

Forgiving the Unforgivable

Psalm 32

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So many things today fight for our attention and strive to capture our hearts. Let's begin with some class discussion. I'm going to ask a few questions and I'll put your answers on the white board.

Q: What creates distance between us and God?

Q: What sins most trip us up?

Q: What common idols do we worship today?

This is how Pastor Chris began his message to the students at the start of their Missions Camp on July 31. I thought it would be helpful to get a first-hand report from one of our students so I'm going to ask Allie Cox to come up.

1. Can you tell us a bit about yourself?
2. The youth group participated in a pretty amazing experience using this white board. Can you give us some details?
3. This night kicked off a Missions Camp. Can you share what you guys did? Which activity impacted you the most?

Our text today is Psalm 32. Let's read it together.

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*. Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. *Selah*. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you. Many are the sorrows of the wicked,

but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD. Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

Here's our main idea: *We must uncover and confess our sins if we want God to cover and cleanse us.*

Background

Before we jump into the text, here are a few background truths.

- **David is the human author.** While he was a great king and walked with God for much of his life, we also know that David committed adultery, murder, and deceit. He had taken another man's wife and then that man's life. He wrote this Psalm to help us know we can be fully restored and completely forgiven no matter what we've done.
- Psalm 32 has also been referred to as one of "**Paul's Psalms**" because it is quoted extensively in Romans 4:6-8 to help establish how we are declared righteous not because of what we've done, but because of what Christ has done on the Cross.
- As we see in the introduction, this is a "*maskil*," which is a literary or musical term to indicate this instruction is extremely important. In other words, this is a "preaching Psalm" given to us that we can learn from the experiences of David. While we don't know for sure, this instruction is likely the application of Psalm 51:13: "*Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.*"
- The word "**Selah**" is used three times in this Psalm. Most versions of the Bible do not attempt to translate "Selah" but simply transliterate the word straight from the Hebrew. It likely refers to a musical rest, in which singers stopped singing to take a breath so only the musical instruments could be heard. According to one Bible dictionary, it can also signify a musical crescendo followed by silent reflection. The Septuagint, which is the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates "Selah" as "intermission."

The idea is to get us to take a breath in order to reflect and remember. The Amplified Version renders it: "*Pause and calmly think about that.*" It's in the imperative, meaning this is something we're commanded to do. We could say it like this: In the midst of our problems, let's pause, pivot and

praise. Because the word “Selah” appears three times in this passage, we’ll follow this natural outline by pausing, pivoting and praising each time we come across it.

Let’s see how God forgives the unforgivable.

1. Forgiveness received (1-5). Listen to verses 1-2: *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”* The word *“blessed”* has a very rich meaning. We could say, *“How happy!”* or *“Congratulations to,”* or, *“Oh, the bliss of!”* In addition, it’s in the plural so it reads, *“Oh, the multiple happinesses, the bundles of blessings and genuine joy to the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.”*

David provides a threefold description of sin in these first two verses. These terms are not mere synonyms but were chosen to cover the entire spectrum of sin. One pastor refers to these descriptions as the three-headed dog barking at the gates of Hell.

- *“Transgression”* depicts a defiant disobedience toward God, a rebellious revolt against the Almighty. It’s a crossing of the line.
- *“Sin”* means to miss the mark of God’s perfection either through acts of commission or omission. The picture is of an archer missing the target.
- The word *“iniquity”* in verse 2 represents a crookedness, deformity, or deviancy. The image is of a gnarled and twisted tree.

We are in rebellion, we fall short of God’s law, and we are totally depraved.

During one of our Super Saturdays many years ago, young imager bearers learned about sin and how pervasive it is. In one experiment, a large aquarium was filled with mousetraps and ping pong balls. A boy was asked to throw a ping pong ball into the aquarium and when he did, everything broke loose, with traps snapping and balls bouncing everywhere. One sin led to a chain reaction of rebellion. In a similar way, Adam’s sin has exploded in each of our lives, setting off a chain reaction of rebellion. BTW, speaking of children, next Sunday night is the Prayer for QC Schools Night. I’ll be leading the time at Jane Addams at 6:00 pm if you’d like to join me. Also, as a way to resource parents and grandparents as the school year begins, we’re featuring a book at the Café called, “Raising Gender-Confident Kids.”

David also used a triad of phrases to express the fullness of our forgiveness. These three words were chosen to cover the wide scope of God's salvation.

- The word **“forgiven”** means, *“to lift a heavy burden or debt and carry it away.”* This is what the scapegoat symbolized in the Old Testament – the guilt of sins was placed on the goat and he was sent out into the wilderness. Psalm 103:12: ***“As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.”*** I think of these words from the hymn, *“It is Well,”* *“My sin – O, the bliss of this glorious thought! – my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”*
- The word **“covered”** refers to that which is concealed or atoned for, with imagery from the Day of Atonement. In Greek, the word for mercy seat means, “propitiation,” which is the act of turning God's wrath aside. What is offensive to God is put out of sight. The idea is that our sins are so completely covered that they will never appear before God again. Isaiah 1:18: ***“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”***
- The third phrase, **“against whom the Lord counts no iniquity”** is a bookkeeping term. We get the words “reckon” or “impute” from the word **“count.”** This is the same word used in Genesis 15:6, where God “reckoned” righteousness to Abraham. God does not count our sins against us and in their place, He has imputed the righteousness of Jesus Christ. God erases our sin-debt from the books as if it never happened. In the greatest exchange in human history, our rottenness has been exchanged for His righteousness. We are counted as justified because of what Jesus has done. That's why these verses are quoted in Romans 4.

According to Isaiah 43:25, when God forgives, He no longer remembers our sins: ***“I, I, am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”*** To **“blot out”** means to *“wipe away.”* God alone is the one who is able to erase our sins, and He does so for His own sake, for His own glory. When we repent and receive Christ, He will not hold our sins against us or bring them up again.

God carries our sins away, He covers them completely, and He considers us not guilty by refusing to count our sins against us. No wonder David refers to the one who is forgiven as blessed! Psalm 85:2 says, ***“You forgave the iniquity of your***

people; you covered all their sin.” As one commentator puts it: *“There is no greater blessedness than to know that our sin has been forgiven and covered over by the blood of Christ and it is no longer counted against us.”*

In the last part of verse 2, David declares that God does all this for the one in *“whose spirit there is no deceit.”* This refers to those who readily admit their sins. It’s the idea of authenticity. It means that we are not deceitful in acknowledging our sin. It’s not a matter of trying to be perfect but recognizing that we’re not. We need to fully admit that we are twisted transgressors and selfish sinners. Far too many of us are dishonest about our disobedience.

If we’re not real with God, we’ll experience the groaning of guilt as seen in verse 3: *“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.”* The word *“kept”* indicates that David persistently kept quiet and *“silence”* refers to being stubbornly resistant and mute about his sins. In fact, he covered up his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah for about a year, before God exposed it through the prophet Nathan.

When David tried to ignore his iniquities, his bones felt like they were decaying. The word *“groaning”* was used to describe the moaning of a wounded lion, or the growl of a bear. Job 3:24 says, *“My groanings are poured out like water.”* David’s groaning and moaning went on all day long, or continuously, without intermission. When we don’t own our sins, our sins will own us, and our bodies revolt. Instead of happiness, we experience heartache. When we keep our mouths shut about our sins, our conscience screams. When we bottle up evil, our bones waste away. His misery was directly connected to unconfessed sin in his life.

I learned this helpful phrase from our Celebrate Recovery ministry: *You are only as sick as your secrets.* The secret you want most to conceal, is the one you most need to reveal. Friend, what have you been concealing? What is it that you’ve been hiding? It’s time to come clean. If you’re groaning under a load of guilt, it might be because you *are* guilty and in need of grace through forgiveness. Those who appreciate most the gift of forgiveness are those who understand the guilt of their sins.

Psychologist Roy Baumeister studied guilt and found that the average person spends approximately two hours a day feeling guilty. I know some who would say that they never stop feeling guilty. Pastor Jeff Seaman describes three ways that guilt messes with us.

- **Guilt destroys our confidence.** Guilt can make us feel insecure because we're always worried that someone is going to find out what we're really like, or what we've done. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once played a prank on five of the most prominent men in England by sending an anonymous note to each one that simply said this, "*All is found out, flee at once.*" Within 24 hours all five men had fled the country. That's exactly the picture described in Proverbs 28:1: "*The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.*"
- **Guilt damages our relationships.** When we live with unconfessed sin we can often respond to people in wrong ways. Are you impatient with others? Do you find yourself reacting in anger? Are you pulling back from those you love? If so, there may be some guilt in your gut somewhere.
- **Guilt keeps us stuck in the past.** Do you continuously replay your sins over and over and over in your mind? Garrison Keillor often said that "*Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving.*" Someone else has said, "*Guilt cannot change the past just like worry cannot change the future. But it can make you miserable today.*" Have you ever noticed how your stomach keeps score when you swallow your sins?

Verse 4 continues, "*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*" Even at night David could not rest from the cries of his conscience and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. This reminds us of Psalm 51:3: "*My sin is ever before me.*" The word "*heavy*" means, "*to grievously afflict.*" David was tapped out but still resisted repentance.

Psalm 38:17-18 says, "*For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me. I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.*" God's hand can bring blessings but can also bear down on us. It's because He cares so much for us. He loves us unconditionally but loves us too much to let us keep living the way we are. As Hebrews 12:10 says, "*...but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.*"

These verses remind us that when we don't fully confess, we will experience physical, emotional and spiritual distress. Anger and bitterness can come as a result of unconfessed sin and will eat your insides out. David is saying that you could be dry spiritually because of some specific disobedience in your life. His failure to confess his sin resulted in internal grief and external weakness.

After describing his spiritual drought and distress, he writes the word, “*Selah*” immediately following this verse. It’s as if he’s saying, “*Hey, don’t miss this! When you’re in a mess, confess!*” David doesn’t want us to miss the point. Only repentance will bring restoration. If you want forgiveness, confess and don’t conceal your sins. Stop playing cover-up and ask God to cover your sins.

[Pause]

It’s not easy for us to admit our sins, is it? It’s like the guy who went into the Hallmark store looking for a card for his wife. He asked the clerk, “*Do you have a card that stops short of saying ‘I’m sorry’ yet vaguely hints at some wrongdoing?*” Many of us do this with God when we’re not specific about our sins. We might tip our hat to our frailty but resist falling down on our knees in real repentance.

I turn to Spurgeon again:

“Ah! But there are too many who make confession, having no broken hearts, no streaming eyes, no flowing tears, no humbled spirits. Know ye this, that ten thousand confessions, if they are made by hardened hearts, if they do not spring from really contrite spirits, they shall be only additions to your guilt as they are mockeries before the Most High.”

Verse 5 gives us the right approach. When David could find relief in no other way, he said, “***I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover up my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.***” Instead of concealing, David is now revealing. And he says it outloud – “***I said...***” We can’t expect God to cover what we’re not willing to uncover.

Here’s an important question to consider: *Will you continue to cover up your own sins, or will you let God cover up your sins for you?*

Proverbs 28:13: “***Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.***” The word “***confess***” in the Old Testament means to “*throw down or to cast down.*” In the New Testament, it carries the idea of agreement. To confess a sin means to throw it down before the Lord and to say the same thing God says about it. When God hears that, He picks them up and carries them away. If you’re not ready to confess, then you should get ready for some more distress in your life.

Notice, David takes personal responsibility by using personal pronouns – *my sin, my iniquity, my transgressions*. David repeats the three words for sins mentioned in verse 1: he acknowledges his sin, he does not cover up his iniquity, and he confesses his transgressions to the Lord. He doesn't deny, minimize, or blame someone else. He simply calls his sin, "sin." He doesn't argue about what the meaning of "it" is. I heard somebody say, "*The greatest holdout to the healing of my hang-ups is me.*"

We need to stop using euphemisms like indiscretion, blunder, flaw, faux pas, misstep, mistake, and miscalculation to excuse our behavior. Instead, we must use biblical terms like iniquity, transgression, disobedience, sin, and deceit.

- Instead of saying, "*I stretched the truth,*" it's more biblical to say, "*I just sinned by lying to you.*"
- Instead of saying, "*I just have a bad temper,*" it's more accurate to say, "*I just transgressed against you with my words. Please forgive me.*"
- Instead of saying, "*I had an affair,*" it's more Scriptural to say, "*I sinned against God and against you by committing the sin of adultery.*"

The smug soul who comes before God and says that sin is no big deal can never know the fruit of forgiveness. One pastor put it this way: "*Until we fear sin and its consequences more keenly, we will not prize our pardon very highly.*" When you recognize your sin and reject it, God will remove it: "***And you forgave the iniquity of my sin.***"

We don't have to *beg* God to forgive us because He wants to forgive more than we want to be forgiven. We don't have to *bargain* with Him and we don't have to *bribe* Him by promising to perform a bunch of good things, and we certainly don't have to do painful acts of penance for the bad things we've done. Let me point out there's no gap between confession and forgiveness in verse 5. There is no probation, no wait-and-see period because forgiveness is full and final. There's zero space between David's confession and God's forgiveness. God doesn't make us squirm by making us wait to be forgiven. Like the prodigal son, once we turn to Him in repentance, the Father runs to us and welcomes us home!

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan describes our forgiveness which leads to freedom: "*I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to*

tumble, and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.”

Another pause is needed here – **Selah** – so that we don’t rush past the beauty of having all of our sins forgiven. Take some time right now to specifically confess any sins that you’ve been concealing and claim His full forgiveness and freedom.

We must uncover and confess our sins if we want God to cover and cleanse us.

[Pause]

2. Freedom renewed (6-7). In verse 6, David urges those who are “**godly**” to pray: ***“Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.”*** There’s a sense of urgency attached to this call to prayer. Isaiah 55:6 says, ***“Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.”***

While it’s true that 2 Peter 3:9 says God is patient and doesn’t want any to perish, verse 10 tells us there’s a limit to His patience: ***“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”*** 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, ***“...now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”***

In verse 7, David speaks directly to God: ***“You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.”*** It’s interesting that in the beginning of this psalm, David is hiding his sins *from* God; now he is hiding himself *in* God.

Corrie ten Boom found tremendous comfort from this verse when she was imprisoned in a concentration camp. In her book called, *The Hiding Place*, she said God Himself became her shelter when everything else was stripped away. She gave testimony that *“no pit is so deep that God’s love is not deeper still.”*

Let’s pause, pivot, and praise at this final **Selah**.

We must uncover and confess our sins if we want God to cover and cleanse us.

[Pause]

3. Fellowship restored (8-9). In verse 8, God is the one speaking now that David's fellowship with Him has been restored: ***"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."*** We see here that God cares and counsels His people. The blessing of protection is wonderful but it would be incomplete if it were not accompanied by His direction. God forgives and gives us instruction so we stay on the right path. That's why we need to stay in fellowship with Him and with other believers.

Verse 9 warns us about not being stubborn when it comes to following God: ***"Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you."*** These two animals are not easily guided, unless they are trained. By nature, most of us are wild and unwilling to obey. A horse has to be constantly pulled back and a mule has to be pushed forward. When we get ahead of God, He pulls us back and when we act like mules, God puts the bridle of suffering on us to move us along. Is God humbling you right now? Is He trying to break you with the bit and bridle? He only does this, so we stay near Him.

4. Fullness revived (10-11). In verse 10, we're reminded that sorrow awaits the wicked: ***"Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord."*** Psalm 16:4 says, ***"The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply."*** When we experience forgiveness, freedom, and fellowship, our fullness is revived as we can rest in the steadfast love of God which surrounds us.

When we stay close to the Lord by cultivating a spirit of surrender and submission, and when we practice regular confession, we can't help but break out into joy according to verse 11: ***"Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!"*** The phrase ***"be glad"*** literally means, ***"to brighten up!"*** The word, ***"rejoice"*** means to ***"spin around with glee."***

He's gone from his bones wasting away to worshipping, from groaning to rejoicing. Now that David has thrown his sins down he has his shout back! When we have our sins forgiven we can't help but break out into spontaneous expressions of joy as Psalm 68:3 says, ***"But the righteous shall be glad; they shall exult before God; they shall be jubilant with joy."*** This is similar to what David prayed in Psalm 51:12 when he said, ***"Restore to me the joy of your salvation."***

Jesus said, those who are forgiven much, love much. Those who have their sins covered can leap for joy. Conversely, if you don't have much joy in your life

today it may be because you've been carrying around a burden of guilt. Sin may be sucking the life out of you. It may be strangling your joy. If you want to truly be satisfied and stop living with so much distress, then learn to confess!

Some of the most miserable people in the world are not non-Christians but complacent Christians who are living a compromised life. As Charles Spurgeon often said, "*God does not allow his saints to sin successfully.*" He loves you too much to let you sin in secret. That's why sin often gets exposed. Numbers 32:23 says, "***Be sure your sin will find you out.***" God cares too much to let you meander through life, pursuing only your own pleasure. Or, as I've heard Matt Bowman say, "*Choose to sin, choose to suffer.*"

We must uncover and confess our sins if we want God to cover and cleanse us.

Action Steps

- 1. Write out Psalm 32:1-2.** In order to be reminded of his depraved sinfulness and God's gracious forgiveness, Augustine had this Psalm engraved on the walls of his bedroom as he was dying in his bed. He liked it because, "*The beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner.*"
- 2. Own your sin before God and turn from it.** Stop covering your sin and let God cover it.
- 3. Confess Christ and be saved.** You might be thinking, "*But you don't know what I've done. If you knew me and the darkness inside me, you wouldn't be so sure.*" Here's what I'm sure of: *The pardon He offers has nothing to do with what you've done or haven't done but everything to do with what He has done for you.*

Invitation

Some of you came today bearing a boatload of bitterness and a trunk of trespasses. The only way to be rid of your regrets and to have your sins covered is to confess them to God. When you do, He will forgive you. And when He does, your sins will be forgotten and you will be set free!

- Has your forgiveness been received?
- Has your freedom been renewed?
- Has your fellowship been restored?
- Has your fullness been revived?

Let's circle back to how we began. When the students went behind this white board, they wrote out their sins and then covered them with bright red paint to represent the blood of Jesus.

[FLIP WHITEBOARD OVER]

- Jesus won't take what you won't give Him.
- He won't cover and cleanse what you won't uncover and confess.

We must uncover and confess our sins if we want God to cover and cleanse us.

Are you ready right now to have your life changed forever? If so, pray this prayer with me.

“Lord Jesus, for too long I’ve kept You out of my life. I admit that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I’ve been living. I’m tired of trying to cover up my sins and now I ask You to cover them by your blood. I throw them down so You can lift them from me and take them away. Please forgive me, a sinner. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe You are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe Your words are true and I now receive You into my life. I repent from the way I’ve been living. Be my Savior and Lord. I surrender to Your leadership in my life. Make me into the person You want me to be. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

Invitation Song: Jesus Paid it All