

Sermon for Sunday, November 15, 2009
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THE CURE FOR ROTTEN BONES
Psalm 32

In our study of Romans, we next come to chapter four and continue a theme we have discussed before: righteousness is credited to believers by faith. No one can earn righteousness because all of us are sinners; none is good enough for the God of holiness and perfection. Yet in His grace, He receives us.

In chapter four, Paul focuses his attention on two Old Testament heroes, proving that they both came to God by a credited righteousness, an alien righteousness that did not belong to them. It was Christ's righteousness, given on their behalf. To make the point, Paul quotes David himself from the famous Psalm 32.

This Psalm is the fruit of his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. But the reflections David gives us on forgiveness come after a long season of reflecting on what he had done, and on what God had done to redeem him.

What lessons have you learned about forgiveness in your life? Let's listen in to King David, teaching us about forgiveness and repentance.

Psalm 32:1 Of David. A maskil. Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
² Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.

³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. ⁷ You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. ⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. ¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.

¹¹ Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

You may have heard of the Mission Agency, JAARS, the flying wing of Wycliffe Bible Translators. This ministry has a wonderful track record of safety, yet on April 7, 1972, a fatal accident took the life of seven passengers.

A mechanic had just completed a 100 hour inspection on the Piper Aztec when it took off toward Papua, New Guinea. The chief mechanic was stunned when he heard the news of the crash. He relived each step of the inspection in his mind, going over them again and again. Then, he in horror remembered that while

inspecting the fuel line, he had been interrupted. He forgot to reconnect the fuel line in the engine. Because the fuel sprayed out, the plane caught fire in flight and crashed.

As you can imagine the mechanic felt as if his life was rotting from the inside. His guilt was too much for him, he felt the crushing weight of his failure. Many tried to help alleviate his sense of wasting away, but it didn't help until the occasion of meeting with the widow of the pilot.

He could barely get out the words as he sobbed in presence of the pilot's family. "That hand there," he said, looking at his right hand, "took a good man's life." The pilot's widow embraced him. Later this mechanic wrote "[This widow] sat by me and held the hand that took her husband's life and another JAARS pilot sat on my other side with a demonstration of love, comfort, and forgiveness. That was the most significant first step in the healing process."¹

Guilt can crush us, can't it? Whether it is guilt over our failure or our sin, sometimes we feel, as David did, that our bones are rotting away within us. If you are here today and not a Christian, you may have a sense that the world isn't as it should be, and even that you have responsibility for some of that brokenness. When we are honest and take a look at the wreckage of life sometimes, the sense we are left with is that of a sinking feeling, or like the energy is sucked out of life.

But there is a cure, a remedy and it comes from forgiveness, forgiveness from the hand of God Himself.

God Forgives

In verse 1, three different words are used for sin, covering a wide range of guilt we have before God. Transgression speaks specifically to acts of rebellion against God, that is, hearing His voice, knowing His will, and choosing to do something different. Second is the general catch-all phrase for sin, that is, turning away from the true path God calls us to walk. The third could be translated iniquity, leaning toward distortion and perversion of the divine will.²

This third description of our sin is really interesting to me, because it acknowledges the sorry state of our souls so often. You may have heard it said that all sin is a good gift of God perverted. There is so much truth to that statement.

You and I have the capacity to take wonderful, blessed gifts from God, things that are holy and good in and of themselves, and pervert or distort them into something that becomes unholy and ultimately harmful to us. When we distort the good will of God in our lives the blessings themselves are hijacked and turn a blessing into a curse.

For example, God gives the blessing of money and resources into our lives to do amazing things, bless others by giving to them and support incredible causes. However, we use our money as a means of defining ourselves, or we hoard it thinking somehow it will run out. He is the giver and yet we operate by factoring God out of the equation. Our goal of life can become keeping or maintaining our money and then we are enslaved to it, the blessing hijacked. When we feel beholden to a gift God has given to us rather than using that gift for our enjoyment and His glory, then we have crossed into iniquity.

We also do it with reputation. A good name is a wonderful blessing. It is a wonderful blessing to be known for integrity and honesty, hard work, kindness and compassion. However, there is a way to live

¹ Max Lucado, God Came Near, Multnomah Press, 1987, p. 101.

² Craigie, Peter. Psalms 1-50, (Word Biblical Commentary, 1983) p. 266.

for reputation, isn't there? Do you feel the need to protect self from anyone knowing or suspecting that you have flaws? Or even deeper, allowing anyone to see and specifically identify those flaws? Do you rush to say, "Why are you judging me?" when someone simply points out that flaw or sin in your life? If so, it could be that you are living for reputation, having become enslaved to the idea of appearance. That, friends, is iniquity, a distortion of a good gift of God.

What do we do with all this transgression, sin and iniquity? God calls us to come to Him, a forgiving God, confess it and lay it down. God is the kind of God that forgives all kinds of sin, from the intentional acts of rebellion that we KNOW and even those we PLAN which are wicked (transgression). He also is so compassionate as to forgive the sin that enslaves us, entraps us and robs us of the joy that could be ours. His grace is a compassionate grace that longs for us to be whole and satisfied, not in the grip of our sin or the consequences of our sin.

How does forgiveness bring happiness? In verse 1 David reminds us our sins are forgiven. Forgiven is "lifted"; covered is "concealed." What vivid pictures not simply of hiding our sin and allowing it to fester. Rather, it is lifted and carried away. That is why happiness comes. God does not simply hide what remains...which is what WE do with our sin. But God lifts it, removes it and conceals from the view of his holiness. The problem with us is that we try to hide what remains in his view, and it burdens our souls. I recently read a story about Robert Bruce, a king of Scotland in the 14th century. Bruce led the Scotsmen into battle to gain independence from England. The English toward the end of the conflict determined that the best way to defeat the Scots was to capture Bruce so he could not be crowned.

At one point, Bruce was in the woods running from the English together with his men when the English put Bruce's own bloodhounds on his trail. His men heard the dogs getting closer and despaired of what to do. Bruce, being a good woodsman, headed for a stream and plunged into it, wading upstream a short distance before emerging on the other side of the bank.

Within minutes, the hounds, tracing their master's steps, came to the bank and stopped. The English soldiers urged them on, but the trail was broken. The stream had lifted and concealed the scent and Bruce escaped. A short time later, the crown of Scotland rested on the head of Robert Bruce.

The guilt and weight of our sin can be like those baying dogs--but a stream flows, red with the blood of God's own Son, to lift and conceal our guilt from the gaze of His holiness. By grace through faith we are safe. No sin-hound can touch us. The trail is broken by the precious blood of Christ.

Our sin is lifted, therefore resolved, and as David says in verse 2, "he does not count our sins against us." This comes to us as His gift, without regard to what we deserve.

This lavish grace and forgiveness of God serves as the foundation for a response of repentance. With our guilt lifted and removed, we are free to acknowledge the pollution of our souls without fear of punishment. Christ was punished on our behalf and we are called to have a lifestyle of repentance in response.

Repentance: Turn Away from Our Sin

To repent in the Bible is a word that simply means to turn away from our sin and toward God. We will take those apart and see how it is God's forgiveness that fuels our repentance.

David says in verse 2 says, the man is blessed in whom there is no deceit, as in not pretending before the Lord. Since He exposes and lifts our sin, so also should we live exposed and honest about our need. Since

He knows our sin at a deeper level than we do, a first step of turning away from our sin is determining not to hide it any longer, no longer pretend to be better than we are.

Only when confession before the Lord is honest, will we truly experience the happiness of sin lifted. When we continue to deceive, the guilt weighs on our hearts and lives. The entrapment of sin begins to be broken when we say clearly to ourselves and to God, "I have sinned" without trying to minimize or explain it away.

What are ways we try to deceive God, ourselves or others from the stark reality of our sin?

Some of us attempt to excuse our sin, blaming it on our past as if we are simply a victim. Because this thing happened to me in the past, I act this way. While our past certainly contributes to the ways we behave in the present, the past isn't an excuse as if we somehow are not responsible for what we've done to hurt others and ourselves in the present. But that's not the beginning point of repentance. That's self-deception.

Other times we may blame someone else for it. If you hadn't done what you did, then I would not have sinned. We might hear ourselves say, "I reacted in anger and hateful words because you provoked me." The words may be the prick for a response, but you and I are responsible for our speech, whether coming from a heart of anger and self-righteousness or from a heart of humility and grace. Blaming others for our sin is self-deception and is not in the pathway of repentance.

We may even walk in cheap grace. God will forgive me, so my sin is no big deal, we may think. Or we may talk about repentance without any genuine change of life, any turning from sin. Friends, this is none other than a denial that God is powerful enough to break our hearts free from the desire for sin, the passion for sin in the depths of our lives. We have no right to continue in sin all the while expecting God's grace. Repentance involves turning away from our sin and pleading with God to change the desires of our hearts.

Because the truth is that like David, our silence, deceit and refusal to confess the truth to the Lord will lead to groaning. He felt the weight of God upon him, and it felt like his bones were wasting away, (verse 3) and the strength was sapped from his life (verse 4). Have you ever felt that sense of conviction? There are physiological effects of conviction and feeling weight of God upon our hidden sin. It takes a lot of effort to keep sin hidden sometimes. Pretending, especially before God, is exhausting.

David did this for a whole year! The crushing guilt of his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, while secret, hijacked joy and peace from his life. For someone in the grip of God, failing to confess and pour out the pollution of our lives before God is a kind of self-torture, a kind of mourning or sorrow that isn't repentance. This is what David experienced. God may bring the weight of our guilt upon us and speak to us through our conscience or friends or someone. Yet while our heart is still proud and unbroken, the crying remains. God calls us to walk away from our sin, turn from it and walk in a new direction, away from self-deception, away from practicing the sin and turn to Him for renewal of our hearts. Is there yet some turning away from your sin that God is calling you toward? Is there unconfessed sin in your life that is sapping your strength? Come to Christ because with him is forgiveness.

Repentance: Turning Toward God

When David confessed, his guilt was removed. The Hebrew in verse 5 is emphatic. YOU lifted my guilt. That could translate to you lifted my guilt, YOU as if he is astounded that God himself had done it. The weight that is too much for us to remove ourselves, the weight of our conscience, the weight that no one

else can remove, no good works, no balance of the scales, God removes. This is the second part of repentance, turning toward God. When we turn toward God in faith we receive His grace.

So maybe that's the happiness. When the burden of guilt is lifted and we realize we had no doing in the lifting, we experience the happiness of being astounded at kindness.

A story is told of Martin Luther's fateful dream in which he was confronted by Satan. Who knows whether or not the story is true. It sounds like Luther. In the dream the devil unfurled a long scroll containing a list of Luther's sins, and held it before him to terrorize him with the sin. On reaching the end of the scroll Luther asked the devil, "Is that all?" "No," he said and a second scroll was thrust before of him. Then came a third. The devil finished with his scrolls and Luther almost mocked him. "You've forgotten something," Luther exclaimed triumphantly. "Quickly write on each of them, 'The blood of Jesus Christ God's son cleanses us from all sins.'"

When we turn toward God, we turn in faith, believing that what Jesus said, he means. We are cleansed by the power of his blood.

What about when our conscience comes in judgment on us? Or when a friend loves us enough to point out a destructive sin in our lives? Confess and agree with God as to the pollution of our souls. Turn to Him in faith, believing He forgives. God is our hiding place. Jesus hides us in the cleft of the rock, as the beautiful hymn says.

This week I saw footage of flooding from Hurricane Ida. Flooding footage is a familiar thing for us here in St. Louis. Whenever you see pictures of a precious piece of property planning for flood waters to rise, what always rings the property? Sandbags. Piled high enough to cause the waters to go around that which is precious, protecting, surrounding, ensuring that whatever is inside this ring of sandbags is safe.

God says here in verse 7 that songs of deliverance surround us and verse 10 tells us specifically what is being sung: God's unfailing love, His loving kindness. His covenant faithfulness surrounds what is precious to Him so that the waters of judgment will not touch us.

When you begin to feel the judgment due you for your sin, turn away from your sin and toward God in faith. Lean into that loving kindness of your Father who says you are no longer condemned. This doesn't mean we ignore our sin or just pretend it goes away. Rather from inside, ringed by the love and forgiveness of God, admit your wrong without deflecting blame for it on someone else and turn to God for a new life of obedience. Confess your guilt. Don't pretend or hide in fear of exposure before the Father who loves you. Come clean to Jesus.

Turning toward God also involves a quest for new life. God responds to David. Part of the blessing of repentance is that forgiveness, turning from our sin to God, leads us along into fellowship with God. Verse 8 says, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you." God promises to walk with us away from our sin and toward the newness of life Jesus has purchased for us. This walk is a walk into being filled with His purposes for us and His design for our lives. It is a walk in new pursuit of holiness and is marked by humility that knows where our feet have been before and could go once more.

God calls us not to force Him to treat us as a mule or a horse (verse 9) that requires pressure or pain to walk toward obedience. Rather, let us turn toward new life because of His kindness and grace!

His hand may feel heavy at time, but how much worse if His hand is absent from us! His love will surround us, encamp around us and keep us in His way.

Are you walking into the holiness and new obedience that comes as a fruit of repentance? If we have no intention toward walking in the new life of holiness, our repentance is incomplete. We turn away from our sin and toward God, not only in His grace but also toward His new pattern of holiness for our lives.