

Confessing

Out of the 150 psalms written in the Bible, seven of these are traditionally known as the penitential psalms.¹ They express sorrow because of sin. They make known the desire for repentance and removal of the source of affliction. The penitential psalms also recognize and give thanks for the goodness and mercy of God. Some of these psalms confess personal transgressions. They all recognize sin as the origin of strife and wrongdoing.

Psalm 32 is one of these psalms of confession. The heading attributes the psalm to David. The readers theater presented an adaptation of this psalm based on the *Contemporary English Version*. During my reflection, I'll be reading it from *The Voice*.

The psalm begins with the joy of forgiveness.

1 How happy is the one whose wrongs are forgiven,
whose sin is hidden *from sight*.

2 How happy is the person whose sin the Eternal will not take into account.

How happy are those who no longer lie, to themselves or others.

I use an online resource that includes more than fifty versions of the Bible.² I was curious what words they used in verse one to describe what is forgiven and what is hidden from sight. The word used most often in the first phrase is *transgression*. Other versions use *wrongdoing*, *offense*, *rebellion*, *disobedience*, *fault*, *lawless acts*, or *wickedness*. Practically every Bible version uses the word *sin* in the second phrase. A few use the word *wrong*.

A criticism of some churches and pastors is that we don't talk about sin enough. We don't name it. We don't condemn it. So a relevant question is: What is sin?

Scholars have identified more than fifty words for *sin* in biblical Hebrew. The most common term means to *miss* or *fail*. It denotes a deviation from what is good and right. Sin means failing to do something in relation to God or people. The second most common term signifies willful violation of a norm or standard. It's often translated as *revolt*, *rebellion*, or *transgression*. This isn't a mere failure or mistake. It is willful disobedience. The third most common Hebrew term for *sin* means *perversity*, *error*, or *iniquity*. It is almost always used to indicate moral guilt before God.

The nature of sin suggests personal alienation from God. Sin ruptures the relationship between the Creator and the creature. Biblical prophets preached about the tragic reality of the nation's sins which evoked divine wrath and resulted in punishment through acts of nature or attacks from enemies. For the individual, Israelites considered one's guilt a possible cause for all kinds of calamities, especially as a cause of illness. The story of Job, even with its many troubling aspects, refutes that idea. More importantly, Jesus refutes this idea when he responds to his disciples' question of whether it was the sin of the parents or the individual that caused a man to be born blind. Jesus' answer was, "Neither one."³ Jesus spent time with persons labeled as sinners, those who others rejected. He also refused to punish some people in the way the religious law allowed and even dictated.

¹ The sermon is drawn from Week 8 of "Seeking God Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#); James H. Waltner, *Psalms: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 169-173, 762, 769-771; and Madeline Kalu, [What Are Psalms of Penitence? \(christianity.com\)](#)

² [BibleGateway.com: A searchable online Bible in over 150 versions and 50 languages.](#)

³ John 9:1-12

What is sin? Who determines what is sinful and what is not? What needs to be confessed and forgiven? I don't think the answers are as easy as some would say and the way we might wish they would be. Sin causes a rift – a separation – within a person, between a person and God, between two people, between groups of people. Confession involves telling the truth about those separations to God, to ourselves, and to each other.

Psalm 32 states that those whom God has forgiven, who don't try to hide things from God or from themselves or from other people are happy. The psalmist knows this truth, but it hasn't always been his experience.

3 When I refused to admit my wrongs, *I was miserable*,
moaning and complaining all day long
so that even my bones felt brittle.

4 Day and night, Your hand kept pressing on me.
My strength dried up *like water* in the summer heat;
You wore me down.

For a while, David was silent before God. Weighed down by his own wrongdoing, he didn't turn to God. Was this an issue of trust? Was David afraid that God might not forgive him? Did he think that by not admitting it, it might not really be a problem? Whatever the reason, David was wasting away, his energy gone as if sapped by the summer sun.

I can relate to those feelings; I assume you can too. We can get weighed down with thinking about what we wish we had done or said differently or things we wish we hadn't done at all or things we think we should have done but didn't. Some of these are completely personal – known only to us individually. Others involve spouses, parents, siblings, children, friends, coworkers, classmates, neighbors, and strangers. When we deny those wrongs or put off dealing with them, we can be miserable, sapped of energy, and worn down.

In Psalm 32, David states that when he ended his silence and confessed his wrongdoing to God, God listened and forgave him.

5 *When I finally saw my own lies*,
I owned up to my sins before You,
and I did not try to hide my evil deeds *from You*.
I said *to myself*, "I'll admit *all* my sins to the Eternal,"
and You *lifted and* carried away the guilt of my sin.

David no longer had anything to hide. When he admitted everything to God, he felt lighter and freer than when he tried to hide it. A common biblical theme is that everyone who confesses sin will be forgiven. A well-known idiom is that confession is good for the soul. In many circumstances, coming clean about anything they are guilty of makes people feel better about themselves, enhances their connection to God, and improves their human relationships. But is that always the case? Can you think of any exceptions?

Some people are compelled to continually examine themselves and repeatedly confess their shortcomings without ever feeling a release from guilt. This is called scrupulosity. Scrupulosity is characterized by repetitive thoughts about being sinful, dishonest, or lacking integrity; ruminating about past mistakes, errors, or possible sinful behavior; inordinate focus on religious and moral perfection; and excessive fear of their own or their loved ones eternal separation from God. For those of us on the low end of the scrupulosity spectrum, reminders of the need for confession followed by reminders of forgiveness and release like those found in Psalm 32 are adequate. For those on the high end, therapy and other kinds of treatment are needed. It's good for us to remember, that once we admit our failures, there's no benefit to hanging on to the feelings of guilt for what we have done. After confessing and receiving forgiveness, we need to forgive ourselves.

There are other questions about confession that are beyond the scope of this reflection. When should confessions remain private and when do they need to be made in public? What does genuine confession look and sound like? Who determines if a confession is genuine? How is confession being misused both within the church and in the larger society? Think about cancel culture, the legal ramifications of admitting mistakes, or the attitude that there's never any need to confess anything. Psalm 32 is primarily about personal confession, but we could also talk about the need for and proper use of corporate confession. Perhaps you will raise some questions, relate some experiences, or offer some thoughts on some of these during our discussion time. But for now, let's return to the psalm.

6 So let all who are devoted to You
speak honestly to You now, *while You are still listening*.
For then when the floods come, surely the rushing water
will not even reach them.

7 You are my hiding place.
You will keep me out of trouble
and envelop me with songs that remind me I am free.

David turns from his personal confession and challenges everyone to confess their wrongs to God because God will forgive them, just as God forgave him. David calls God his "hiding place" where he finds comfort and safety from trouble. God is not just a hiding place for David but also for all of us. The guilt of sin will no longer weigh us down because God has taken it away.

The last portion of this psalm invites all the listeners to apply this insight to their living. Let the psalmist's experience be that of others too!

8 I will teach you and tell you the way to go *and how to get there*;
I will give you good counsel, and I will watch over you.

9 But don't be *stubborn and* stupid like horses and mules
who, if not reined by leather and metal,
will run wild, ignoring their masters.

10 Tormented *and empty* are wicked *and destructive* people,
but the one who trusts in the Eternal is wrapped tightly in His gracious love.

11 Express your joy; be happy in Him, you who are good and true.

Go ahead, shout and rejoice aloud, you whose hearts are honest and straightforward.

It's not clear who offers this wisdom teaching. Is God speaking to the psalmist? Is the psalmist speaking to others? In either case, the message is that forgiveness is not just a license to go on behaving however we please; it's a second chance to make things right and learn to walk in God's way. The appeal is to be teachable, not stubborn. The faith community has a role in this, helping each other to experience the steadfast love that keeps us close to God, to be honest and straightforward, to rejoice together.

It's hard to confess our mistakes, but Psalm 32 reveals that we can embrace God's forgiveness instead of giving in to fear. We can tell God about all of our sins because God loves and forgives us. We don't have to be afraid of God. God wants a loving relationship with each and every one of us. We can be happy and rejoice when we are honest and straightforward. Thanks be to God.