

Sermon

Psalm 32 and the Surprising Joy of Repentance



by ANDREW D. ROGERS _____

“I am most happy when _____. I enjoy life the most when_____.” How do you fill in those blanks? Perhaps you immediately said, “I am most happy when I am on vacation.” Maybe it’s, “I enjoy life the most when I’m debt-free and have money in the bank.” Or, “I’m most happy when my kids are obeying me.”

Generally speaking, we tend to answer that kind of question with temporal things that reflect our situation, things that reflect “I’m doing well physically, mentally, emotionally, financially, relationally, vocationally.” Certainly how we are doing temporally does matter. There is nothing wrong with feeling glad when life is going well. But there is more to life than the temporal. And there is far more to happiness, too. As Christians, one significant way we find and experience deep happiness is when our souls are healthy.

We find joy when our conscience is clean and clear. Indeed, the Scriptures point us again and again to this insight about what makes a happy or blessed person:

- “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked... but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”
- “Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law.”
- “Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding.”¹

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¹ Psalm 1:1–2; Psalm 94:12; Proverbs 3:13

Each of these verses makes the connection between blessedness and living a life that is right in the eyes of the Lord.

A further picture of what it means to have a healthy soul is found in Psalm 32. It describes a most unusual kind of happiness: the blessedness that comes when God makes right a life that has gone wrong. Psalm 32 is full of thanksgiving and testimony. King David wrote it with the intent that we learn something from his experience. It's as if he's saying, "I want you to know that when God gave me instruction in wisdom, I chose to walk in folly. I did not follow his law, and this is the trouble that happened as a result. But, here is the wonderful way that God restored me."

Psalms 32 and 51 tell the inside story of events narrated in 2 Samuel 11–12. David had committed adultery, lied, and then played a part in a murder. After some time he was stricken with guilt and misery. Somewhere between nine and twelve months passed. Nathan confronted David, and he finally came clean and dealt with his guilt. In Psalm 51 we hear the confession David made. He appealed to the Lord, "Have mercy on me.... Wash me." He understood the nature of his sin, "Against you, you only, have I sinned." He desired a change in his whole person, "Create in me a clean heart." He became deeply concerned with God's program and will, "Do good to Zion in your good pleasure, O Lord."

In the middle of that confession, David sought the privilege of being *a lesson to others*. He made a promise, saying, "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you" (Ps 51:13). What a delight it is, then, to see how David makes good on this promise by writing Psalm 32. He reflects on his experience, and seeks to instruct us on the *joy of repentance*—the true blessedness of dealing with our sin by honest confession and by receiving God's forgiveness.

That is the context and occasion in which David wrote Psalm 32. Now let's move on to look closely at the flow of the psalm. It unfolds in seven stages:

1. Bountiful blessing
2. Manifold misery
3. Complete confession
4. Caring counsel
5. Sure safety
6. Pointless pigheadedness
7. Relentless rejoicing

We'll start by considering the great gift of forgiveness that David received from the Lord of mercies.

Bountiful Blessings

“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (v. 1–2)

Here we see the bountiful blessing of being forgiven—God’s complete covering of sin with forgiveness. David is a poet, and he uses three slightly different words to help us understand the comprehensiveness and breadth of sin—*transgression*, *sin*, and *iniquity*. He doesn’t want us to miss one aspect of what it means. Transgression is crossing a line. Sin is the violation of a divine command. It is missing the mark. Iniquity is a perverse turning aside from the proper course of life. It is an absolutely entrenched desire not to do anything right.

But within the same breath, sin is juxtaposed with the awesomeness of God’s forgiveness. Transgression is “forgiven,” sin is “covered,” and God chooses to “count no iniquity.” So we see not only the breadth and comprehensive nature of sin, but also of forgiveness. He uses the word *forgive*, which means to lift or to carry away. Indeed, sin is a burden so heavy that only God can carry it, and he carries it away from you.

Notice also that David’s use of the word *covered* alludes to the atoning sacrifices that covered the Israelites’ sins. God covers the penitent’s sin, hides it and obliterates it. Then David says that God does not count or impute, or think upon them. Unlike a banker who keeps careful accounting of the debt owed the bank, David says God does *not* count iniquity.

As you can see, believers have great reason to rejoice (v. 11). Their sins have been forgiven and they are no longer held to account for them. So, why is it that so many of us don’t experience that joy? Why is it that we depend so often on financial stability, good relationships, obedient children, trouble-free cars, or our favorite teams winning in order to be happy? Why do we so often experience what David experiences in verses 3 and 4—manifold misery?

Manifold Misery

“For when I kept silent, 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.” (v. 3–4)

David testifies that one reason we don’t experience the joy of forgiveness is because of the way we handle sin. If we are silent about our sin, then we will groan. We feel as if our bones are wasting away. Our strength dries up. This is not to say that all suffering is a result of personal sin. We must not assume that sin is the cause of all hurt and brokenness. But we must always consider if and how sin

may be involved. Knowing God's Word, we should consider the possibility. But like David did at first, we are often silent about our sin or we fail to recognize that our suffering is a result of our own sin. What a contrast this misery is to the blessedness described in verse 2! David wants us to see the night and day difference between the misery of silence and the blessedness of a full, honest confession.

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We all know how rare it is for any of us to admit to sin right away. And yet, we're still shocked when we encounter blatant denials, cover-ups, and deceit. It's as if you were to see someone break a glass, and the person flatly denies it to your face. You'd almost feel your brain flip upside down. We've all been in those situations. You witnessed actions plain and simple, and yet the person says, "No, I didn't do that." We're all hard-wired with that tendency. But David says the blessed person is the one with no deceit, the one who comes clean with sin. David shows how he violated that general principle and how he learned the lesson the hard way. He minces no words. His silence had cost him greatly, resulting in tremendous trouble.

I love how well the Hebrew language paints a picture with words. We can feel it viscerally when he says, "My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." Once when my family and I were moving, we had to clear out a shed in the backyard. Inside the shed, I found a piece of cardboard that looked like a rat. It turned out that it was a rat...a *dead* one. It was so dead that when I kicked it, it was just like kicking around a piece of cardboard. That is the picture that David paints for us. In essence he's saying "When I kept silent about my sin, my strength was dried up. I felt pressed down, like a dead rat, a useless version of my former self."

Are you getting a picture of his misery? It was full-orbed, affecting not only his soul, but his mind, emotions, and body. Keeping silent about his sin affected his entire being. But God did not leave him there. God's "heavy" hand on David kept the seriousness and consequences of his sin ever before him. What a gracious gift this was to David! Indeed, it is a gift of God to lay his heavy hand upon us in order to convince us to turn from sin. We see this concept elsewhere in Scripture:

- “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”
- “Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law...”
- “I know, O LORD, that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.”²

God does not want a believer to remain in sin and keep silent about it. Because sin destroys us, God lays his heavy hand upon us to awaken our conscience so we will turn from sin. David learned this and we do well to know it. We do well to live it and to not be silent about our sin.

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David eventually submitted to God’s heavy hand. We see David’s complete confession in verse 5.

Complete Confession

“I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” (v. 5)

A complete confession is a remedy to our manifold misery.³ David again uses three synonymous words to convey the breadth and comprehensive nature of his confession. He *acknowledges* sin, *does not cover* sin, and *confesses* sin. Everything is out in the open. David lays himself bare before his God. His language conveys urgency, an eager willingness and a sense of force.

First he acknowledges: “I came before you, my Father in heaven, to declare purposefully, to declare willingly, to declare emphatically my sin before you, because I know that in you I get forgiveness. In you, I receive mercy. In you, I get grace. In you, I am forgiven. I am cleansed of this unrighteousness, so that I might know you and be rightly related to you, so that I might grow to become more like you. I’m coming to you willingly with my sin, because that means health for my soul.”

Then he says, “I did not hide it.” No cover-up. This is clothing language. “I

² Hebrews 12:5–6; Psalms 94:12; Psalms 119:75

³ 1 John 1:9

laid my sin bare. I laid it naked—totally exposed, totally open.” There’s a play on words here: If you cover up your sin, God won’t. If you don’t cover up your sin, God will.

Then he says, “I will confess,” which simply means to admit, to agree with, to be of one mind about a matter. Confession requires submission and trust. It requires me saying, “You are God. I am not. You are the standard. I am not. What you say goes and I will agree. If you say it is a sin, then I say it is a sin.”

Sometimes we’re tempted to think, “Well, I’d really like God to reconsider whether some of these things are really sins or not. Could we perhaps draw up a proposal?” No. This reminds me of the NFL referee labor dispute in 2012. Even though the replacement referees made some obvious errors, one of the players demonstrated a remarkable attitude of humility and submission, saying, “They’re the refs. What they say goes. It is what it is.” How much more should we, who have the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit and God’s assurances of forgiveness, be able to submit to, trust in, and confess our sins to God? It is out of fear of judgment that we avoid God, but in Christ we have no fear of judgment. We are free to run to him, to confess and be forgiven.

The prophet Micah reflected on the wonder of forgiveness: “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy” (Micah 7:18). Joy comes in knowing that our heavenly Father graciously forgives and restores a right relationship with us. God *delights* to show mercy.

Have you ever humbly approached someone with a confession, asked for forgiveness, only to have the person respond half-heartedly or with reluctance? You say, “Will you please forgive me for what I have done?” Everything about the person’s demeanor and tone conveys resistance. The person might even say, “Do I have to? Well, okay.” But let us all drink in this wonderful news about God. Our heavenly Father *never* responds that way. He describes himself in his Word as one who cups his ears, who bends and leans forward to you because he’s interested in what you say. And when you plead for mercy, it is a great joy for him to give it. He rejoices in being merciful. He rejoices in forgiving you. Therefore, never hesitate to come before God with your sin. Instead, acknowledge it, confess it, don’t delay and don’t cover anything up.

Many people do not move from manifold misery to bountiful blessing because they do not practice complete confession. David experienced the blessing of confession in his life. And like a loving person who discovers a key truth that helps improve life, he wants us all to know. In verse 6, David gives us caring counsel.

Caring Counsel

“Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you in a time when you may be found; surely in a flood of great waters, they shall not reach him.” (v. 6)

David directs his speech to the Lord for everyone to hear. David counsels us all as we witness his prayer. Hear the urgency in his tone. He’s saying, “Do this quickly. Do not waste time. Run to him.” I often say to my children, “When you get it wrong, you can get it right.” There is a right way to handle it when we go wrong. David tells us the way. We can run to God when we get it wrong. We can get right with God.

No matter the severity of sin, David assures us that deliverance is all around you.

Again, we don’t naturally run freely to confess our sins when we do something wrong. We regularly behave like a child who hides in his bedroom when he is naughty. Our father and mother, Adam and Eve, showcased avoidant behavior in Genesis 3 when they hid themselves from God out of fear. David urges something different: Do it NOW. Let’s heed our brother’s counsel.

David goes on to describe that with God our safety is sure. We have no reason to fear confessing. God’s judgment was laid on Christ at the cross. He loves us. There is no fear in love (1 John 4:18).

Sure Safety

“You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.” (v. 7)

The assurance of safety expands upon the end of verse 6 that “in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.” That water could refer to enemies, tough times, challenging circumstances or the consequences of our sinful choices. David is essentially saying, “The waters—the troubles—may surround you, but don’t forget that God’s deliverance also surrounds you. In him there is sure safety.” David further builds our confidence in God with the picture of a fortified city with guards keeping watch, protecting the people from attacks. Finally, “shouts of deliverance” convey the idea that there is incredible victory over whatever threatens our wellbeing.

No matter the severity of sin, David assures us that deliverance is all around you. Many people object to coming to Christ for salvation because they believe that their sin is so severe that Christ would never forgive them. But there is no

sin that is so severe that will not be forgiven when we confess it to the Lord. God will not turn away anyone who comes after him with a repentant heart. He is our sure safety.

In verses 8 and 9 the voice changes. David changes from writing from his point of view to that of God's point of view. God counsels us to avoid pointless pigheadedness.

Pointless Pigheadedness

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you." (v. 8–9)

Here again are three synonymous words that give the breadth, comprehensiveness, and sufficient nature of God's guidance. "I will *instruct* you. I will *teach* you. I will *counsel* you."

God gives us instruction because he doesn't want us to follow the path of the fool who, like a dog that returns to his vomit, repeats his folly (Prov 26:11). God doesn't want us to be like a horse or a mule without understanding. For them, obedience will require bit and bridle. It takes manifold misery, if you will, in order for them to understand which way to go. Many people mistakenly think that manifold misery is what it takes to learn something. They can only learn "the hard way." Can you hear God's pleas in these verses? "Please do not insist on being the kind of person who has to learn the hard way. Please trust my words and my instruction. Know that I'm sovereign, know that I'm wise, know that I'm perfect, and know that I'm out for your good."

Often, we disregard the instructions that come with a bike, or desk, or an item where assembly is required. We look at it and say, "I don't need the instructions," and we toss them aside. It's only when our attempts fail that we say, "I guess I should have followed the instructions." When we refuse to listen to God's counsel, we communicate a lack of trust that he knows what he's talking about. We communicate a lack of belief that he is indeed God, that he is all wise, that he is omniscient. We act in pride and arrogance when we simply decide, "I don't need his instructions, and I'm going to go live life my own way."

We have a choice: We can either learn by command or by crucible. God has given us knowledge of his commands so it is pointless for us to be pigheaded and make choices that go against his wisdom.

As we learn to not be silent about our sin, to come clean with it, to receive forgiveness and grace in Christ, to avoid pointless rebellion against God, then we have good reason to live with relentless rejoicing.

Relentless Rejoicing

“Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD. Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!” (v. 10–11)

Why do the wicked have many sorrows? They don’t know forgiveness. They don’t know Christ. “But steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.” We are “glad in the LORD and rejoice” because we are forgiven people whom God has made “righteous” and “upright.” And so we “shout for joy.”

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Again, David uses three words, communicating the comprehensiveness of our rejoicing. And these mount up like a crescendo. When he says *be glad*, it’s an inward and hearty joy. It doesn’t necessarily express itself. Then, to *rejoice* is to express that joy in some way. And finally, to *shout for joy* is to cry out with gladness. It’s like a triumphant shout after victory. To envision this better, imagine for a moment that your favorite NFL team made it to the Super Bowl. It’s the fourth quarter. There’s five seconds left. They are down by five. They’re about ready to receive the kickoff. You know that all they need to do is return the kickoff for a touchdown and they’ll win. You watch the play as it unfolds. The player receives the ball in the end zone, and begins to run. He gets to the 20, and you gasp. Now, you want to be careful to not get too happy, but there’s a sense of inward joy. Then he crosses the 50. You raise your arms silently. He passes the kicker at the 35, and you cry out, “He...is...going...all the way!” And that is a shout for joy. That is what King David is painting for us through these words. There is a crescendo of joy. It starts with the inward gladness when we know that our sins are forgiven. Then the joy increases, “Wow, God’s kindness to me is really something.” Eventually there is a shout of, “Yes! Hallelujah! He saved me!”

Notice this psalm is bookended with God’s blessings and with relentless rejoicing. David structures the psalm this way in order to press his central point into our hearts: “Do not keep silent about your sin.”

There Is Joy in Repentance

What makes you happy? What brings you joy? In our culture, it would be

shocking to see the words *joy*, *rejoice*, or *happy* in the same context as *repentance*. I have yet to see a Hallmark card that says, “I just want to talk to you about repentance—the joy of repentance. May you experience that today.” There is a kind of happiness at the heart of the Christian life that the world cannot conceive of. It’s so unusual to normal expectations for what makes for human happiness. But what Hallmark doesn’t get, we who are found in Christ understand: there *is* great joy in repentance

In light of this, let me end by encouraging you to pray to the God who invites you to come to him to be cleansed from all unrighteousness. Ask him to help you not to hesitate to run to him with your sin. Resolve to confess your sins wholeheartedly without justification and without excuse. Ask him for grace to live as a person who truly understands the magnificence of the forgiveness that is yours in Christ. Entrust your souls to him, dear brothers and sisters. He absolutely delights to show you his mercy.