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Greenwood Baptist Church

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Before Time Began

Psalm 32

It's the 4th of July weekend, and we're continuing, as I have been sharing over the weeks, with different things about the early days of our country. Today, we're going to talk about something that happened during the War of 1812. In September 1814, British troops had already marched through our capital—burned it down—and even set fire to the White House. Now they were about to enter the harbor at Baltimore, Maryland. That was a major harbor at the time. If they had done that, they probably would have taken Maryland. Our country was only thirty-six years old at this point.

Things are hanging in the balance. There is a fort that stands between the British and the ability to take Baltimore—Fort McHenry. A few months earlier, the commander of Fort McHenry had commissioned a flag maker there to make what was thought to be the biggest flag in the United States at the time. It measured thirty feet by forty-two feet. It was so big that they had to assemble it. They had to borrow a factory and assemble it on the factory floor because no room could contain it. That flag flew over Fort McHenry.

In that same harbor was a young man—he had grown up in Maryland and was a devout follower of Christ. He believed he would enter the ministry at one point, but he ultimately chose the law as a career and became an attorney. A friend of his, a physician, was captured by the British, leaving the village and the area where he served without a doctor. So this young man was asked—and he took a couple of other people—to go to the British to see if they could negotiate a release for his friend, the physician.

So they did that. They met with the head of the British forces there, and he agreed to release his friend. But there was one condition. They had to remain on the ship in the harbor until the plans were fulfilled and the battle was over, because they had been on that side of the line, had seen all their ships, and had heard some of their plans for what they were going to do. So they were left there on the ship.

After they arrived, the British began bombing Fort McHenry with rockets and bombs. The bombardment lasted for twenty-five hours. There is some debate about the exact number, but somewhere between fifteen hundred and eighteen hundred rounds were fired at Fort McHenry. This young man stood on the deck of the ship, watching throughout the entire battle. As long as the cannons were firing and shells were being sent, they knew the fort had held. The shelling went on all night long.

There was so much smoke that they couldn't see the fort, but they knew that as long as the shelling continued, they held it. Then, a little before daylight, the shelling stopped. They didn't know whether that meant the fort had surrendered and the flag had been taken down, because there was so much smoke and it was dark, so they waited to see. As the smoke began to clear and light came through, they looked across the water and saw our flag flying over Fort McHenry.

The young man took out an envelope—he had received a letter—and wrote down his account of what happened there. A friend of his took this account, printed it, and distributed it. Before long, it had spread up and down the colonies—the states at the time. Ironically, it was set to an old British tune; they began to sing it, and it became—a hundred years later—an official song. But it's a song I think we know. These are the words to the poem he wrote standing on the deck of that ship, seeing that flag across the bay:

*O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,  
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,  
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?  
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there;  
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?*

The man was Francis Scott Key, obviously. Sometimes we sing that song, and it sounds like poetry, but it wasn't based on poetry. It was based on what actually happened, as an eyewitness saw it. As you know, the fort held, and our country held—we're still here. But it's good to remember the sacrifices made for us so we might have freedom.

One of the other things I love about America—I love being an American—is that we don't celebrate the day in 1781 when Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, which marked the end of hostilities. There was even a day after that when the treaty between us and Britain was worked out and finally signed. It was years later that the British finally left New York, and the last British troops left the United States. We don't celebrate that either.

Do you know what we celebrate? It's the day we *declared* our independence. We didn't actually win our independence for six years, but we declared it on July 4th, 1776, and that's the day we celebrate. I love that. I love that we celebrate that day as our Independence Day, because now we look at it and think, "That is the day. That's the day when everything changed." It took six years to get it done, but that's the day we celebrate.

Here's the thing about it: we rightly celebrate the birth of Jesus. We should. We also rightly celebrate the resurrection. I don't mean to burst anyone's bubble, but Jesus probably wasn't born in December. It was probably in April or May, or something like that. We don't really know when that was, but we do know when Easter happened. We know when because of the Jewish calendar, which marks Passover. That's when Jesus was crucified. We know when that one is.

We ought to celebrate that one, too. The resurrection of Jesus is the most significant moment in all of history.

Here is something I find really interesting. As I was reading Psalm 32 this week, it really struck me about God's plan. The fact is that God's plan of salvation was put in place and decided by Him before He ever created the first man—before He created Adam and Eve. It was already decided. He knew He was going to give man free will. He knew that at some point we would choose to be disobedient and that sin would enter the world. He made a plan before He even created us for how He would redeem us and how we could choose to be with Him forever.

He, as a gracious God, chose to create man with a choice. But the plan of forgiveness and the plan of salvation were there before the foundation of the world. So I want to read Psalm 32, and then we're going to go through that Psalm in little bits at a time.

Psalm 32:

***"Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty! When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.***

***Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.' And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. Interlude Therefore, let all the godly pray to you while there is still time, that they may not drown in the floodwaters of judgment.***

***For you are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of victory. The Lord says, 'I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control.'***

***Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord. So rejoice in the Lord and be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!"***

In Revelation 13:8, God is talking about the end days and the plan that will take place at the end. He says this:

***"And all the people who belong to this world worshiped the beast." That's talking about prophecy. "They are the ones whose names were not written in the Book of Life that belongs to the Lamb who was slaughtered before the world was made."***

That's to say that God's plan was in place before He ever created the world. Note that there was no other death that Jesus suffered before the world was made, but it was as good as done. When God said this was the way people would be forgiven, it was as good as done. And all the people

who lived before Jesus who were saved were saved through the blood of Jesus, even though it hadn't yet been shed on this earth, because the Lamb was slaughtered before the foundation of the world.

David saw and understood as much, or more, than anyone else in the Old Testament about God's forgiveness. That's why he says here, ***"Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty!"***

Here's the thing about David: this Psalm was written after he sinned with Bathsheba. Even though it appears in a different place in the Psalms, or later in the order of Psalms, Psalm 51 was most likely written before this Psalm. In that Psalm, David says, "Restore to me the joy of my salvation. Then, I will convert sinners. I will tell others about Your love and forgiveness." (I'm paraphrasing here.) So, in this Psalm, David teaches us about forgiveness.

He says, "Look, their sin is put out of sight. Their sins are erased. The Lord has cleared of guilt those whose lives are lived in complete honesty." The record has been erased; made clean. Sins forgiven. One of the reasons I think we struggle with that—I love David, but one of the things I love about him also bothers me a little bit—is that he can say things like, "You know what? My sin has been erased. You've made me whiter than snow. You've removed the guilt of my sin." I know what he did. I know he took another man's wife and committed adultery with her.

And then, to cover it up, he had him killed. He sent orders. He put them in the guy's own hands and said, "Here. Take this to your commander." When his commander got it, it said, "Hey, put him up at the front of the fighting and then pull everybody back," ensuring that he would be killed. So how can a guy like that say, "Hey, I'm guilt-free!" That's hard for me to get. Here's why it's hard for me to get. Every time I see that, I kind of rejoice in it, but I also have a little problem with it. Here's the reason:

I'm just going to put us all in the same boat. We sometimes have a hard time forgiving. Am I right? Now, there are some people who are easy to forgive. You know, yesterday was the 4th. My daughter, her husband, and their family were all gathering. My grandchildren were there, doing their grandchildren stuff. They'd sometimes do things they're not supposed to. I'm just going to be honest: it's easy for me to forgive them. Their parents are like, "I can't believe they did..." And I'm like, "Oh, it's okay, baby. It's not a big deal. Come see Papa B."

I forgive them immediately. It ain't no problem. They're my grandchildren. Number one, I don't have to go home with them, and I don't have to deal with it when they do things they're not supposed to. So it's easy to forgive them. But there are other people in life who are not so easy to forgive—people who hurt you or did something to your family.

It kind of bubbles back up every now and then, doesn't it? You think you've forgiven them, and then you're around them, and you just can't help it—something comes out. "Well, remember that time..." and you've just got to throw it out there. You've got to remind them, because it's hard to forgive. We look at it the wrong way. There is a reason why God talks about us, and Jesus talked

about us forgiving others. To the degree that we can't forgive others, to that same degree we're going to have a hard time truly understanding and accepting God's forgiveness of us.

I'll bet that anyone here who has trouble forgiving other people has times when they think, "Can God really forgive my sins? How can that be?" It's hard for us. But the Bible says God has taken our sins *away*. He didn't take them unto Himself. He gets rid of them. In Leviticus, God demonstrates this in what He tells Moses and the priests. "This is what you've got to do. These are the things..."

Not only were these the things they did to be right before God in the short term, but they also served as a demonstration so they would understand forgiveness in the long term with Jesus. So here is what He tells them in Leviticus 16:20-22:

***"When Aaron has finished purifying the Most Holy Place and the Tabernacle and the altar, he must present the live goat. He will lay both of his hands on the goat's head and confess over it all the wickedness, rebellion, and sins of the people of Israel. In this way, he will transfer the people's sins to the head of the goat. Then a man specially chosen for the task will drive the goat into the wilderness. As the goat goes into the wilderness, it will carry all the people's sins upon itself into a desolate land."***

He says, "We are going to transfer it all over here." That's symbolic of Jesus becoming our sin. The Bible says, "He who knew no sin became sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." So all of my sins and all of your sins were transferred onto Jesus. This goat is a symbol of that. They didn't just turn the goat loose. Think about it: all your sins have been transferred onto the goat, and the next day the goat is at the opening of your tent.

People would freak out! That would be a reminder. "Man, that's the goat! That's the one. Everybody's sins are on that goat! Get him out of the tent! I don't want to touch him!" But here's what God said, "I want someone specially chosen, and they're going to drive that goat so far out into the wilderness that he is never coming back!" Because God wants us to realize that's what He does with our sins.

People ask me all the time—and it is a great question—"How do you know when God is speaking to you?" Well, there is one way to know that a voice—or whatever you hear—is not from God. It is any time you are reminded of your past sins. That is not God speaking. God tells us clearly in His Word, in Psalm 103:12: ***"He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west."*** In another place He says, "Your sins will I remember no more." When you hear something tell you, "Hey, remember what you did?" that's not God. That's the Enemy. So you can know.

God demonstrated His forgiveness. One reason we have a hard time with that is that we say, "All right, I've forgiven them," but we haven't forgotten. And every now and then, it comes back up in our hearts and minds. Forgiving means letting go of. Now, understand something. There is a difference between forgiveness and trust. If someone does something to you, you can forgive them. It doesn't mean they automatically get your trust again. But it means you've really released

it. And that's hard to do. There is not one of us here who, in some area of life, isn't having a hard time letting go.

Jesus said this: "If you forgive your brother, your heavenly Father will forgive you. If you don't, He won't forgive you." There has been an argument since the beginning of time between people much smarter than I am about what that means. One thing I know is that it doesn't mean you're not saved if you struggle to forgive someone. That's not what it's saying. But here's what I take from it. No matter what, forgiving people is a serious thing. God is serious about it. He is telling you, "That person you haven't forgiven? You'd better figure out a way to let that go."

There are two reasons for that: First, you've been forgiven much. Second, if you don't learn to forgive others, you'll always struggle to believe you are forgiven. You'll have a hard time understanding that God has cleansed you and removed your sins. He is not up there thinking about your sins. When you come into His presence, He is not going, "Oh, yeah. I remember what you did!" He is going, "That's my child. I love him." We struggle to grasp God's forgiveness because we struggle to forgive others.

David understood and grasped God's forgiveness. Some of you are like, "How can that be forgiven? He murdered a guy after he stole his wife!" That's one of the most horrifying things you can imagine someone doing. I'm sure you've got a list, whether you know it or not, of four or five things you just find hard to believe can be forgiven at all. But here's the deal with that: If God could not really forgive David, cleanse him, and remove the guilt of his sin, how do you know He can do that for you?

You see, the amazing thing is that God forgave David. Completely. He removed his sin from him. He removed the guilt from him. And David lived before God as a forgiven, cleansed man. There is a part of me that asks, "Did he show any remorse toward the people he sinned against? That guy had a dad, had a mom. His wife is there in your home. Did you ask their forgiveness?" There is a part of me that thinks, "Man, did he suffer enough?" Here's the flipside of that: when God forgives me, I want to be completely forgiven.

The good news is that if God forgave David and could forget David's sin, He could do the same for you. We sang it earlier: our sins are many, but God's mercy is more. It's more. In the first part of John, there is rejoicing that God removes sins—He doesn't just forgive them; He removes them.

John 1:29—This occurs at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry.

***"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"***

He didn't just die for it. He doesn't just die so we can be forgiven. He takes those sins away. And that's something we should be grateful for. Here is something that David talks about next. When you hide your sins, when you try to cover them up, when you try not to admit they are there, there are consequences. There's pain. It goes all the way back. Psalm 32:3-4 says: ***"When I***

***refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long."*** There are consequences for keeping sin.

One of the things I don't think I do enough—I would guess I'm speaking for you, too—is that I don't confess my sins enough. I'm not talking about getting out in front of this group or that group, or announcing it at a family dinner, or whatever. I'm talking about confessing before God. We need to confess our sins before God. That's from the very beginning. In Genesis, after they sinned, the Bible says their eyes were opened.

Genesis 3:7-8:

***"At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness."*** And what did they do? They tried to hide it. ***"So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees."***

Our first instinct is to hide our sin—to hide behind it. Sometimes we hide behind it with humor. We make a joke, "Oh, that's just the way I am," and other people join in, because if we can make it seem like sin is not a big deal, that's one way of hiding. Then sometimes we just cover it up when there are things we don't want anyone else to know about. We even try to hide it from God. We just pretend it's not there.

When God called them out from the trees, He didn't just make them do this. This wasn't punishment. This was God's mercy. He had them tell what they had done. God already knew. He wasn't asking because He needed the information. He was asking because they needed to confess. Man has always needed to confess their sins to God.

David said, ***"When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat."*** One of the things I love about David is that he doesn't just tell us what; he tells us how it felt, and it is something you can relate to. When we sin, when we go against God, something gets in the way of our relationship with Him. David describes it: "My body was wasting away; your hand of discipline was heavy on me."

Hebrews says, "Those whom I love I reprove and discipline." God loves us enough to discipline us. It's interesting how sometimes, when you discipline a small child, they turn around and want to crawl right up into your lap. Sometimes they want to run away. That's true. Sometimes we do that. But I find it beautiful to see a parent discipline their child, only for the child to want to be comforted by the one who disciplined them. That's the way it's supposed to be. That's the way we're supposed to be. When our heavenly Father disciplines us for our sin, we want to crawl up in His lap and say, "I'm sorry, but that hurts."

Proverbs 28:13:

***"People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy."***

David chose to confess his sins. He did so after God sent a prophet to confront him about it. And God will put things in your way to remind you of your sin. Someone will be living a life, and you think, "Man, I'm not doing that." Or "I'm doing something different, and I shouldn't be." Or you hear something from the Word of God, or another believer says something to you, or you realize that when you are talking to somebody else, you're trying to hide it. There are ways that God is going to show you.

He is going to confront you with your sin, and you've got to make a decision. "Am I going to confess it? Am I going to turn to Him and open up about it?" The thing I love about David is when the prophet came in and confronted him with his sin, he immediately said, "I have sinned." He didn't try to make excuses. He was ready to confess, and he did.

It says in Psalm 32:5, ***"Finally I confessed all of my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the Lord. And you forgave me. All of my guilt is gone.'"***

It is freeing to confess. Are there times you need to confess to someone else? Yep! If you're married, sometimes you need to confess to your spouse. Sometimes you just need to confess to a close friend. Sometimes you need to confess to a group of people. Most of the time, whatever arena your sin is in, that's the arena you need to confess in. If you're in front of your whole family and you totally lose it and blow it, you don't just go off before God and confess that—that should be first—but then you also ought to confess it to your family. "Hey, I blew it the other day. I'm sorry."

If it's a private sin—if it's just in your heart—then confess it to God. He's the only one who knows. But I think you may need a friend to hold you accountable, and you need to say, "Hey, I'm struggling with this." That's good too. But you don't have to come before the church with every sin in your heart and confess it to everybody. Now, if you sin in front of the whole church—it's public—then the Bible says yes, you confess in front of the church. But the first and foremost thing we do is confess before God. That should be a regular thing.

1 John 1:9:

***"But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."***

When we confess our sins, turning away from them is part of it. He says, "I will confess my rebellion to the Lord." Confessing our sins means turning away from them. He is faithful to forgive and to cleanse us from all wickedness. Whatever we've let into our hearts, God cleanses us of. But you don't get to come and keep confessing, knowing you're going to keep the same sin.

It doesn't work that way. You may struggle with something and have to confess it dozens—even hundreds—of times in a lifetime. But when you come before God, it had better be with repentance. "I'm turning away from it. I'm going to stop." And God cleanses us of all wickedness. It is a gift.

Now, confession. When do you do that? The best time to confess is when it's just a sin of the mind or the heart, and you haven't actually done anything. The second-best time is right after you've actually done something. The next-best time to confess your sin is *right now*. Whatever sin that might be. Whether it's from years ago and you haven't confessed it, whether it's something you've continued in, or whether it's something you did this morning—it's time to confess your sins. It ought to be a regular part.

Here's the deal: if you've never gone and just confessed your sins to God, it's one of the most freeing, good things you can do because you'll feel that guilt lifted. That's the promise of God's Word. "Then you removed the guilt from me—after I confessed." We need to make that a regular part of our life—of our prayer life—by confessing our sins. Not just, "God, forgive me of all of my sins." Sometimes that's okay. Maybe you can't think of any. But it's good to confess the ones you can remember.

Some of you are like, "Oh my gosh! It's been a long time since I did that. It's going to take a while." I'm not saying you've got to confess every instance that's happened over the last ten years. You may not even have a list. If you're a guy and you're married, get your wife to make a list for you—she's got one. And vice versa! I'm being equal here. Ladies, if you can't think of anything—actually, your husband should say, "No, Baby, there's nothing. You're perfect." So that probably wouldn't work. But people know—and you know—what your sins are. Confess them.

Psalm 32:6-8:

***"Therefore, let all the godly pray to you while there is still time, that they may not drown in the floodwaters of judgment. For you are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble."***

There's a part of that—you've got to come before God and confess Jesus and your sins. We all know the floodwaters of judgment are ultimately coming. We're all going to die. "It is appointed unto man to die once, and then judgment." We're all going to experience that unless Jesus comes back and takes the church before then. It gets my vote, but whenever it happens, it happens.

So at that point, the moment you take your last breath here on earth, whatever happens after that is set in stone. It's done. So repent of your sins while there is time. None of us knows when that time is coming. The second part of that is—there is a passage in Proverbs that talks about how there comes a time when we make decisions here on this earth that we will experience the consequences of our actions.

David experienced consequences. The child born of his adultery with Bathsheba died. There are consequences. You make decisions—you sin against the people you love, or you make decisions about how you use money, or whatever, and those things are not godly. There are consequences for that. There is still God's forgiveness, but here's what it says in Proverbs 1:24-31:

***"I called you so often, but you wouldn't come. I reached out to you, but you paid no attention. You ignored my advice and rejected the correction I offered. So I will laugh when you are in***

***trouble! I will mock you when disaster overtakes you— when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster engulfs you like a cyclone, and anguish and distress overwhelm you.***

***When they cry for help, I will not answer. Though they anxiously search for me, they will not find me. For they hated knowledge and chose not to fear the Lord. They rejected my advice and paid no attention when I corrected them. Therefore, they must eat the bitter fruit of living their own way, choking on their own schemes."***

There's a point when we choose to disobey God and go our own way, building up earthly consequences—and we're not going to escape them all. There is still forgiveness. And no matter when we confess and turn back to the Lord, the record is wiped clean. But that doesn't erase the results of our actions here on this earth. If you choose to do something that's against the law—"Hey, I need some money. I'm going to go rob a bank." You can rob the bank, then ask forgiveness from God, and you'll get it. But that doesn't mean you aren't going to get arrested and go to jail.

There are consequences to your actions here on earth. God is not going to miraculously erase the consequences you chose. So what the Scripture says is, "Hey, don't get to that point!" David says the same in Psalm 32:

***"Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control. Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord. So rejoice in the Lord and be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!"***

Do you know what he is saying? Every day, no matter what you did yesterday or how many times you messed up, wake up and say, "I'm going to follow the things of God. I don't need God to correct me. I'm going to live in such a way that God doesn't need to correct me because I'm following His Word."

Keep short accounts with God. Confess your sins regularly. It will remind you. The more you confess, the more you'll remember. The more you remember and turn from them, the more you'll feel like you can go tomorrow and not do them again, because He is faithful to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So keep short accounts with God. Confess your sins. And every day be determined, "I'm going to live unbridled. I'm going to follow the things of God. I'm going to follow God's ways, be obedient, and live a life that honors Him. Then not only do I not need the bit and bridle, but I'm also not going to experience the consequences of rebelling against the things of God." So both of those things can be true.

The main point of this message is this: you might think you've got so many consequences, but there is still great value in confessing before God, turning away from your sin, and turning to Him, because your tomorrows have not yet been determined in terms of what you're going to experience in them in relation to your obedience to God. Confess your sins now. Turn away from them now. Turn to Him now. It's not necessarily going to erase the results of every bad decision,

but I'm telling you about the path God can have you on, the joy you can experience in being forgiven and in having your guilt removed, and the restoration that comes with forgiveness.

It's worth it. It's what Jesus died for. He died to take our sins away from us. When we can live with a clear conscience before God, it is by far the best way to live. The last two verses:

***"Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord. So rejoice in the Lord and be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!"***

You might say, "Well, my heart is not pure." But if you're forgiven and belong to Jesus, it is, because He has declared you righteous. So rejoice!