

The blessing of forgiveness

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[0 : 00] Psalm 32, a psalm of David, a masculine.

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. 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. 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. Therefore, let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found. Surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.

[1 : 20] You are a hiding place for me. You preserve me from trouble. You surround me with shouts of deliverance. 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 or bridle, or it will not stay near you. 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. This is God's word to us this evening.

Let's pray together. Almighty God, as we come to the preaching of your word, we pray that you, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we come to know him better.

[2 : 27] We pray that you will speak to us tonight through this psalm, and we ask that you will give me the help of your Holy Spirit to preach this sermon for your glory, as I ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Martin Luther said this about the church. We are all mere beggars, showing other beggars where to find bread.

And that sums up the message of this psalm exactly. The author David, one of the greatest kings of Israel, in Psalm 32 is a mere beggar, showing other beggars where to find bread.

He's a mere sinner, showing other sinners where to find forgiveness. Think of David, and if you're a child, you think of a shepherd boy facing the giant Goliath with just a sling and six small stones. But if you're an adult, you think of Bathsheba bathing on the roof, and David's adultery, and his desperate attempts to cover his sin.

[3 : 39] David was a sinner, a great sinner, and yet he found forgiveness. And in this psalm, he shows us where to find it too. When David repented after his adultery with Bathsheba, he wrote Psalm 51, his great outpouring of grief, and guilt, and shame, and repentance.

And as we were singing that psalm this evening, did you notice what David wrote in the fourth verse? He says this, Make me glad in your salvation. Make my heart obedient too.

Then shall I teach other sinners who shall hear and turn to you. Then shall I teach other sinners.

Psalm 32 was actually written after Psalm 51, and it's a masculine, a teaching psalm.

And David wrote it to teach us from his experience. He's a sinner, showing other sinners where to find forgiveness, a mere beggar, showing other beggars where to find bread.

The psalter begins with the words of Psalm 1, Blessed is the one who turns away from where the wicked walk, who does not stand in sinners' paths or sit with those who mock.

[5 : 03] Instead he finds God's holy law, his joy and great delight. He makes the precepts of the Lord his study, day and night. Here, blessedness is beyond any of us.

Do you always turn away from where the wicked walk? Do you always find in God's holy law your joy and great delight? Do you always make the study, the precepts of the Lord your study, day and night?

But here in Psalm 32, blessedness is for the failures, for those who've screwed up, for those who've sinned. perhaps you feel you've blown it.

You feel your life's been marked by failure. You've struggled again and again with sin. Well, this psalm is for you. David is the sinner, showing us sinners where to find the blessing of forgiveness. For the four points this evening, first in verses 3 to 4, guilty before God. Second in verse 5, grace from God.

[6 : 16] Then in verse 6 and 7, hiding in God. And finally in verse 8 and 9, walking with God. First, guilty before God.

In verse 3, David gives us a graphic description of guilt. 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 in the heat of summer. And David's guilt is so painful, it's physical.

It's like a cancer eating away at him. His bones wasted away. His strength was dried up. It's agony. It's misery. Wait a minute, you say.

You're just five minutes into your sermon, and already you're making us feel bad talking about guilt. I don't need this. Religion again. Just making you feel bad about yourself.

[7 : 23] In 2009, you just make up your own rules, and you get on with it. Forget all this guilt stuff. Actually, you're right. And wrong.

Let's think about guilt for a moment. What is guilt? Psychologists define it like this. Guilt is an experience that occurs when a person realizes that he or she has violated a moral standard.

And so you feel guilty when you realize you haven't lived up to a certain moral standard. And whether we think about it or not, we all live our lives by certain moral standards.

But you see, you can have true guilt and false guilt. Think about this for a moment. The first time I came here to the Tron, I felt guilty.

I came to a lunchtime Wednesday service to hear Sinclair Ferguson preach through Mark's Gospel. And I sat near the back, on the right-hand side, under the gallery. And I felt guilty.

[8 : 33] Why was that? Well, at that time I went to a church which said you shouldn't go to any other church unless it belonged to the same denomination as them.

And I felt guilty. You see, I'd broken their rules. I'd violated their standard. But was that true guilt? Of course it wasn't.

You can see from the fact I'm standing here in the pulpit tonight that I've worked through it pretty well. It was false guilt. But more seriously, I know someone who's crippled by guilt.

She's in her 40s, an Oxford graduate, bright and intelligent, yet her life is being destroyed by guilt. Guilt that she hasn't achieved what she thinks she should have.

Guilt that her career hasn't developed as it might have done. Guilt that she hasn't found just the right husband. Why? Well, you see, her parents set harsh and unrealistic standards for her.

[9 : 38] And when she can't live up to them, she's plagued by guilt. True guilt or false guilt? Absolutely false. So how do we know what is true guilt and what is false guilt?

Listen to that definition again. Guilt is an experience that occurs when a person realizes that he or she has violated a moral standard.

Violated a moral standard. I violated the moral standard of my old church. False guilt. My friend violates the standard of her parents.

False guilt. And you're quite right. Nobody needs that kind of guilt. What then is true guilt? True guilt is when you violate the moral standard of God.

Christianity teaches that God has a standard he holds us accountable to. God is holy, sinless, and perfect.

[10 : 49] And he expects the same of us. And he's given us his law to keep. And that is the moral standard that we are to live up to. Remember the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue?

David had violated that moral standard. The Tenth Commandment, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. David had coveted Uriah's wife.

The Seventh Commandment, you shall not commit adultery. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. The Sixth Commandment, you shall not murder.

David had murdered Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. David had violated God's moral standard. David had true guilt.

And boy, was he feeling it. For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. True guilt.

[11 : 56] But it wasn't true guilt because of the intensity of David's feelings. It wasn't true guilt because of David's physical symptoms. It was true guilt because it was God's moral standard that he'd violated.

Ultimately, other moral standards don't matter. It doesn't matter what standards the church sets. It doesn't even matter what standards your parents impose.

It doesn't matter what moral standards you impose on yourself. God's moral standard is ultimately the only standard that matters.

And what about you? Perhaps you're no adulterer and certainly no murderer. Yet listen to the words of Jesus of Nazareth from the Sermon on the Mount.

You have heard that it was said to people long ago, do not murder. And anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you, anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.

[13 : 07] And God's law is not just about actions. It's about our thoughts and our motives. And you don't need to physically kill someone to break the sixth commandment. It's enough to be unjustifiably angry.

And Jesus goes on. You have heard that it was said, do not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

And you don't need to do what David did to break the seventh commandment. God can read our very minds into the very darkest recess of our beings.

and a lustful look is enough to violate God's standard. And if you're honest, you know that manners and culture and social finesse just cover our selfishness and laziness and lust.

C.S. Lewis wrote honestly about looking into his own heart. And there I found what appalled me. A zoo of lusts.

[14 : 22] A bedlam of ambition. A nursery of fears. A harem of fondled hatreds. My name is Legion. Not one of us is any different.

We have all violated God's standard. Paul writes in Romans 3, there is none righteous. It doesn't matter if we don't feel guilty. What makes us guilty is the fact that we've violated God's moral standard.

And you were right. Nobody needs false guilt. But you were wrong. Everyone has true guilt.

Augustine said, the beginning of knowledge is to know thyself a sinner.

And like David, you need to find bread. Like David, you need to find God's forgiveness. Secondly, grace from God.

Look at the incredible change between verse 4 and verse 5. Verse 4, For day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was dried up as in the heat of summer.

[15 : 38] Verse 5, I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover up my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgive the iniquity of my sin.

The change comes when David acknowledges his sin. And the result, you forgive. You forgive the iniquity of my sin.

What? No penance? No good works? No church going? Simply this, you forgive the iniquity of my sin.

That is grace, the heart of the Christian gospel, that God gives us what we so don't deserve. That we are beggars, utterly penniless, and he gives us bread.

That we are sinners, truly guilty, and he gives us forgiveness. Paul quotes verse 2 of this psalm in Romans 4. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness, apart from works.

[16 : 56] Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him. It's not the man or woman who's paid for their transgressions, who's forgiven.

It's not the man or woman who commits to a lifetime of helping the poor, who has their sins covered. It's not even the man or woman who goes to church regularly, whose sins are not counted against them.

It's the one who acknowledges, who confesses their sin, who finds God's forgiveness. righteousness. It's all about grace. You know, it's always been about grace.

Christianity has often been misunderstood as a religion of morality. And it's thought that you're a Christian by going to church, by keeping the rules, by being against certain things, or by living a moral life.

But nothing could be further from the truth. God's ultimate moral standard simply shows us how far we've fallen.

[18 : 04] And you aren't a Christian tonight because of what you've done. You're a Christian because of what God does for you. David uses three pictures in this psalm for what God does.

The first picture is in verse 5. I acknowledge my sin to you and did not cover my iniquity. Now look at verse 1.

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. When we stop trying to cover up our sin and guilt and acknowledge it to God, He covers it.

We spend our lives trying to hide our guilt. We develop elaborate schemes to hide our sin from our families, from our spouses and from our friends.

God says, stop covering up. Acknowledge your sin to me and I will cover it. It's an allusion to the most important day in the Jewish religious calendar, the Day of Atonement.

[19 : 16] Once a year on that day, the high priest in Israel went into the Holy of Holies, that inner tent in the tabernacle where God mysteriously dwelt among His people.

And inside that inner tent was a box called the Ark of the Covenant. And inside that box were two tablets of stone on which God had written the Ten Commandments, the Moral Law, God's ultimate moral standard.

gathered. And on top of the lid of the box of the Ark of the Covenant were the figures of two angelic beings called Cherubim. And between these two Cherubim, above the Ark of the Covenant, in some mysterious way, God dwelt.

And on the Day of Atonement, the high priest went into the Holy of Holies with the blood of a sacrificial Lamb. and he covered the lid of the Ark of the Covenant with the Lamb's blood.

Why? Well, the point of the ritual is this, that God was above the lid. And below the lid were the tablets of stone, the ultimate moral standard that the whole community of Israel had violated.

[20 : 41] and the tablets of stone simply recorded their guilt, their sin. But the blood of the Lamb covered the lid and covered the record of their sin and hid it completely from God's sight.

And so David says, blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. blessed is the man whose guilt, whose violation of the moral standard, is hidden completely from God's sight.

But it was just a ritual. It was just a picture. It didn't actually achieve anything. It simply pointed forward to the greatest event in all of history, the ultimate sacrifice, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And you find a reference to that very ritual in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. And the writer there draws a contrast between Jesus and that high priest.

And he writes this in chapter 9. Jesus appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

[22 : 09] Just as a man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once. To cover? No, to take away the sin of many people.

And that blood which covered the broken law, the violated moral standard, was only a temporary symbolic ritual, repeated year after year. But Christ's death at Calvary happened once for all time and doesn't just cover sin, it takes away the sin of many people.

And the second picture in verse 5, he forgives. David says, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgive the iniquity of my sin.

sin. The Hebrew word to forgive simply means to lift off a burden and carry it away. And guilt really is a burden.

It weighs us down. It affects every single thing we do. You go to bed with it at night and if you even manage to get to sleep, it's there when you wake up in the morning.

[23 : 29] it's always there. Max Fulcado puts it like this, the bags we grab are not of leather, they're made of burdens, the suitcase of guilt, a sack of discontent.

You drape a duffel bag of weariness on one shoulder and a hanging bag of grief on another, add a backpack of dight, an overnight bag of loneliness, and a trunk of fear.

No wonder you're exhausted at the end of the day. Lugging luggage is exhausting. Guilt is a burden. What does God do?

God lifts off the burden of our sin. 300 years after David and still 700 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah wrote about how exactly God would lift off our burdens.

Listen to these words from Isaiah 53 about the suffering servant, about Jesus Christ. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

[24 : 43] The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. And by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray.

Each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Our burden of guilt and sin and shame and despair is lifted off from us.

and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. And at Calvary he bears our burdens and takes away our sin.

You forgive the iniquity of my sin. And the third picture, God cancels our debts.

[25 : 45] Remember your guilt, that moral standard you violated again and again and again. Too many times for a human being to compute. But God knows.

And he keeps a record of our sin. And it's his moral standard that we violate. But David writes here in verse 2, Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity.

God not only takes off our sin, God not only takes away our sin, and lifts off the burden of our guilt, but he cancels our debts. But how does he do this?

When you default on a debt, somebody has to pay. If you get into financial difficulty and you're declared bankrupt, somebody has to pick up the tab.

Every credit card, every personal loan, the last pound of your mortgage, the lender has to absorb the debt. Somebody always pays.

[27 : 01] And when God cancels our debts, who pays? Jesus, the answer is simple. Jesus, the sins that were taken from our account, God put them in Christ's account.

Listen again to those words from Isaiah. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. and by his wounds, we have been healed.

Our transgressions, our iniquities, he was pierced for them at Calvary, nailed by his hands and feet to a Roman cross.

He was crushed for them at Calvary. The Bible tells us of how he took God's punishment for all our sin. And at Calvary, God's judgment, God's righteous wrath against our sin, fell on his own son, Jesus Christ.

And he suffered until our sins were fully paid for, until our debt was completely discharged. And when he died, God raised him from the dead to declare to the world that that great debt of sin of God's people has been paid.

[28 : 29] Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity. Friends, here is where beggars find bread.

Here is where sinners find forgiveness. Here is where our burdens are lifted. Here is where our sins are taken away. Here is where our debts are cancelled. At the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ at Calvary.

and it's all of grace. And thirdly, hiding in God. David writes in verse 6 and 7, Therefore, let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found.

Surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. you're a hiding place for me. You preserve me from trouble. You surround me with shouts of deliverance.

In Bible times when ships were small and basic and sailing was always dangerous, the sea was greatly feared and it came to symbolize judgment.

[29 : 50] And here David sings about the rush of great waters. It's an allusion to the ultimate judgment day. And that's where this world is heading.

Surely that's the obvious implication of an ultimate moral standard. A judgment day. The end of time. And that is the great terrifying day when Jesus Christ will return to this earth to judge with righteousness.

the apostle John writes about it in Revelation 6. He says these words, Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and free man, hid in the caves and

among the rocks of the mountains.

They call to the mountains and the rocks, fall on us, and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand? And where is the one whose sins are forgiven? David writes, you are a hiding place for me.

[31 : 15] You are. You are a hiding place for me. The irony here is amazing. The righteous God, whose moral standard we have violated, and who judges sin with righteousness, becomes for us the sinner's hiding place.

You see, if you are forgiven, you are hidden in Christ. And for you, the wrath of that final judgment day was brought forward to Calvary, and God's wrath, fell there on Jesus Christ, on your behalf. And he paid the full price of your sin. And judgment day no longer has any fear for you, for Jesus Christ is your hiding place.

And that's exactly what Augustus' top lady had in mind when he wrote his famous hymn, Rock of Ages. He writes his final stanza like this, when I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyes shall close in death, when I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

Hiding in God, tonight be sure that he alone is your hiding place. Finally, walking with God.

[32 : 55] David writes in verse 9, Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curred with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.

Horses and mules are stubborn animals. And to make them cooperate, we need to be able to control them with a bit and a bridle, with pain. And we have our own saying in the English language, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.

And David is saying, don't be stubborn, don't be like me, all those months of hiding my sin and covering up what I'd done wrong.

Oh, I felt the tug of the bridle, I felt the pain of the bit in my mouth. For he writes in verse 4, for day and night your hand, your hand was heavy upon me.

And it was God's hand that was heavy upon him as God brought David to confront his guilt.

Perhaps tonight you're struggling with bit and bridle and God is showing you the guilt of your sin and his hand is heavy upon you.

[34 : 16] David says this to you tonight, don't be like the horse or the mule, don't resist, confess your transgressions to the Lord and he promises to forgive the iniquity of your sin.

And look at the relationship that results. God no longer disciplines us with bit and bridle but look at verse 8. God says this, I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.

I will counsel you with my eye upon you. It's a relationship with God. It's not a situation of fear. It's not a situation where you wonder if you've done enough good, if you've accumulated enough credits to wipe out your debits.

You see, because our relationship with God depends only on his free grace and only on his forgiveness in Jesus, we are free to trust him completely.

We're more sinful than we ever imagined, but more loved than we ever dreamed. And being more loved than you've ever dreamed by God opens up the possibility of the most satisfying and fulfilling relationship with him.

[35 : 41] God has created us. He knows what's best for us. And he gives us his word and his spirit to teach us and to guide us in the way that we should go.

This is what you were made for. And you will never truly be satisfied with anything less walking with God. In conclusion then, David's final verse, Be glad in the Lord and rejoice so righteous and shout for joy all you upright in heart.

David addresses us, sinners, as righteous and upright in heart. David, a mere beggar, has shown us beggars where to find bread.

David, a mere sinner, has shown us sinners where to find forgiveness. Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

words. Let's pray together. Almighty God, we thank you so much that you haven't treated us as our sins deserved.

[37 : 05] But as far as the east is from the west, so far have you removed our transgressions from us. O God, we thank you tonight for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich.

Father, we thank you for the possibility of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. We pray that tonight we all may be trusting in him, as we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.