

Confessing to God

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn in our Bibles to Psalm number 32. Psalm 32. I'm just with you here for this one week.

This is what you might call a one-off sermon. But next week, I think we've got Alex Bedford here, but there's a series of five talks under the title of Meet Jesus, and Alex will be continuing to work his way through Mark's Gospel, and you'll have the little blue note about that.

But Psalm 32 for this week. King David writes these words. 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.

[1 : 15] 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. 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 and 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 the word of the Lord, and may the Lord indeed make it a blessing to us now. Happiness, happiness, the greatest gift that I possess.

[2 : 34] I thank the Lord that I've been blessed with more than my share of happiness. Who remembers that song? The over 50s. I knew it. Somebody will tell me afterwards who wrote it.

I can't remember, but it's one of those songs that always brings a smile to my cheeks when I think of it. I thank the Lord that I've been blessed with more than my share of happiness. Now, friends, the Bible is very interested in the happiness of God's people.

And in the book of Psalms, I think I'm right in saying that there are three Psalms which begin with the words happy or blessed is the man who, or happy are those who. And Psalm 32 is one of those three Psalms.

It is about the happy man or the happy woman, the happy believer. So if the description of the happy believer that we have here in Psalm 32 matches up to your life or my life, the result will be that we too will not simply be believers, we will be happy believers.

Now, if Psalm 1 here had been written by an atheist or a materialist, I guess it might read something like this. Blessed is the one whose lottery ticket gets picked.

[3 : 49] Or blessed is the one who enjoys perfect health into their 90s. Or even blessed is the one who has a Hamlet cigar to smoke with his coffee after dinner. The man of this world will always think of happiness in terms of money and health and pleasure.

Now, King David, this godly king who wrote this Psalm, has a completely different view of the happy life. For David, happiness does not consist in material pleasures.

It's all to do with God and about his relationship to God and what the Lord God does for him. And this Psalm, like all of David's Psalms, is full of urgent writing.

He has something to say. Now, he need not have written this Psalm, need he? After all, he was the king. He was the most powerful and wealthy man in Israel. So, on the day that he put this Psalm on paper or on parchment, he might have done something quite different.

He might have whiled away the morning in bed with a few slices of extra toast and marmalade and a few newspapers to read. He could have spent the afternoon watching Wimbledon. But no, the Lord took hold of him yet again and impelled him to write these words because this was an important message about human happiness which the Lord wanted to have given to the human race for every generation.

[5 : 10] So, let's look at David's description of the really happy human life. There are three ingredients to it. First, happiness comes from being forgiven by the Lord.

Don't you think verse 1 is very striking? He doesn't say blessed is the one whose bank account is full. He doesn't say blessed is the one whose blood pressure is normal. But, blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven.

Whose sin is covered. That is the beginning of the blessed or happy life. The primary ingredient, you might say, of human happiness is to know that our sin is forgiven by God.

And conversely, the thing that makes human life ultimately wretched is the fact that we have turned away from God and we are rebels against his loving authority. And until that problem, that primary problem is sorted out, then we are out of kilter.

We are out of touch with God. In fact, worse than that, we live under his condemnation. Now friends, are you aware of that? That great fact that the first thing we need is to be forgiven?

[6 : 25] Many of you, I know, are well aware of that. But there may just happen to be some folk here today who have never fronted up and acknowledged to God how they have lived without him for all these years and have rejected his loving authority over them.

Now if that is the case, you need to face the fact that unforgiven transgression bars the way to God and bars the way to happiness for you. And David, very helpfully and interestingly, tells us in verses 3 and 4 what his life was like before he acknowledged his sinfulness to the Lord.

We don't know what this particular sin was. In Psalm 51, he tells us as he confesses his sin that it's to do with his murder of Uriah the Hittite and his adultery with his wife Bathsheba.

We're told nothing of the particular circumstances here. So we don't know that. But what we do know is that he had to confess something serious. Verse 3, For when I kept silent, in other words, silent about my sin, I imagine he had plenty to say to the people around him, but silent about his sin, when I refused to confess it, my bones wasted away, he says, 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. It's a vivid description of a man who is troubled both in body and in mind.

[7 : 55] Now look at verse 3. We must beware not to read these symptoms through the eyes of modern medical science, as though David were perhaps suffering from osteoporosis or some bone-thinning illness.

It's not that. He simply means that he felt as lively as an old sack. He was unwell. He was bone-weary, if you like, virtually in a state of collapse. And in verse 4, he speaks of his strength being dried up as in the heat of summer.

I was talking just the other day to Ralph Martin, who's one of our elders here at the Tron Church. And Ralph spent many years working as a missionary in Japan. He recently retired. And I was asking him about the temperature and the weather over there.

And he told me that in the winter it gets pretty cold in Japan. But in the summer, he said there were days weeks when the temperature would be up in the 90s and it was very humid. And he said it was very hard for people to do a vigorous day's work in that kind of heat.

So aren't you glad you'd have been Glasgow? We don't suffer from that kind of thing, do we? We don't know what it is to be melted by summer heat. But we can be sure that King David knew all about it in a hot country like Israel.

[9 : 02] So here he is. He's bone-weary and he's exhausted. Think of him as a young man, as a young shepherd. He killed lions and bears, didn't he, when they came to attack his sheep. But by Psalm 32, verse 4, he could hardly have swatted a fly. He was so miserable that he was groaning all day long. Oh, do you ever do that?

Oh, oh, that's a groan, isn't it? He was groaning all day long. Now he recognizes the source of his trouble in verse 4.

He says to God there, for day and night, your hand was heavy upon me. Now that's why he was groaning and at the point of collapse.

It was God's heavy and yet merciful hand that was making his life so burdensome. God was making him wretched and miserable so as to bring him to the point where he would acknowledge and confess his sin.

[10 : 04] Now God will sometimes mercifully deal with us in that way. If we won't listen to him when we're healthy and vigorous, sometimes, because he loves us, he will cause us to be miserable and debilitated until we come to him and acknowledge our sin before him.

Now I'm not wanting to suggest that all debilitating illness is a result of unconfessed sin. That's certainly not the case. But our psalm is showing us that sometimes that is the reason.

So here is David being shown by the Lord why he's feeling so wretched and unwell. It's because in the words of verse 3 he was keeping silent.

He was not confessing to God. He couldn't bring himself as it were to look God in the eye and tell him that he was a self-centered and sinful man. He wasn't at this stage prepared to humble himself and to ask for forgiveness.

But the turning point, it's a lovely turning point, comes in verse 5. He says, I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover my iniquity. I said, I said at last, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and having done that, you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

[11 : 24] So he acknowledged his sin, he confessed his sin and the Lord forgave him. And from verse 6 onwards, there's no sign that his misery and his weariness and weakness continued.

In fact, from verse 6 onwards, he seems to be a man of renewed vigour and joy, a man who begins to turn outwards to other people so as to help them and encourage them. Now David, of course, could not know, could not have known in the 10th century BC when he was alive and king of Israel.

He could not know that a thousand years later, his descendant, Jesus, would go to the cross and shed his blood and give his life for David's sin. Of course, David's sin and the sin of all the Old Testament believers is covered by the death of Christ.

His death works retrospectively in history as well as forwards to our own time. Now David didn't know this. He didn't have privileged access to an understanding of the cross of Jesus.

Although interestingly, David wrote Psalm 22 and in that famous psalm he seems to have been given a rare insight into the meaning of the cross. It's the psalm that begins, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[12 : 38] Nevertheless, despite the fact that David lived a thousand years BC, he knew that confession led to forgiveness and that forgiveness led to happiness, to blessedness.

Now friend, if you're not a Christian, will you come to God as David did and confess that you're a sinner? You may not be physically or mentally ill or exhausted as David was, but to acknowledge your sin and to ask for forgiveness, that is the fundamental thing.

It's the first thing that a man or woman needs to do. There is no way into the blessedness, the happiness of the kingdom of God until we take that first step.

That surely is why David sets it at the beginning of this psalm. If you haven't done that, will you do it? Everything hangs upon it. Everything. So there's the first ingredient of the really happy life.

Happiness comes from being forgiven by the Lord. And then second, happiness comes from being protected by the Lord. That comes out in verses 6 and 7, which I'll read again.

[13 : 55] 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.

The great waters shall not reach that person who prays. You are a hiding place for me. You preserve me from trouble. You surround me with shouts of deliverance.

Now David, of course, is a poet and he's using metaphorical picture language here. And what he's describing here in verse 6 is something like a tsunami. We'd never heard the word tsunami, at least I hadn't, until we had that dreadful one in the Far East three or four years ago at Boxing Day.

But on our television sets we saw footage, didn't we, of this great pile of water coming in and destroying everything in its path. That's the kind of thing that David seems to have in mind in verse 6 when he speaks of the rush of great waters.

It must be a terrifying thing to be facing an oncoming wall of water like that. But David says in verse 7, you are a hiding place for me.

[15 : 02] You preserve me from trouble. And David can hardly have been thinking of a physical tidal wave when he writes these words. I mean, Jerusalem, after all, is miles from the sea.

There's no danger of a tsunami ever hitting Jerusalem. He must be thinking here of the final overwhelming judgment of God as he writes about the rush of great waters.

Remember, Jesus uses a very similar picture at the end of Matthew chapter 7 where he speaks of the two builders, one wise and one foolish, and they each set about building their house. One builds on a proper firm foundation of rock, the other builds on sand, in other words, no foundation at all.

And when the rain falls and the floods rise and the winds beat against the house, one stays upright, the one built on the rock, and the other falls flat. It's the same sort of thing that David is picturing here.

But notice the lovely thing in verse 7 of our psalm. And that is that there is a hiding place where David can be protected from the raging flood. So what is it?

[16 : 06] Is it a dugout or a bunker? No. It's God himself. You, he says, you are a hiding place for me. You preserve me from trouble.

Now that's the great message of the Bible. It is God and only God who can protect us from the devastation of the day of judgment.

It's only God who can protect us from the wrath of God. Nothing else can save us on the great and terrible day of judgment. No amount of money or prestige or achievement can save us from the judgment.

You might be the richest person in Glasgow. You might have a string of achievements and honors to your name. Your funeral could be attended by a thousand people, all of them saying what a wonderful person you were.

But if you're not taking refuge in the hiding place that is God himself, the Bible says there is no hope for you. Remember these lovely words of Charles Wesley in another hymn.

[17 : 11] Jesus, you lover of my soul, let me to your bosom fly while the gathering waters roll, while the tempest still is high. Hide me, oh my saviour, hide, till the storm of life is past, safe into the haven guide, and receive my soul at last.

So happiness comes from being protected by the Lord on the day of judgment. And then third, happiness comes from being instructed by the Lord.

Here is verse 8 where suddenly the Lord himself begins to speak to David in the first person singular. So verse 8, he says, I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.

I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Now this is a very practical and down-to-earth source of happiness. And it's no accident that it follows the two things that we've been looking at so far.

By the time we get to verse 8, the big things, the really important things, have already been sorted out in David's life. David knows now that he's forgiven and he knows that he is protected from the judgment of God.

[18 : 26] All of which means that he's no longer alienated from God. That black cloud, you might say, of separation and judgment has been lifted. David's relationship to God has been wonderfully restored.

But that's not all he needs. Now that he is at peace with God, he needs to know how to conduct himself. Well, how is he to live? How is he to make wise decisions?

How is he, the king, going to handle the affairs of the kingdom? He needs, I guess, regularly to meet with his generals, doesn't he, and chiefs of staff and secretaries. He has letters to write and orders to give.

So how is he to live? How is he to live in the domestic scene as a husband and father? How is he to use his time profitably? A king needs to be self-disciplined. He needs to get up in the morning.

He needs to study his Bible. He needs to attend to all the business of government. And David didn't have an excellent, there wasn't an excellent predecessor for him to model himself upon because his only forerunner as king of Israel had been Saul and Saul had messed things up in a bad way.

[19 : 34] So David greatly needed to be instructed by God. Now you and I, thankfully, are not having to run a government or to meet regularly with the head of the armed services and so on.

But we have plenty to do and we have real responsibilities. And even those amongst you who are older and retired, you have plenty of responsibilities, don't you? You may be feeling busy.

I met a recently retired minister just the other day and I asked him if he was keeping busy in his retirement and he said, I certainly am. In fact, I'm so busy in my retirement that I think retirement is really a job for a younger man.

Now whatever level of responsibility we may have, we need, all of us, the Lord's instruction if we are to live a productive and fruitful life.

We're not going to get instruction in life skills from the world, are we? All the world can offer us in the way of life skill instruction is to say something like, indulge yourself, please yourself, serve yourself, eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.

[20 : 44] Now where does that philosophy leave people? It leaves them wretched, doesn't it? Thinking about and worrying about and allowing their minds to be filled with concerns to do with health, weight loss and sex life.

I sometimes pick up the Reader's Digest when I'm waiting for the dentist to drill my teeth in the dentist's waiting room and I flick through the various articles. Not that I'm particularly drawn to the Reader's Digest but it's interesting to see what folk are reading about and all the articles it seems to me are on health, weight, how to lose it, beauty, how to gain it, appearance and sex life without reference to marriage.

I travel in and out of Glasgow quite often by train these days and sometimes I like to read sort of make my head go to one side so I can read the magazines that people are reading beside me.

You know the glossy magazines that you see? I don't know why the young women who read these magazines don't become comatose with boredom. I don't know how they're not being carried off the trains in coffins having died from boredom because every page is the same.

Health, how to achieve it, weight, how to lose it, beauty, how to get more of it, personal appearance and sex life without reference to marriage. Is that all there is to being a human being?

[21 : 58] The Lord says to David and he says it to all who trust him and know him I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.

Now friends that is real living to join the Lord's school of life instruction to get to know his teaching and to live by it that's the way to live human life at its very best.

It's glorious to live the Christian life day in, day out, week after week. If somebody says to a Christian wouldn't you really like just a few days of the old life to enjoy again?

You know, cast off self-restraint just for a short time. Do a bit of this and a bit of that. The Christian would reply who in his right mind having left slavery for freedom would want to go back to slavery again?

Now the Lord knows that King David will have his wobbles. He won't always want to follow instructions from heaven because there will be temptations of course. So he kindly says to David in verse 9 be not like a horse or a mule without understanding which must be curbed with bit and bridle or it will not stay near to you.

[23 : 18] In other words, David, don't you force me to treat you like a stubborn mule. I don't want to have to yank your head round with a sharp tug on the bridle. I want you to think about my instructions in the Bible to understand them, to love them, to follow them and to live by them.

Do it willingly, not like a dumb brute that has to be forced and then you'll have the joy of walking in the right path. So friends, this is the really happy life.

First, to be forgiven by the Lord. That is our first need. Second, to know that we're protected and will be protected by the Lord from the great storm, the day of judgment.

And thirdly, to know the greatest experience in life in this world which is to live under the Lord's instruction, not the instruction of the world. No wonder David then says in verse 10, many are the sorrows of the wicked but steadfast love, covenant love, the love of the Lord surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.

And then look at his final verse, verse 11. Let me read that to you now. Be glad in the Lord. Shed tears, you believers. Cry out in pain, you Christians.

[24 : 36] No, this is the happy man, isn't it? And he wants to share his happiness with all his fellow believers. So he says in verse 11, be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

He simply can't keep it to himself. It makes him vocal. He has to shout for joy to all his fellow believers. Now that's the Christian life. That's life immersed in the Bible.

And if that is our life, then we can do other people no greater service than to share it with them as much as we can. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together.

Be glad in the Lord, says King David, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart. Dear God, our Father, we do thank you so much for teaching and enabling David to write this psalm by your grace and power.

We thank you for what you showed him about forgiveness, about protection, and about continued instruction. And we pray, dear Father, that every person in this hall this afternoon will come more and more to enjoy and rejoice in the happy life of being forgiven, protected, and taught.

[26 : 06] And that you will help us to share these joys with many others. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.