who has not walked in God’s way, has sinned, but has repented of his or her sin, now knowing the joys of restoration.

Psalm 32's two opening verses also contain three Hebrew words chosen to cover the entire spectrum of sin, and the wide scope of God’s salvation from it.

In our own English language, the word ‘sin’ literally covers a multitude of sins.

In Hebrew, the first word for sin, mentioned at the outset of Psalm 32, is “*transgressions*,” which literally means “a going away” or “departure” or, in this case, “a rebellion” against God and God’s authority.

This is what makes sin so dreadful to the psalmist, that it is transgression, not only against other people whom we hurt by our sin, but, at its root, it is also against God.

This is why Psalm 51 contains such a verse as, ***“Against You, You alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight”*** (v. 4).

It is not that David had not sinned against others, for he had.

He had sinned against Bathsheba, against his own loyal servant and soldier, Uriah, and also against the nation, which suffered for his sin.

But, in light of the enormity of his sin against God, these other matters faded into the background.

For many Christians, sin is rarely regarded as being “against God.”

The second Hebrew word for sin is ***“chattah”***.

While it, too, is translated literally as sin, it is nearly the equivalent of the Greek word used in the New Testament for sin.

“Hamartia” and ***“chattah”*** both mean “coming up short,” or “falling short” of a mark or a target.

In the ancient world, the term was used in archery to describe a person who shot at a target, but whose arrow fell short of it.

The target is God’s law, will, or way, and the sin described by this word is a failure to measure up to it.

The third word for sin here is ***“iniquity.”***

It means “corrupt,” “twisted,” or “crooked.”

A contemporary example of this surfaced recently, when an investigation uncovered the offspring of high-powered people being admitted to elite schools by means of bribery and cheating.

It sounds out the terms in this way:

The first use of the word, ‘sin’ in this Psalm describes sin in view of our relationship to God.

It pictures us as being in rebellion against God.

The second word describes sin in relation to the divine law.

As Paul said in his Letter to the Romans, ***“since all have sinned and fall short***

of the glory of God” (3:23).

The third word describes sin in relation to ourselves.

It is a corruption or twisting of right standards, as well as our own beings.

The three words for sin that I have just explained are matched in the opening stanza by a second set of three terms, describing what God does with the sin of those who confess it to God.

God forgives it, covers it over, and refuses to count or ‘impute’ it against the sinful person.

The first of these words is *‘forgiven,’* which literally means to have our sins “lifted off.”

Before the sin is confessed, we bear it like some great burden.

But when we confess it to God, it is lifted from our shoulders.

The second word that describes what God does with our sin is *‘covered.’*

It comes to us from the imagery of the Day of Atonement.

On the Day of Atonement, or *Yom Kippur*, the high priest of Israel took blood from an animal that had been sacrificed in the courtyard of the temple.

The blood was then carried into the Holy of Holies, where it was sprinkled on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant.

The mercy seat was the lid, or covering of the ark, and the blood was sprinkled there because it came between the presence of the Holy God, symbolized as dwelling in the space between the wings of the cherubim above the ark, and the broken law of God, which was contained inside the ark itself.

It thus covered the broken law, shielding the sinner from God’s judgment.

In Greek, the word for mercy seat means ‘propitiation,’ which is the act of turning God’s wrath aside.

The third word for what God does with sin is negative, that is, it describes what God does NOT do.

God *“does not count”* the sin against us.

The word, ‘count,’ is elsewhere translated as ‘impute,’ and it is a bookkeeping term, as ‘count’ especially suggests.

It is the word used by Paul in Romans to explain how God writes our sin into Christ's ledger and punishes it in Him while, at the same time, writing the righteousness of Christ into our ledger and counting us as justified because of His merit.

There is much more that can be said of Psalm 32, but it is important for us to know that our sin has been forgiven and covered and no longer counted against us.

What a blessing that is!

Blessedness does not consist of being without sin, for all of us have sinned, but of the forgiveness of sins, which we have freely because of Christ.

As Luther himself put it:

“No one is without unrighteousness; before God, all are unrighteous, even those who practice works of righteousness and imagine that, thus, they can escape from unrighteousness; for no one can rescue oneself.

Therefore, blessed are they — not those who have no sin or work in their own way out, but only those whom God forgives by grace.”

Before leaving this Psalm, another thing needs to be said.

Pop spirituality and psychology asserts that you must learn to forgive yourself. Such advice is both bad theology and cruel, for only God can forgive sin and us.

When we attempt to forgive ourselves, we are taking God's place in the equation.

We are deifying the self, which is idolatry.

Blessedness is found not in self-rendered declarations of righteousness, but in Christ's verdict: ***“Your sins are forgiven.”***

Beloved people of God,

The most basic and fundamental problems in life involve the question of guilt.

Guilt begets anxiety.

It is manifested in the inferiority complex and follows resentment.

Any counseling, whether religious or secular, that is going to succeed in helping people, must know what to do with the problem of guilt.

Psychology does not eliminate guilt, but shifts it.

There is no cure without confession, for as the Psalmist teaches us, only God removes guilt and forgives us.

The primary purpose for the confession of sins at the beginning of our worship, or in private prayer, is not emotional or psychological liberation, but the creation or strengthening of personal trust in God's forgiveness.

AMEN