

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory (Ps. 32:1, 2)		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	31		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE GREATEST BLESSING

“Honesty,” sings Billy Joel, “is hardly ever heard.” One reason is because we are uncomfortable with it. Oh, there is a level of honesty that we expect and without which we could not survive as a society. But the kind of honesty I am speaking of is laid out in Ps. 32:3. In fact, honesty is a fitting synonym for what the Bible calls repentance. Honesty is a truth-telling about our experience that has given up on strategies of flight, appeasement, or confrontation. “Honesty,” writes Paul F. M. Zahl, “means facing up to a tragic situation.”¹ This type of honesty is set forth by the Apostle Paul in Phil. 3:4-8. If we are seeking to establish our standing before God on the basis of works righteousness, we will never be honest, either with God or ourselves (cf. 1 John 1:8). This was David’s experience in Ps. 32. “Why should we dwell on the wretched story? Because it teaches us, as no other page in the history of God’s church does, how the alchemy of Divine love can extract sweet perfumes of penitence and praise out of the filth of sin; and therefore, though we turn with loathing from David’s sin, we have to bless God for the record of it, and for the lessons of hope that come from David’s pardon.”² “Ps. 32 is a didactic Psalm, concerning the way of penitence which leads to the forgiveness of sins; it is the second of the seven *Psalmi poenitentiales* of the church, and Augustine’s favourite Psalm. We might take Augustine’s words as its motto: *intelligentia prima est ut te noris peccatorem*. The poet bases it upon his own personal experience, and then applies the general teaching which he deduces from it to each individual in the church of God. For a whole year after his adultery, David was like one under sentence of condemnation. In the midst of this fearful anguish of soul, he composed Ps. 51, whereas Psalm 32 was composed after his deliverance from this state of mind. The former was written in the very midst of the penitential struggle; the latter after he had recovered his inward peace. The theme of this Psalm is the precious treasure which he brought up out of that abyss of spiritual distress, viz. the doctrine of the blessedness of forgiveness, the sincere and unreserved confession of sin as the way to it, and the protection of God in every danger, together with joy in God, as its fruits.”³

I. DAVID’S COMMENDATION (vv. 1-2)

Here he sets forth the objective facts about his sin, using three different words to express its character. He also uses three words to describe forgiveness, all of which have atonement in view. “As in Psalm 51, the vocabulary of sin dominates the first five verses of Psalm 32. The same three key words recur here – *transgression* (vv. 1, 5), *sin* (vv. 1, 5), *iniquity/guilt* (vv. 2, 5, 5). Sin is pervasive, but what the psalmist celebrates is the forgiveness of sin. Those who do not ‘hide’ their iniquity will be the ones ‘whose sin is covered’ (‘hide’ in v. 5 and ‘covered’ in v. 1 are from the same Hebrew root, *ksh*). In terms of the literary structure of Psalm 32, God’s forgiveness surrounds, encompasses sin (vv. 1a, 5c; the Hebrew root translated ‘forgiven/forgave’ is *ns*). The personal pronoun in verse 5c is emphatic, ‘you forgave the guilt of my sin.’ Furthermore, verse 5c is the turning point of the psalm. After this proclamation of

forgiveness, things are different. This change is marked literarily by the fact that none of the words for sin occurs again.”⁴

II. DAVID’S CONFESSION (vv. 3-5)

The way of restoration is now given. Having declared the objective truth concerning his sin and God’s way of forgiveness, he now illustrates the doctrine from his own experience.

- A. **His Affliction** (vv. 3-4). He kept silent. He would not speak to God about his sin, and this brought him only misery.
- B. **His Confession** (v. 5). Notice the threefold refrain. “I will acknowledge,” “I will confess” . . . “I hid not.” The Hebrew graphically represents this as an ongoing confession.

Note: The importance of confession to God cannot be overemphasized. Prov. 28:13: “He who conceals his sin does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” Jer. 3:12, 13: “I am merciful, declares the Lord, I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt – you have rebelled against the Lord your God.” “Confession,” noted Thomas Manton, “argueth sincerity. A hypocrite will pray, but will not thus sincerely open his heart to God . . . Many ways men may be guilty of guile of spirit in confession of sin; either when they content themselves with general or slight acknowledgments; as thus – we are all sinners; but they do not declare their ways.”⁵

- C. **His Forgiveness** (v. 5). And **thou** (emphatic) forgivest. In the words of confession (v. 5), David uses the exact same three words, *sin*, *iniquity*, and *transgression* as found (vv. 1, 2), indicating the comprehensiveness of his confession. “Confession,” comments Peter C. Craigie, “is like opening the floodgate of a dam. When there is no confession, the waters pile up behind the dam, creating immense pressures on the wall, but as soon as the floodgate is opened, the waters subside and the pressures diminish.”⁶

III. DAVID’S CONFIRMATION (vv. 6-7)

His admonition is rooted in his own experience – note to whom this instruction is given.

- A. **Everyone Who is Godly**. The Hebrew word for “godly” is *chassid*, who loves God.
- B. **Everyone Who . . . Prays**. According to one old rabbi, this is not a prayer, but rather a promise to all the devout (godly) who learn the art of repentance from David.⁷
- C. **His Appropriation** (v. 7). “Thou (emphatic) art my secret hiding place” (cf. Ps. 27:5). This language promises instruction and counsel as well as assurance.

IV. GOD’S COMMUNICATION (vv. 8, 9)

Wisdom is now given as in Prov. 26:3. Stubborn sinfulness is seen here as resistance to confess sin. This leads only to grief.

CONCLUSION: Honesty before God. What a strange statement – does He not know everything there is to know about us? Indeed He does, but like prayer, we are not informing God about things of which He is unaware. Rather, we are acknowledging and unmasking ourselves before Him (cf. Heb. 4:13). This honesty is necessary. As A. W. Pink has written, “The inward experience of a believer consists largely of growing discoveries of his own vileness and of God’s goodness, of his own excuseless failures and of God’s infinite forbearance, with a frequent alternation between gloom and joy, confession and thanksgiving.”⁸ Phrases such as “nobody’s perfect” and “to err is human” are often used to excuse our moral failures. It is another way of minimizing our sin. David Wells observes, “The disappearance of sin in the modern world is not, of course, an actual disappearance. It is not sin that has vanished. What has been lost is our capacity to understand our life as being sinful. So, what has happened? We should begin by noting that this is not a problem of recent vintage. ‘By 1900,’ Andrew Delbanco writes, ‘it was impossible to reattach the word ‘sin’ to its original sense, because the target of the violation – God – was gone.’ He had ceased to be a reality to

be reckoned with in the culture. Churches nevertheless continued to use the word, but in the windowless world in which the language was heard, it ceased to have meaning. Its use created the same kind of dilemma that a promissory note might today where the financial accounts of the person making the promise are discovered to be empty. The promissory situation has continued down to the present. While we deplore the fracturing of life, its robberies, and rapes, its abuses and cruelties, its assaults and catastrophes, we can no longer measure its darkness in the presence of God. All we do is weep. We cannot make confession. There is no one to whom to confess. We cannot bring our sin before God, because he is gone. In our failures, we are not able to penetrate the real character of our sin, because we cannot take its measure, see its nature, in relation to God. We cannot say, as did David after his adultery, ‘Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment’ (Ps. 51:4). All we can do is wipe each other’s noses.”⁹ We need to recognize that sin is first and foremost transgression of God’s standards, not society’s. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 14) captured it well. “What is sin? A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (1 John 3:4). The glorious news of forgiveness is good news indeed! John Newton, writing to a friend on the Question, Whether the Sins of Believers shall be publicly declared at the Great Day? Or, how are we to understand the Apostle’s Assertion, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the Things done in his Body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad?” 2 Cor. 5:10, compared with Rom. 14:12, had this to say, “I think all the great truths in which we are concerned are clearly and expressly laid down, not only in one, but in many places of Scripture; but it sometimes happens, that here and there we meet with a text which, in the first and obvious sound of the words seems to speak differently from what is asserted more largely elsewhere; which texts, singly taken, afford some men their only ground for the hypothesis they maintain. Thus the Arians lay a great stress on John 14:28, and the Arminians on James 2:24, & c. But their true interpretation is to be sought according to the analogy of faith. They are capable of a sense agreeable to the others, though the others are not intelligible in the sense they would fix upon these. In like manner I would say, whatever may be the precise meaning of 2 Cor. 5:10, we are sure it cannot be designed to weaken what we are taught in almost every page, of the free, absolute, and unalterable nature of a believer’s justification; the benefit of which, as to the forgiveness of sin, is signified by the phrases of ‘blotting out,’ ‘not remembering,’ ‘casting behind the back,’ and ‘into the depths of the sea.’ The sins of a believer are so effectually removed that, even when, or if, they are sought for, they cannot be found. For Jesus has borne them away: believers are complete in him, and clothed in his righteousness. They shall stand before God without spot or wrinkle. Who shall lay any thing to their charge?”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul F. M. Zahl, *Who Will Deliver Us? The Present Power of the Death of Christ* (Seabury Press, 1983), p. 73.

² Alexander Maclaren, *The Life of David as Reflected In His Psalms* (rpt. Baker, 1955), p. 209.

³ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament V* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 393.

⁴ J. C. McCann, Jr., *A Theological Instruction to the Book of Psalms* (Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 109. A. G. Clark adds that Paul cites this Psalm in Romans 4:6 “in support of the doctrine of righteousness apart from works; ‘blessed’ = happy; ctr. Gal. 3:10. Note three terms for sin: (a) ‘transgression,’ Heb. = an act of revolt; (b) ‘sin,’ Heb. = a wandering from the way; (c) ‘iniquity,’ Heb. = moral crookedness. Note also three terms for forgiveness: (a) ‘forgiven’ (more lit. ‘lifted off’), Heb. denotes the removal of the burden of sin; (b) ‘covered’ = the hiding of the stain of sin; (c) ‘imputeth not’ = the cancelling of the debt of sin.” *Analytical Studies In the Psalms* (John Ritchie LTD, 1949), p. 93.

⁵ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton VI* (rpt. Maranatha Publications, 1980), pp. 246-247.

⁶ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50: World Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1983), p. 267.

⁷ *Tehillim: The Psalms A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologizes from the Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources I* (Mesorah Publication, 1987), p. 389.

⁸ A. W. Pink, *The Life of David II* (rpt. Reiner Publications, 1974), p. 54.

⁹ D. F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 181.

¹⁰ *The Works of John Newton I* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1985), p. 149.