Psalm 32 – "Forgiveness"[1]

Before the class, print the "Chesed" handout for each class member. Have a pen/pencil for each class member. These will be used during the Transformation Exercise.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What is your favorite kind of music? (rock, country, rap, etc.)

Who is your favorite musician?

Information

Today, we continue our study of several Psalms. First, a few basics to understanding Psalms. Since we are going to be looking at Psalm 32 today, we can use it as a template. First, psalms are *poems that are meant to be sung*. If we were to name this book today, we would probably call it, *The Book of Lyrics*. Unfortunately, we do not have the music for any of these lyrics.

There have been many attempts to make sense of the organization of the psalms. Some see five books representing the first five books of the Bible (the Torah). Others say the book may be divided into thirds of 50 psalms each, each third dealing with penitence, justice, or glory, respectively. Others do not see chronological groupings but themes – thus, psalms of lament, psalms of thanksgiving, royal psalms, etc. Some psalms are clustered together and in Jewish rituals are recited together. For example, Psalms 112 to 117 are known as "Hallel" (like the first two syllables of "Hallelujah") and are chanted on Passover night, Pentecost, the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Booths.

So, Psalm 32 is not the thirty-second psalm written or the thirty-second most popular psalm, or the thirty-second song written by a particular person. It is the thirty-second psalm for reasons we can only guess.

Next, your Bible may give a descriptive reference. For Psalm 32, the NRSV has "The Joy of Forgiveness" and the ESV has "Blessed Are the Forgiven." These descriptions are created by modern-day editors. However, often there are other lines before the psalm begins that are ancient. These lines may refer to an author, a type of psalm, a backstory, or musical instruction.

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[1] This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

Psalm 32 says, "Of David." Many of the psalms are credited to David, though some are credited to other authors including Moses and Solomon. Fifty-one psalms are not credited to any particular author.

Psalm 32 also begins, "A *Maskil*." Thirteen psalms are called *maskils*, but we are not sure what that word means, since there are no consistent themes or structures among these thirteen lyrics.

Within it, Psalm 32 is the word, *Selah*. We are not sure of the meaning of this word, either. Some think it represents a place to pause for reflection. Others think it is an instruction to musicians to change the volume or the pace. This word occurs 71 times in the book of Psalms within 39 different psalms.

Now that we know some of what we do not know about Psalm 32, let's look at the psalm - because it has had a meaningful influence on many a person's spiritual journey.

"In the words of St. Augustine … 'the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself a sinner.' Indeed, it is recorded that Psalm 32 was Augustine's favorite psalm, that he quoted it frequently, and that before he died, he had its words inscribed on the wall by his sickbed, to be both exercised and comforted by them. (Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 161.)"[2]

- Have a class member read Psalm 32:1-2.

What is the first word in your translation? (Blessed, Happy, Lucky, Fortunate, etc.)

John Lorinus (1559-1634), the Jesuit theologian and commentator, says of this verse: "Notice, this is the first Psalm, except the first of all, which begins with Blessedness. In the first Psalm we have the blessing of innocence, or rather, of Him Who only was innocent: here we have the blessing of repentance, as the next happiest state to that of sinlessness."

[Write on the board: "I'm only human."]

When you hear someone say this, what does it mean? (I made a mistake, I am not perfect, I am not sinless, etc.) What attitude may accompany this saying? (defensiveness, "get over it, it's no big deal", my humanity is a good enough excuse for why I did the wrong, etc.)

In this psalm, the thought that "I am only human" is an acknowledgment that brings relief. How do you see that relief in these verses?

Walter Breuggemann says, "The psalm does not trouble over the speculative question of a life free of transgression. It assumes transgression. It has observed the killing burden of sin

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[2] Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 268.

unforgiven, and it knows that *forgiveness is the power for new life. Genuine forgiveness permits freedom to get on with living.*"[3]

The psalmist is not talking about forgiving another person. The psalmist is talking about accepting God's forgiveness.

Can someone share an illustration (personal or otherwise) about how accepting forgiveness frees a person to "get on with living"?

- Have a class member read Psalm 32:3-7.

"The unrepentant state (vv 3-4) is described as one of 'silence': the silence in context is specifically the absence of confession, in contrast to the speech of confession in v 5."[4]

"Carrying a perpetual burden of sin and guilt can do more than make us feel worn out; it can literally make us more susceptible to physical ailments and prone to health-defeating behaviors."[5]

What do you think about this idea that the spiritual life has an effect on the physical life? Why would it be so? Does it work the other way as well – does the physical life have an effect on the spiritual life of a person?

Now that the sinner has acknowledged sin and accepted forgiveness, God speaks.

- Have a class member read Psalm 32:8-9.

What is the lesson for the forgiven person?

The psalm ends with an observation about two kinds of people.

- Have a class member read Psalm 32:10-11.

How would you describe the God of Psalm 32?

We sometimes think that there is an "Old Testament God" and a "New Testament God", with the OT God being distant, harsh, and legalistic whereas the NT God is close, loving, and forgiving. However, when we read the Psalms, we can see how this songbook of the Jews informed the faith of Joseph and Mary and Jesus so they might understand God as the forgiver of sins.

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[3] (My emphasis.) Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994), 94.
[4] Craigie, 266.
[5] Tony Cartledge, "Forgiveness," *Nurturing Faith*, March 9, 2014.

Jesus is God in the flesh. Think of how this psalm is the background for this woman in a story from Jesus' life.

- Have a class member read Luke 7:36-50.

How is this psalm background for this woman? How does it speak to Jesus coming as God in the flesh?

"Where does one go when told by Christ, 'Go in peace'? The price of the woman's way of life in the city has been removed from the very institutions that carried the resources to restore her. The only place she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams for the need of a church, not just any church but one that says, 'You are welcome here.'"[6]

John 3:16 does not say, "God so loved the saints that he sent his Son to have a party with the perfect."

God loves every sinner and invites us to be free of the burdens and pains and penalties of sin. We have the choice to accept or dismiss this love. We can live in the past with guilt and regret or we can "get on with living" covered by God's grace and mercy.

Transformational Exercise

[Distribute the handout.]

Verse 10 uses a Hebrew word that is used nearly 250 times in the Old Testament, over half of these in the book of Psalms. It is the word *chesed*. [Pronunciation guide: http://www.forvo.com/word/chesed/]

It is a difficult word to translate into English. [For a more thorough article about the translation efforts, see http://www.bible-researcher.com/chesed.html .]

The italicized words in these verses are how English editors translated *chesed*.

[Give time for students to read through the verses.]

Psalm 32:10 tells us that God's *chesed* surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Looking at these different ways of translation, which of these words is most significant for you today? Circle that word on your page.

As we close, I will leave a place for you to name that word.

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[6] Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1990), 106.

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *God, we confess that we sometimes get stuck in our spiritual lives because of our sin. We are tempted to live in regret and guilt. We are so grateful that you offer us forgiveness and with that forgiveness, a future. Your love is so great, we have difficulty finding the right word to describe it, but this morning we thank you for a love that is described in these words: [Pause for class members to speak.] Thank you, loving God. Amen.*

חסד

Chesed

Psalm 32:10

Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's *unfailing love* surrounds the one who trusts in him. (New International Version)

Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but *steadfast love* surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD. (English Standard Version)

Many are the sorrows of the wicked, But he who trusts in the LORD, *lovingkindness* shall surround him. (New American Standard Bible)

Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the LORD, *mercy* shall compass him about. (King James Bible)

The pain of the wicked is severe, but *faithful love* surrounds the one who trusts the Lord. (Common English Bible)

The wicked have many sorrows, but *gracious love* surrounds those who trust in the LORD. (International Standard Version)

An evil person suffers much pain, but the LORD's *faithfulness* overwhelms the one who trusts in him. (NET Bible)

Many are the afflictions of the evil one, and *grace* will surround him who hopes in Lord Jehovah. (Aramaic Bible in Plain English)

Many are the pains of the wicked; As to him who is trusting in Jehovah, *Kindness* doth compass him. (Young's Literal Translation)