## Psalm 32

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In this psalm, the word “Selah” appears three times. It’s unknown what “Selah” means, but most commentators I’ve read assume it means something like “take a pause.” Perhaps a musical interlude, or perhaps just a moment to meditate on what you have just heard.

Let’s use these pauses to stop and reflect. If a song breaks out, that’s ok too.

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,

whose sin is covered.

2 Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,

and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away

through my groaning all day long.

4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;

my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

When I was a child we would go “up north” for vacations — the same place we eventually moved when I was thirteen or so. There was, and still is, a gas station at the corner of M-55 and Seaman Road. It’s your typical up north gas station, a little bigger, perhaps than some, full of junk food and cheap souvenirs. Sometimes I would walk there — it’s about a mile away. Once, I bought a really large Baby Ruth candy bar, and ate it, slow bite by slow bite, as I walked back. It might have been the best experience of my childhood.

But there was another time.

As I was walking back, a really old car came by, rusting out in the way that only American cars made during the bad years of the automotive industry could rust. Driving the car was an elderly African-American man, whom I did not know. There were a fair number of African-Americans who lived in the area — we were not that far from Baldwin and Idlewild, sometimes called “the Black Eden.”

As this man drove his car slowly by, I remember picking up a small rock, and throwing it, weakly and inaccurately, at the car. I don’t know why I did that. And I shouted something racist at him — it was a long time ago, but I think it was “chocolate bunny.”

He drove on. I’m not even sure he heard me or saw what I was doing. Nothing happened. Just another moment of racism for him, and for me.

Why am I telling this story?

It is a story of which I am deeply ashamed.

“Happy is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is pardoned,” says the Psalmist. I would be happy to have *this* particular sin erased and pardoned, forgiven and forgotten.

I’ve kept this story a secret for many years; I may have told it to Bess, but it’s festered inside. Sometimes, as I walked along that road in the summers, the sun would be so hot that it would feel like it was drying me out completely, and that’s a bit how this transgression has felt. Or more accurately, perhaps, this shame added to the slag of all my other shameful acts.

Wouldn’t it be nice to be free from this shame? For God not to hold it against me?

Perhaps you feel the same way about some secret or not so secret shame that only you know.

Look how the psalmist writes — happy are *those*, happy is *the one* who sins are forgiven, but *I* kept silence and *I* wasted away. It is *you* — at this point he is talking to God — who is causing this dread. I want to be among the forgiven and blameless, but God is reminding me of my sin.

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you,

and I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,”

and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

The psalmist’s solution is to acknowledge his sin against God. In another psalm, we read “against you, and you alone, have I sinned.”

The psalmist lets out the secrets of his shame and guilt. He doesn’t hold back, but verbally confesses where he has gone wrong.

And God, in God’s mercy and righteousness forgives him, he feels.

What does this feel like?

As Christians, and during the time of Lent, we understand the depths of what it requires to obtain this mercy and righteousness. God’s only Son, scourged and killed on our behalf, in some miraculous way, brings about our pardon, and begins to rearrange our inner life, our live in connection with the divine, and our connection with one another.

When I insulted that man, I insulted the God who made him in God’s image.

When I insulted that man, I participated yet again in the structural evil of racism, and I attacked him personally. Imagine that he had heard me — I don’t think it too doubtful; at least to have seen me. Imagine how he felt.

When I insulted that man, I dragged myself a little lower, weighed down my soul a little me.

But, when I am forgiven —

I begin to see the truth of God’s creation, that every person is made in God’s image.

I am free to join a fight against the evils of structural racism, and to enjoy the company of those whose skin is darker than mine. If I had not been forgiven, would I know my daughter? Would I even know my wife whose family had fought for many years for racial justice?

My inward self begins to renew, and the shame expunged. I am a bit freer.

6 Therefore let all who are faithful

offer prayer to you;

at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters

shall not reach them.

7 You are a hiding place for me;

you preserve me from trouble;

you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. *Selah*

And when this forgiveness comes, we find protection. Look, we are surrounded twice over. On the one hand, we are surrounded by distressing “might waters” that threaten to destroy us. But more importantly, we are surround by God, by God’s protection, with the songs of deliverance. We are free to call out to God, and God will be with us.

8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;

I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

9 Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,

whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,

else it will not stay near you.

10 Many are the torments of the wicked,

but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

11 Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,

and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And finally, the psalmist turns, not to God, or himself, or “those” who might be forgiven, but to his listeners.

Don’t be a mooncalf, a stupid animal who doesn’t see the good thing being offered to you. Why should we live in the torment of shame and guilt? Why wouldn’t we seek out the steadfast love of God that surrounds those who trust in God? A word to the wise — don’t be a fool!

Having been forgiven, we are free to be glad and rejoice.

“Oh, for a 1000 tongues to sing.”

1. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ps 32:1–11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)