

## Songs of the Spirit | Using the Psalms to Connect With God

### Guilt

Psalm 32 and Romans 4.1-8

June 10, 2018

*How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! <sup>2</sup> How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit!*

*<sup>3</sup> When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. <sup>4</sup> For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Selah. <sup>5</sup> I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"; And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah. <sup>6</sup> Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him. <sup>7</sup> You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah.*

*<sup>8</sup> I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you. <sup>9</sup> Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, Otherwise they will not come near to you. <sup>10</sup> Many are the sorrows of the wicked, But he who trusts in the LORD, lovingkindness shall surround him. <sup>11</sup> Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; And shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart.*

**Romans 4** *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." <sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup> But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, <sup>6</sup> just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup> "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. <sup>8</sup> "BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."*

We're looking at themes in the Psalms. The plan we're using is only ONE WAY to slice the pie. The truth is: the five books that make up The Book of Psalms are difficult to classify and there's a variety of ways to organize the 150 Psalms...and I hope you'll try... I hope this series will send you INTO the Psalms and that you'll learn to love them.

Today, we look at the Penitential Psalms and there are seven in that formal category but other Psalms ALSO express penitence or confession of sin. These poems and songs record the believer dealing with GUILT... and BY that I mean actual guilt AND the sense or feelings that come when a person has done something wrong or thinks he has.

I guess we could talk about guilt and guilt feelings. They don't always go together. Sometimes people feel guilty when they're NOT (sometimes they DON'T feel guilty when they actually ARE)...and I'd love to talk about false guilt... maybe another time...but THIS Psalm (32) is about REAL GUILT - when a person has broken God's commands and then feels guilty and ashamed because of his/her deeds, words or actions.

What to DO when we DO wrong...and we know it? What do we NORMALLY do (our default response)? What does God DO FOR US and how does that come to us (how is it applied) and how can we turn this into an ongoing spiritual practice?

Guilt – our default/automatic response; second: what God does to address our guilt; third: the practice of penitence.

Sometime, type the words, “mistakes were made” in your search-bar. It's a phrase we associate with high-ranking leaders of government and business (it goes all the way back to Ulysses Grant) It's a way of saying that something went badly but it also attempts to dodge any direct admission of responsibility... AND that play-it-safe phrase is only ONE of a million ways we automatically deal with guilt.

Going all the way back to the first display of guilt in recorded history – in the Garden of Eden – when the almost involuntary reflex response was to run, hide, cover and blame. Adam, of course, even turned the gun on God: “it was the woman YOU gave me!”

So it is...and ever HAS BEEN... when we get caught or even when we simply know about ourselves what no one else knows – that we are WRONG... our unstoppable impulse is SOME FORM OF ...DENIAL.

Here the Psalmist says, “When I kept silent about my sin...” We use a whole array of mechanisms to deny the truth. We will suppress the sense that I was wrong (push it down and try to ignore it).

We will re-name the wrong we did. I always give my sins a nice name. He says, “I'm a laid-back kind of guy” (his neighbors say, “That guy is lazy”). She says, “I've always been a determined person” (you say, “She is obsessed and driven!”). He calls himself friendly and gregarious – his co-workers call him, “a flirt and kind'a creepy.” It's hard to name it/own it.

Another way we deal with guilt in our default denial-mode is to cover – to atone for our sins. They go to a marriage counselor. She says, “He never tells me he loves me!”

He says, “I told her once and if it ever changes I'll let 'er know.”

The therapist says, “Well, show her...what say you buy her flowers...and we’ll meet next month to see how it went?”

Next month – he says, “For 30 days in a row, I bought her roses...and she’s still not happy!”

She says, “Well maybe if you didn’t say every night, ‘Well, here’s your dumb flowers!’” See, he’s trying to atone for his sins...another form of denial.

And finally we MAY think that if we “avoid” sin THEN we won’t have to deal with guilt! The problem is – we only THINK we’re avoiding sin and most likely are simply sinning in a different way...that’s less obvious.

The Flannery O’Connor character Hazel Motes...was a preacher-boy ...and she wrote about him, “There was already a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.” In other words, “If I avoid sin then Jesus won’t mess with me.” (But isn’t that the actual essence of sin – the desire to be aloof/independent from God?)

We can try to avoid sin...but we’re never very successful at it... AND if it’s a way to avoid dealing with Jesus...then you’re missing the whole point!

The great news in this Psalm (and in all the Bible) is that God alone can deal with our guilt – He HAS and He has a way of bringing His solution into our denial.

In some sense there are two choices – either WE can cover our own guilt/sin OR God can cover it for us. And these two options lead to VERY different results.

St. Paul uses this psalm in his discussion on how God justifies the guilty. He makes it clear that Abraham (the pagan) was justified (i.e. declared righteous) by God before Abraham did anything to deal with his own guilt. Abraham was circumcised only AFTER God declared him righteous. It was NEVER that God rewarded Abraham for being obedient/righteous but that GOD DECLARED IT FIRST -- and Abraham responded to the gift...he simply received it...trusted.

It wasn’t a transaction like a paycheck where you DO for your employer and then he/she owes you your wages. God deals with our guilt NOT because we work for it. God IMPUTES... He credits the works of Jesus to us and He ascribes MY GUILT to Jesus Christ.

Theologians sometimes call it, “double-imputation” – my sin is blamed on Jesus Christ (and He carries it and pays the penalty) and His beauty and obedience is imputed or accounted to me.

So, St Paul quotes the second verse of this Psalm, “How happy is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity” i.e. the man declared righteous.

And this double-imputation is received (as with Abraham and everyone else in the whole Bible and beyond!) it's received NOT by effort/achievement (like a paycheck) but by passive trust...by leaning into God and by ceasing to work – by believing.

Here's Paul: "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness..." (Rom 4.5) Not by working but by believing – that's how imputed righteousness is applied or granted...and received.

And the way this often happens is that God turns up the heat. He makes it first difficult and finally impossible for us to live in "guilt-denial".

We've seen a lot of mountains in the Psalms (as a symbol) and we flat-lander Floridians have a hard time relating to mountains (as Chris said a few weeks ago). BUT WE HAVE NO TROUBLE RELATING TO THIS IMAGE: "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer." (3-4)

God will sometimes give guilt a psychosomatic force... Like Poe's "Tell-tale Heart" ...we find ourselves unable to get away from it. It dances across the pillow...can't sleep...and we feel inwardly sick like a hot humid day when you feel lethargic...drained...groaning and wasting away...

He's not saying that ALL PAIN is rooted in guilt (Job shows us that this isn't the case) but sometimes and for a redemptive purpose God will press His hand gradually down on us...to liberate us from the denial of guilt...IN ORDER TO ACTUALLY DEAL WITH IT.

We come to face it. That's the turning point in this Psalm, v. 5, "I acknowledged MY sin to YOU"

There are two kinds of people in this psalm – the deceitful and the godly... NOTICE I DID NOT SAY, "good people and bad people..."

There are bad people who deny their badness and there are bad people who OWN IT...who will not hide the fact of their failings and flaws and sin.

St John made the same contrast (1<sup>st</sup> John CH 1):

If we say that we have fellowship with God and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1.6-8)

The great corrective in both Psalm 32 and 1<sup>st</sup> John is that the opposite of a wicked person is a person who admits to his failings in the sight of God.

Again – it’s not good people and bad people; it’s people who cover their OWN sin and people who are covered by God...by imputation...by divine forgiveness given to those who come into the light.

And the practical results of this Practice of Penitence (our 3<sup>rd</sup> point) are also surprising.

First, repentance, i.e. owning up to your failings and calling it (vv. 5), “MY sin” is so often connected to joy in the Bible. I realize WE think of repentance as a sad thing but the unexpected result is JOY...relief!

The Psalm begins as the writer remembers the overwhelming sense of relief at being forgiven... that word means to carry/lift. “When God lifted this guilt, I was relieved...HAPPY THE MAN WHO IS FORGIVEN.”

He words it four different ways in the opening verses, that to come clean before God... to stop the denial and the deceit and get free from the default pattern of “run-hide-cover and blame” and simply to TAKE responsibility before the God who forgives is RELIEF!

God has covered me so I can stop the stupid fig-leaf thing! – God has made atonement (“covering”).

Jesus Christ is my hiding place (7). I can stop hiding behind dumb excuses... God has carried what I could no longer bear... and I no longer have to play the part of a good and sinless person – no deceit – relief!

A second reality in this practice of penitence is that it IS INDEED A PRACTICE not a once-and-done thing. Martin Luther took issue with the Medieval Church by pointing out that the whole life of the Christian is a life of repentance. We’re learning to be honest that we are “Justus et simul peccator” – justified and sinful at the same time. It depends NOT on MY goodness but on God’s declaration. Jesus Christ’s work is imputed to me – God sees me as righteous even though I am sinful... so I OWN it...don’t deny it.

Open-ness is next to godliness. We’re not good people but we are learning to be honest because we are secure in Jesus Christ and what He did FOR us.

Our repentance is never perfect – we will never be sorry enough (in fact Jesus’ Christ’s tears were cried FOR ME) but we’re learning to be open before God and even before other people (appropriate vulnerability!) that we are REAL sinners and Jesus Christ is a real Savior... And it becomes a practice, a new logic, a new approach to life and the path to joy and relief!

Unlike Hazel Motes – who avoided sin because he wanted to avoid Jesus – those who really get the “hesed” of God (God’s non-transactional love for us) those who keep getting “hesed” and who begin to show (v.6) “Hasid” (God’s grace begins to make us gracious) and we WANT God’s blessed intrusions in our lives!

I don’t want to avoid Jesus... (8-9) “I will instruct you, teach you...counsel you with My loving eye on you” – who wouldn’t want that? Jesus Christ is transforming me and sculpting my character.

It’s not like that transactional reward/punishment thing of traditional religion – like a bit and bridle for a horse and mule – a whip and a carrot: “They will not come near you!” No, there’s a higher and sweeter motivation – which I share with the “grace people” (THAT’S YOU...I hope!)

And as we continue to gather (not perfect people who have no sin – but failed people who have a great Champion...honest, realistic people who know the relief of grace and forgiveness) as we gather, we sing. How can we help but sing.

We cheer each other on and are (v. 7) “surrounded with songs of deliverance” – joy, happiness, relief, gladness. Even when the storms and chaos of life threatens – we’re safe because we know what it is to be forgiven...and honest...practicing repentance and singing about God’s hesed/grace. Trusting!

Look...you may still see God as a cruel and abusive animal trainer – whipping and poking and tricking you into giving up your bad habits and your job is to convince Him and the people around you that YOU ARE A GOOD AND SINLESS PERSON...

There’s a better way. There’s a King who lived, died and rose for His people... He imputes a perfect report card to those who trust Him.

He wants us only to be honest...to be forgiven...to have the Perfect Record of Jesus imputed/ascribed to us... So come out of hiding behind your excuses and fig leaves.

Own your sin in front of the Cross and let God change you from the inside out... Pray to Him while He may be found (6).