

BaptistWay: The Joy of Forgiveness

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- *The BaptistWay Bible study for April 7 focuses on Psalm 32.*
- [Download a powerpoint resource for this lesson here.](#)

Popular culture suggests a plethora of ways to find happiness—many of which revolve around the pursuit of such things as power, pleasure, possessions and popularity. To be sure, these do have the capacity to fulfill some of our needs.

However, each of us has a deep-seated need that never can be satisfied by the stuff of life, and that is the need to be forgiven. Psalm 32 presents this bedrock principle of life: Nothing else can go right, no other true fulfillment can come, until we first find the forgiveness of God for our sins.

Psalm 32 sometimes is called a penitential psalm, because it focuses on the importance of repentance. However, it more aptly is classified as a “song of thanksgiving,” a type of psalm that testifies about a time of personal trouble, describes a prayer to God for help, then calls for praise to the Lord for the answer he has given. In the case of Psalm 32, the trouble was unforgiven sin, whose destructiveness moved the psalmist to repentance, which then led to God’s forgiveness. To complete the cycle, the psalmist responded to God’s grace with thanksgiving and also with instruction for others to seek God’s forgiveness.

Beatitude

The psalm begins with a beatitude that celebrates the profound goodness of knowing God’s grace, driving home the point with three parallel phrases:

“transgressions are forgiven,” “sins are covered” and the “sin the Lord does not count against” (vv. 1-2). John Calvin said in his commentary on Psalms that all people “must continue in deadly lethargy, until they are persuaded that God is reconciled towards them. Hence (the psalm) here teaches us that ... happiness ... consists only in the free forgiveness of sins.”

In verses 3-7, the psalmist gives a personal testimony about his own experience with sin and grace. He laments a time when he stubbornly refused to acknowledge his iniquity, with the result that he groaned under the burdens of bones wasting away, strength failing and the pressure of God’s heavy hand on him (vv. 3-4). The language may be metaphorical for the internal anguish of personal guilt.

Perhaps the psalmist’s experience echoes our own struggle, for very often we, too, keep silent in the face of our guilt, suffering the self-destructiveness of shame. The only answer, of course, is the denial of pride and the abandonment of futile attempts to “cover up” our sin, as the psalm puts it in verse 5. When the psalmist finally gives up the subterfuge, he speaks his confession to God, and then, as he simply puts it, “you forgave.”

Exhortation

This is the essence of the gospel. The psalmist’s testimony continues with an exhortation for all faithful people to seek the Lord while he “may be found,” suggesting one must not presume upon the grace of God. As Augustine says about this psalm, “Do not claim the right to the kingdom on the grounds of your own justice, nor the right to sin on the grounds of God’s mercy.”

The psalmist continues his testimony in verses 6-7, witnessing that forgiveness, once it is received, is like a dam that holds back the floodwaters of destructiveness and like a hiding place of protection from

trouble. These powerful metaphors of divine safety also are linked to hymnody, for the psalm says “songs of deliverance” literally are what protect us from trouble. The idea is that when we engage in the act of worship, celebrating God’s forgiveness, we are holding up a shield of protection against attacks on our faith that will inevitably will come. The final verse of the psalm echoes the theme, as it issues an irresistible invitation for all whose hearts have been set right by grace to join in the song of joy.

Education

After blessing (vv. 1-2) and testimony (vv. 3-7), the psalmist turns to education in verses 8-10, with the intention of teaching others the absolute necessity of repentance. He warns that someone who refuses to confess sin is like the stubborn “horse or mule, which have no understanding” and must be forced to follow by “bit and bridle” (v. 9).

Artur Weiser comments, “the point of comparison is to be found not only in (a person’s) obstinate perseverance in self-will, but also in the necessity of applying force. In the poet’s view, it is foolish to persist in ... hardness of heart in relation to God, since God in such a case overcomes (one’s) obstinacy by force.”

Indeed, it was the psalmist’s own experience that when he resisted the internal pressure toward confession, his life wasted away, and it was only when he gave in to the pull of grace that he found blessing.

Psalm 32:1-2 is quoted in Romans 4:6-8 as part of Paul’s exhortation concerning justification by grace. In this way, the desire of the psalmist to instruct others in the value of repentance comes to its highest fruition, as his words join with Paul’s in calling us to confess our sins at the foot of the cross as James Mays points out in his interpretation of the Psalms.