**Joy of forgiveness**  3/3/24 dkm

Read: Psalm 32, 1John 1

Text: Psalm 32

Psalms: 130, 38:1-4, 51:1-7, 117

‘Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight’ (Ps 51:4). These words of confession come for the lips of King David. But they did not come quickly or easily. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, he tried to cover up his sin. He end up murdering Uriah, albeit indirectly. David knew he had sinned, but did not confess his sin until the prophet Nathan came to him. No confession meant no forgiveness for David- and for you! David still suffered the consequences of his sin, but anguish and agony gave way to joy and happiness when he confessed and the Lord forgave him.

In Psalm 51 David speaks of sacrifices and burnt offerings but knew that God wants the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart. Here in Psalm 32 there is no mention of sacrifice, just sincere repentance. David knew that sacrifice is required of course; he knew that God would provide that sacrifice in Jesus Christ our Lord. This psalm is a wisdom psalm, as well as a penitential psalm, like Psalm 51. David shares his experience of confessing his sin and being forgiven as the way of wisdom for us all.

**1. Happy to be forgiven**

The theme of this psalm is set down in the first line: ‘Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven’. The word ‘blessed’ is sometimes translated ‘happy’, ‘happy in the Lord’. We know the word ‘blessed’ from Psalm 1, another wisdom psalm. Blessing comes to those who listen to the Lord, and not the wicked. Blessing comes to those who listen to the Lord and his word, and not their own proud and sinful hearts. Remember, God is powerful to touch our hearts and convict us of sin, as he did with David through the prophet; he convicts us through his holy word and Holy Spirit (2Tim 3:16, John 16:8).

What is sin? ‘Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God’ (Shorter Catechism Q14). David uses three words for sin. The first is transgression, as in the Catechism. By committing adultery, David was blatantly breaking God’s command. The second word is ‘sin’, a broad term for missing the mark, for not measuring up. We are born in sin, or with sinful hearts, as David acknowledges in Psalm 51:5, and a Paul declares in Romans 3:23: ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’. The third word for sin is ‘iniquity’, which refers to offending God by breaking his holy law. As David said, all sin is against God and will incur his just punishment, unless he forgives us.

Forgiveness is the focus or theme of this psalm, a psalm of David. In the first two verses he speaks in general, but the following few verses are in the first person. David knew the joy of forgiveness in his own life. He knew that if he confessed his sin, the Lord would forgive him. Isaiah speaks of the Lord’s Servant being wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (Isa 53:5). The Lord forgave David and forgives us because his Servant Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, took the punishment due to us for breaking God holy law; he did this on the cross.

John instructs us as David does: ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1John 1:9); being ‘just’ relates to the cross. Paul actually quotes the first two verses of this psalm to ‘prove’ that we are justified and made righteous in God’s sight by faith alone, apart from works (Rom 4:7,8).

Forgiveness means to pardon, to declare not guilty. When the Lord forgives your sin it is erased from your record. People spend a lot of money going to court to clear their name; they do not want their name in the criminal records. No amount of money will clear your name from the records in God’s court, but in his amazing grace he cleanses your record when you humbly and sincerely ask the Lord to forgive your sin. ‘As far as east in from the west, so far has he removed our transgression from us’ (Ps 103:12).

A second way of looking at forgiveness is that of covering sin (32:1). The word ‘atonement’ gives us the picture of covering or washing clean. David would have gone to the ‘temple’ on the Day of Atonement to make sacrifices for his sin. The blood of an animal was sprinkled on the altar by the priest. This symbolised the covering of his sin, or being washed clean (Ps 51:7). This covering of sin was not to hide it but so that the Lord no longer saw it. What the Lord sees when he looks upon hearts he has forgiven is the blood of Christ, which amazingly makes us whiter than snow (Ps 51:5, Rev 1:5).

A third was of looking at forgiveness is that the Lord does not ‘impute iniquity’ (32:2). Picture a ledger listing all your debts. Forgiveness means these debts are cancelled; the Lord no longer reckons these debts to your account. Many people are crying out for a fresh start in life; they have mixed up and want to start again. Well, this is what the Lord offers you, a fresh start, and a whole new life as a child of God. But do remember, God sees your heart. If your confession is not sincere, the Lord will know. You may deceive others, or even yourself, but you will not deceive the Lord (32:2). To confess your sin and then go back to your sinful life shows a spirit of deceit in your heart.

**2. Hiding sin brings misery**

Is your life miserable? Do you know people who are miserable, or show that their life is miserable? David knew what it was like to live a miserable life, ‘groaning all the day long’ and having no aims or energy (32:3, 4). He knew sleepless nights and tear-soaked pillows. Sorrow and misery are not always the result of unconfessed sin, but for David at this time it was. The apostle Paul speaks of weakness and sickness among church members at Corinth because of failure to ‘discern the Lord’s body’ in the sacrament (1Cor 11:30).

Paul, like David, urges us to examine our hearts for sin, and confess our sin. David admits that his refusal to do this resulted in guilt and mental problems, as well as physical ailments. Failure or harsh criticism can devastate us, so much so that we become ill. Guilt can also affect our health. The heavy hand of God may be involved. God disciplines those he loves in various ways, even physical ways. When David was brought low and his vitality sapped, he knew God’s heavy hand was upon him (32:4).

With spiritual insight and God-given wisdom, David stopped trying to hide his sin. He acknowledged his sin and confessed to the Lord (32:5). And when he did, the Lord forgave him. How did David know the Lord had forgiven him? He knew because of what is written in the Bible. God declared to Moses that he was merciful and gracious, ‘forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’ (Exod 34:7). That the Lord forgives sin was no secret- it is no secret today. The Lord is ready to forgive any and all who come to him confessing their sin and asking for forgiveness. There is ‘plenteous redemption’ with him (Ps 130:7). When you confess, God forgives you all your sins. He casts them behind his back. Do not offend the Lord by claiming good works you have done. Just be thankful and praise the Lord for his wonderful grace.

**3. Hiding place in the Lord**

This psalm is called ‘a contemplation’, and David is doing just this in what seems to be a public prayer. He admits to God, and to other worshippers, his mistake in refusing to confess his sin, and then tells of the blessing that came when he did confess and was forgiven by the Lord. He wanted others to learn from his experience and to call upon the Lord ‘while he may be found’ (32:6).

Living with unconfessed sin is debilitating and dangerous. Sin cuts us off from God. Unconfessed sin makes it difficult to pray; David’s silence meant he was not praying (32:3). Thankfully, he saw God’s hand of discipline upon him, but there was the danger of falling further away from his covenant God. In our misery and groaning we are vulnerable to attack from the evil one. When we cannot pray or come to worship because of unconfessed sin, we are in a dangerous place. A flash flood may sweep us away, as it were (32:6). When we confess our sin and God forgives us, our relationship with God, and with his people, is restored.

‘Bad boy comes good’ is a not uncommon headline these days. Celebrities, of whatever kind, are often swept up in drink, drugs, and debauchery. Sometimes they reform their ways, and then stand up and tell others how to live. It is good if they have truly changed their ways, but we rarely see sorrow for what they have done or true repentance. Sometimes they try to overcome guilt by donating money to the poor, but still publicity and money remain attractive. Christian testimonies sometimes focus more on the sins committed than on giving glory to God for his grace. David felt the shame of what he had done; and does not even tell what his sin was. His confession was genuine. As king of Israel, David was anointed by the Lord, and people looked to him for advice and instruction. Would they still listen to him after he sinned?

‘You are my hiding place’ says David in verse 7, as he prays before the people. He was back in relationship with his covenant God. The Lord had brought him to a safe place, a place of blessing, a place of rejoicing and of singing songs of deliverance. He was back in the house of God worshipping the Lord with the people of God.

**4. Heed instruction**

The people would not listen to David while ever he remained silent and tried to cover up his sin. But when they saw their king humble himself before the Lord, and confess his sin, they would have respected him and again listened to his advice. He was, after all, a man just like us, a man who was tempted and sinned. David would have a descendant who was tempted as we are, but who never sinned. He is the One we look to for advice and instruction, and help in time of need. He is our great high priest, who took our sin upon himself as he suffered and died on the cross. Without Jesus and the cross there would be no forgiveness!

When David says, ‘I will instruct you’ in verse 8, some think it is the Lord answering David, while others say it is David declaring he will instruct the people. He was their king, and he spoke in this way in Psalm 51:13. Belcher writes, ‘These verses make sense as the instruction of Jesus to his people because he is in a unique position to exhort us to submit ourselves to God’s way’. Ultimately it is David’s ‘greater Son’, our Lord Jesus Christ, who instructs us and teaches us the way we should go. He calls us to, ‘Take my yoke upon you and learn from me’ (Mat 11:29). We are to look to Jesus, ‘The author and finisher of our faith’ (Heb 12:2). He is the one who keeps us as the apple of his eye, and guides us all the days of our life.

A word of instruction follows in verse 9: ‘Do not be like the horse or mule’. The mule is notoriously stubborn. On the farm we had a horse that hated coming into the yard to be saddled. A few of us ran around to chase it into the yard, but at the last minute it would dart off down the paddock. But if we got on the motor bike it went in without any trouble! David, or the Lord, instructs us not to be slow or stubborn when it comes to confessing sin. Pride itself is the greatest sin. If we humble ourselves before the Lord he will lift us up. ‘Draw near to God and he will draw near to you’ (James 4:8,10).

**5. Happy in the Lord**

The psalm concludes like most wisdom psalms, with a contrast between the wicked and the righteous. And it returns to the opening words of blessing or happiness being the outcome of confession and forgiveness. The wicked is a person of sorrows (32:10); they may appear happy but sorrows fill their heart. People without God are without hope (Eph 2:12), and life without hope is not a happy life. ‘There is no peace for the wicked’ (Isa 57:21).

This psalm is a solemn reminder that even as a child of God, as David was, we can be foolish and bring sorrow upon ourselves, just like the wicked, if we stubbornly refuse to confess sin. The lesson for each of us is to trust in the Lord, knowing that he is merciful and ready to forgive. But to be forgiven we must confess and ask for forgiveness. When we do this, we will know the joy of the Lord. We will ‘rejoice in the Lord always’ because through the cross of Christ he forgives all our sin, and redeems our life from destruction (Ps 103:3, 4).