

# David Leads a Liturgy of Redemption

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## **Psalm 32**

*A Maskil of David.*

How fortunate the one whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.  
How fortunate the one the Lord does not consider guilty,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

When I kept silent,  
my bones wore out from my constant groaning.  
Day and night your hand weighed me down;  
my strength dried up like summer.

*Selah*

I let you know about my sin;  
I didn't cover my guilt;  
I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord;  
and you took away the guilt of my sin.

*Selah*

So, let every faithful one pray to you at the right time,  
and rising floodwaters will not reach them.  
You are my hiding place;  
you protect me from trouble;  
you surround me with joyous shouts of rescue.

*Selah*

I will enlighten you, and teach you the way to go.  
I will give advice with my eye upon you.  
Do not be like a senseless horse or mule,  
who must be controlled by bit and bridle  
or they will not come to you.

Many sorrows for the wicked,  
but the one who trusts the Lord is surrounded by steadfast love.  
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones;  
shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

## Children's Song

*The rest of the story*

Zacchaeus was a deceitful man,  
a crooked, no-good cheat,  
who climbed a tree when Jesus came,  
a makeshift front-row seat.  
And as the Savior passed that way,  
he saw the dangling feet.  
And he said, "Zacchaeus, come on down,  
for I'm going to your house today,  
for I'm going to your house today."

The crowd was shocked. It couldn't be!  
Could Jesus be so blind?  
Zacchaeus was as shocked as they,  
so shocked he changed his mind.  
"I'll help the poor, I'll make amends.  
From now on I'll be kind."  
And Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, you've been found,  
for it's you I've come to save,  
for it's you I've come to save."

## Sermon

We may forget to do it the rest of the week, but every Sunday morning we confess our sins. We follow a set and familiar pattern. We admit that we're sinners, we silently confess particular sins, we join our voices to confess sins we have in common, and we plead for God's mercy. It takes the better part of a minute, but we don't let that stand in the way. We do it every week!

My hunch, however, is that sin is more than a one-minute-on-Sunday-morning problem for us. Actually, this is more than a hunch. Our tradition says that sin splits us all right down the middle; that sin stains our every action, our every word, our every thought; that, in a painful parody of the Great Commission, sin is "with us always" — not as a master necessarily, but at least as a constant companion. This is hardly something to tend to fully by means of a Sunday morning minute.

Here's another hunch. We could use some lessons on sin, on confession, on forgiveness. Perhaps Psalm 32 is a good place to start.

**In Psalm 32 David leads the people in a liturgy of redemption.** He begins by assuring the people that there's nothing like being forgiven by God. When you cross the line but it's not held against you, when the twisted terrain of our life is covered by a new landscape of mercy, when you own up to the barrenness of your soul and learn that a criminal record will not follow you forever, then you know the goodness of God, then you know redemption.

David illustrates this basic lesson with some personal history. "I had to come clean," he says. "Until I did, I was in misery." And he was. He was "worn out" (v. 3b). He was "weighed down" (v. 4a). He was "dried up" (v. 4b). He was a wreck physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Sin — that sometimes obvious, sometimes elusive and hard-to-define violation of God, of your neighbor, of yourself — sin eats away at the sinner when it's allowed to linger.

I'm not saying that unconfessed sin is the explanation for poor health or for emotional and spiritual distress. Only that sin, sin that hasn't been dealt with, can and does cause such distress, eating a person up inside, especially a person with a conscience.

That was the case with David. But when he came clean, the guilt he was trying to cover up was taken away. His bones recovered their structure. The weight was lifted from his shoulders. His strength was renewed like spring. And with the taste of this redemption still on his lips, David gave praise to God and he gave advice to the people. The advice was simple: "Learn from me. Trust the LORD for mercy. You'll be safe, and your life will be a joy."

**Here's my question: Why should we listen to David, of all people?** David was hardly an ordinary guy. He had the wealth and privileges of royalty to smooth his ride. And who's to say that his joy wasn't helped along by some judicious expenditures from the royal treasury?

Nor was David an ordinary sinner. David doesn't name his sins in this psalm. It's all very general. But he has the zeal of someone who's finally quit smoking. And he's ready to tell other people how to do it. He has the zeal, the fanaticism almost, of a new religious convert. He has seen the light, and he's going to shine it all around. He's going to shine it in your face! But give him a few more pages in the Book of Psalms, and he'll really have some confessing to do. Here in Psalm 32, his sins are vague and unspecified. Soon enough, and he'll be owning up to rape and conspiracy and murder.

So why should we listen to David of all people on the subject of sin and confession and forgiveness? He hardly seems like a shining example. He didn't even have the sense of a horse or mule, the sense to stay in obedient harness to God. Instead he moved all too quickly from the joy of forgiveness to the depravity of greater crimes. We may as well learn accounting from Zacchaeus as to learn redemption from David.

**Yet suppose someone greater than David were to take up David's words?** Someone greater than David . . .

It's important to remember that we do not receive the Old Testament straight. We always and only receive the Old Testament in Christ and through Christ. Apart from Christ, the Old Testament remains incomplete, unfulfilled, unresolved. Apart from Christ, Psalm 32 tells only part of the story. A second important thing to remember is that the Book of Psalms is the *Prayer Book of the King*. Yes, there are psalms from King David, psalms for, by, or about King David. But those psalms speak all over again when their words are on the lips of Jesus. How significant it is when Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22. How significant it is when Jesus says, "The LORD [YHWH] is my shepherd [ . . . all the way into . . . ] the valley of the shadow of death." That's Psalm 23, of course. And it's every bit as significant when Jesus takes Psalm 32 on his lips.

Jesus knows the whole story. Jesus knows how reality is terribly complex, with few straight lines connecting the dots. Jesus was not a "fortunate . . . one . . . whose sin was covered" (v. 1). He was covered with the sins of others. There was no deceit in his spirit, yet he was considered guilty (v. 2), and in Isaiah's phrase, he was "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). The heavy hand of God (v. 4a) was upon him, as he suffered in silence (cf. v. 3), his strength giving way as he groaned from stabbing thirst (v. 4b). He went down into the "rising floodwaters" (v. 6b) of baptism, he identified there with sinners and with the sin of his people, but there was no "hiding place" (v. 7a) for him and no "rescue" (v. 7c) from a cross.

Yet on the third day, he was rescued. He was delivered from the grave. He trusted the Lord to the end, and in the end he was surrounded by a steadfast love that brought him back (cf. v. 10b). And the shouts of joy (cf. v. 11b) have yet to die down!

**So, what do we do with Psalm 32? How does it teach us?** First of all, while the equations of sin are complex (for example, I have my sin, my family's sin, my people's sin, my world's sin all twisted together) and Jesus knows that complexity better than anyone else (Psalm 32 seems to be his story, though told backwards and inside out), certain simple truths remain.

First, sin has vast destructive power. Sin destroys individuals and families. It destroys institutions, including churches. It destroys whole peoples and nations. Sin has vast destructive power. But some of that power, at least, is short-circuited when sin is acknowledged. Think, for example, of the enduring, insidious power of racism in communities that deny its presence. When he first moved to Columbus, my friend Vince Frosh, pastor of First AME Zion Church, was stopped by the police again and again and again and again and again and again, because he was driving in the wrong neighborhoods with the wrong skin color. He still gets pulled over for "driving while black." But think of the healing that can begin once the sickness of racism is seen for what it is, once its ugly, enduring presence is acknowledged.

Sin has vast destructive power. But beyond the power of sin is the power of God's mercy, a mercy made known in Jesus Christ, mercy for all sinners, a mercy built upon the love of God in Jesus Christ.

The extent of this mercy of God and confidence in this mercy, as expressed in Psalm 32 and made complete in Jesus Christ, open our eyes so that we can see David as forgiven and redeemed and able to teach us, so that we can see Zacchaeus as forgiven and redeemed and a "child of Abraham" (Luke 19:9), and so that we can see the kindness of God taking care of what we can't take care of and setting us on a better path.

It seems as if I've lost my way from where this sermon began. (I am somewhat out of practice with those three Sundays off.) Let's see, I began with our one-minute-on-Sunday-morning confession of sin. I said that I think sin is more than a one-minute-a-week problem for us. Then I turned to Psalm 32, which led this way and that.

I guess I'll end with this. Sin is, indeed, a big problem for me, for you, for our families, for our church, for our country, and for our world. Sin is a big problem for God. Sin is a big problem for Jesus. There are no simple equations for sin — we don't necessarily know it when we see it — and there are no simple solutions for sin. But there is the Lord Jesus, without transgression, without sin, without iniquity, without guilt. There is the Lord Jesus, silent, suffering, worn out, weighed down, dried up. There is the Lord Jesus, surrounded by steadfast love and rejoicing. There is the Lord Jesus. And the main thing to do about sin is to trust him.