

A Song for the Guilty

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[0 : 00] Well guilt is a problem that affects everybody. Even though we live in a culture that we try to suppress guilt, we see guilt really as an imposition to our lives, personal guilt being something that you shouldn't worry about too much.

Nonetheless, despite that being the culture's view of guilt, we still feel guilty if we're honest, and we sense that we're not really what we ought to be as human beings.

So our culture would say, you decide what is right and wrong for you. So don't let anybody put a guilt trip on you. Don't let your family, don't let your friends, don't let your colleagues, don't let your employer, don't let religion, don't let the church make you feel guilty.

You decide what you want to do and you just live with the consequences. And yet despite this being the narrative, if you like, of 21st century Western Europe, we can still feel guilty.

No matter what the culture says, we can still find it hard to eradicate the feelings of guilt inside us as human beings. And so we'll always struggle with a sense of condemnation, a sense that something isn't right and we just can't shake it.

[1 : 20] Many years ago, a man called Franz Kafka, he was a famous writer, he said this in his diary. He said, the problem modern people have now is that we feel like sinners, though independent of guilt.

The problem modern people have now is that we feel like sinners, though independent of guilt. What he means is that we've gotten rid of the idea of guilt, and yet for some reason we still feel there is something fundamentally wrong with us.

So a question for you, what do you do when you feel guilty? Or put it another way, what do you do when you've failed or when you've screwed up big time? How do you cope?

Well, there really only are two options open to us. One of them is we can do our best to try and suppress any feelings of guilt that we have and live with them.

It's one option. Or the other is we can do something about it. And what we find really is the only solution here in Psalm 32, which is a song for the guilty.

[2 : 30] This psalm was written by David who felt guilty, and yet he found freedom from his guilt. And it's one of the so-called penitential psalms.

So David, first of all, initially he tried to ignore his sin and live with the guilt, but it crushed him. And so this is a psalm about how confession of sin brings forgiveness and joy.

And so we're going to look at the psalm under four headings this afternoon that are on the back of the service sheet. The first is why guilt exists. The second, what guilt needs. The third, how guilt goes.

And then the fourth, when guilt ends. So first of all, why guilt exists? It exists because of sin. David's guilt existed because of his sin. That's clear.

In verse 5. And so the only way for him to be free from his guilt was for him to have his sin forgiven. And he expresses this in verse 1 and verse 2.

[3 : 28] So let's read. Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them, and in whose spirit is no deceit.

So what David is saying is that it's only those whose sins are forgiven who are blessed. It's only those who know forgiveness who are blessed.

Blessed. The word blessed could be translated as happy. And so he's saying that you're happy when you know that God has forgiven your sin. So if you put it as a question, what makes you happy?

Well, if you're a Christian believer, let me tell you what makes you happy. It is the certainty that you are a forgiven sinner. Because if you know you need forgiveness for your sin, and if you've got it, then you're one of the happiest people in the world.

Or you should be one of the happiest people in the world. Because this psalm, what it is doing, it's pointing out to us that sin is a problem. Now, sin is not a word that is used much these days.

[4 : 37] You won't find it in the newspapers. You won't hear it from the lips of politicians. And it certainly won't be mentioned in polite conversation in the staff room or the canteen.

But here, David uses three different words for sin in the original language. So verse 1 and 2, he uses the word transgression, transgressions, and then sins, and then sin slash iniquity.

So transgression means rebellion against God by deliberately doing something that offends him. So it's like crossing the line, or knowing that there is a boundary, but stepping over the boundary.

Like seeing a sign that says, keep off the grass, and then deliberately crossing over to stand on the grass. Transgression. Deliberate rebellion against God. And then secondly, sins.

That means missing the mark. That means getting it wrong, whether it's intentional or unintentional. It's failure to do what God wants us to do.

[5 : 41] Sins. And then sin or iniquity means inner perversion or corruption. It means the original sinful nature that we were born with. And so what David is saying here clearly is that sin is a serious problem.

Now some would say that the background to this psalm, some commentators suggest, the background may have been when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then he murdered her husband Uriah.

There's a story in 2 Samuel verse 11 and 12, because after the adultery and the murder, it was around a year before the prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin.

And David then did something about it. And so that could have been the period in which David felt this guilt, inside and outside, as he tells us in verse 3 and 4.

And if so, then David was deceiving himself, pretending something wasn't wrong when it was wrong. And in a sense he was trying to deceive God, trying to live with the consequences of what he'd done, rather than acknowledge that he'd done anything wrong.

[6 : 53] And that's probably why he says at the end of verse 2, blessed is the one in whose spirit is no deceit, because he realised there's no point pretending with God.

You just can't deceive God as if he doesn't see what we're doing. Because God knows exactly what we're like. And so the issue for David was that he did find forgiveness for his sin, but he only found that forgiveness after he confessed it, after he'd stopped trying to deny it.

And so you see this in the language of verse 1 and 2, three words that match the three words for sin. There's forgiven, which means to lift or to remove or to take away.

And then there's covered, which means to put out of sight, to cover up, never to be seen again. And then there's not counted against. And that's like cancelling a debt, where there's nothing written on the charge sheet against us.

And so David was able to experience this, both the bad, his sin, plus the good, the forgiveness. And so David knows that God no longer counts his sin against him.

[8 : 10] It's been forgiven. It's been covered. Just imagine offensive graffiti on a wall, and then it being covered over with paint, so it's no longer visible to the eye.

You've probably heard of the artist Banksy. Well, I discovered that Banksy's got some work in Glasgow, in the Arches' nightclub, which is no longer around.

But back in the day, there was an exhibition on, and Banksy had painted some work on the wall for this exhibition. And I do like Banksy's artwork, but when the nightclub was sold, the administrators came in and they painted over his artwork.

What a disaster. So it couldn't be seen anymore. And then they had plans, I think, to uncover his artwork, because apparently he's only got three pieces of art in Scotland, and they're all covered under that paint on that wall.

And I don't know whether they managed or not. Bad news for Banksy. But the good news for David is that God has covered over his sin. Despite what it was, whatever he's referring to here, God had covered it over and forgiven it.

[9 : 23] It would no longer count against him. He found freedom and liberation from his guilt, because God forgave him. And that's why the psalm points us to what is at the very heart and core

of the Christian faith.

It points us towards the gospel of Jesus Christ, to tell us the good news that God can, and God does, forgive your sin and mine.

Because we're all guilty of sin. It runs right through our lives, and it's deep in our hearts. And if we're not convinced, then just imagine having all that we've ever said, all that we've ever thought, all that we've ever done, displayed on a massive screen for all the world to see.

And of course there'd be some great stuff there, all the achievements in life, all the good things we've done. There'd also be so much there of which we're just deeply ashamed and embarrassed. Because you see, no matter how much we or our culture tries to deny guilt and sin, we just know we're not what we should be.

[10:38] And so the solution is to have our sin forgiven by God. So when I know that I'm a sinner, and I know I've been forgiven, then I am blessed, I'm happy.

I'm happy because I have what I need most in life, which is the forgiveness of my sin. And so the happiest people in the world, the blessed, most blessed people in the world, are those who know they're sinners, but who have experienced God's forgiveness.

And that was David's experience. And it's ours too, if we are a believer. And so how do we get this? Well, that's the first point. Why guilt exists? It exists because of sin.

Secondly, what guilt needs? It needs confession. And we see this in verse 3 to 5. David here is giving his own personal story. Because when he didn't confess his sin, he suffered.

But when he did confess his sin, he found forgiveness and freedom from guilt. So just let's read verse 3 and 4 and see what happened when David didn't confess.

[11:45] When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For night and day, your hand was heavy on me. My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

So he was trying to live with the guilt, but it was affecting him physically and it was affecting him psychologically.

And what he's doing here is he's analysing the effects of his guilt. Physically, he says, his bones wasted away. He went about groaning. He had no strength in his body.

Like he says, my strength was sapped as in the heat of the summer. But like today, hot day in Glasgow, you just feel tired the whole time. You don't want to do anything. But David felt that constant zap of energy.

So the burden of his guilt took its toll on his physical well-being. Remember Shakespeare's Macbeth? If you don't, let me remind you.

[12:44] This is what Macbeth said. He said, well, all great Neptune's ocean washed this blood clean from my hand. So he was referring to the literal blood on his hands, but also to his sense of guilt at committing murder.

And then Lady Macbeth, she couldn't escape from her guilt either. So when she's sleepwalking and dreaming, she tries to wash her hands and she says, out damn spot, out, I say.

And she too feels a sense of guilt for her part in this murder. And it becomes so intense, the guilt for Lady Macbeth, that she becomes insane.

She goes mad and she ends up killing herself. And so Shakespeare is saying what we all know. He's saying what the Bible already says, which is that we can't escape the sense of guilt when we've done wrong.

No matter how hard we try, it still will always be there. And so the liberation can only come through confession. And that's what David discovered here.

[13:49] He had no peace, either physically or mentally, until he confessed his sin. He sensed that God was in it by referring to God's heavy hand being on him.

And then since this was his wake-up call, telling him that he needed to confess and do something about what he'd done wrong. Now our society would want us to try and suppress these guilty feelings, advising just don't worry about it, just try and forget about it, just to avoid any notion that we've done something wrong.

And rather than confess, the solution of our world is to shift the blame. So blame other people for what you've done. Blame your circumstances, blame your family or your upbringing, blame your lack of opportunities in life, all with the aim of trying to downplay or even ignore sin or failure.

And you know that people pay large sums of money to talk to counsellors to rid themselves of guilt, or will hire a therapist to hear that the solution lies in you being able to forgive yourself.

Never mind God, it's all to do with you and what you do. And it's all pushing away any sense of personal culpability for the hope that somehow, at some point, we'll just feel better and the guilt feelings will go.

[15 : 19] And so people will try anything and everything except confession. And it's confession that works for David.

I guess we've seen it in so many public figures that they only get to the point of confession when everything else has failed. Just think of people like Bill Clinton or Jonathan Akin or Tiger Woods or Lance Armstrong.

Just confess when you're pushed into a corner and there's nothing else to do. Deny, ignore, keep quiet, cover up, but only as a last resort.

Confess. And in a sense, that's what David does. And it doesn't work. The only thing that does work is confession. So he could no longer go on in his misery.

He'd worn himself out trying to deny his sin, but then when he finally confesses, he gets released.

And this is in verse 5. So verse 5, he says, Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.

[16 : 23] I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgave the guilt of my sin. So he stopped trying to rationalize his sin and guilt.

He stopped trying to cover it up, but instead he confessed it all to God. And only then did the relief come and it came instantly for David.

Because it's only when we uncover and confess our sin that God is willing to cover it. The uncovering has to come from us before God will then cover.

So God removes our objective guilt so that it can't bring us into punishment, but he also removes our subjective shame so that we don't remain in this kind of inner anguish, feeling the way that David felt.

So it's only genuine confession that makes guilt go away. Because if there's something in us that says, I know I was wrong, but I was provoked.

[17 : 26] I know I shouldn't have done that, but I just couldn't help it. Or, I know it was bad, but it wasn't as bad as what these other people have done.

If there's any sense of trying to justify our sin to ourselves, then it won't be true confession. And so there won't be true release and relief from guilt.

So we need to acknowledge our sin and confess it to God. And the brilliant news is that when we do, God is willing and God is quick to forgive. So David does suffer, David does struggle when he doesn't acknowledge his sin, but he does find forgiveness and release when he confesses his sin to God.

And that's one of the surest signs that God the Holy Spirit is working in our lives. That the Holy Spirit makes us sensitive to sin in our hearts and in what we do.

And we're sensitive that we realise that we have sinned and we need to do something about it. So we shouldn't try to justify our sin to ourselves, but we need to come clean and confess it to God because he knows.

[18 : 34] And the more we do this, the more we grow as a believer. So that's the second thing. What guilt needs is confession. First, why guilt exists, sin. Second, what guilt needs, confession.

And third, how guilt goes, forgiveness. We see this in verse 6 to 10. Now David learned this lesson the hard way. And so what he does is he encourages others, his listeners, and us, not to live with guilt, but to confess our sin to God and then seek his forgiveness.

So verse 6, he says, therefore, let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found. Surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. So he's saying pray to God.

In other words, take your sin to God and seek his forgiveness. And do it while you still can. Because when David speaks here in verse 6 about the rising of the mighty waters, what he's talking about is God's judgment.

He's using this terrifying flood imagery to say that God's judgment is coming, the waters are rising, and nobody will be able to escape them. And that's why we need forgiveness so that we don't end up drowned in the waters of God's judgment because of our sin.

[19 : 54] God is our hiding place for him. Verse 7, you are my hiding place. You will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

And isn't that what God is? He is our hiding place when we go to him. So our guilt need not cripple us. And we need not face God's wrath for our sin because God himself delivers us.

He saves us. And so we must make sure we don't miss out on this. And that's why David warns his readers about being stubborn in verse 8 and 9.

I will instruct you and teach you in the ways you go. I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. 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.

So the horse and the mule have to be controlled with pressure because they're sometimes forced to do what they should be doing because they don't want to, they're stubborn. And David says, don't be like that.

[21 : 07] Don't make God get tough on you because of your sin just like he was tough on me. Don't end up being so stubborn that you miss the forgiveness that God offers.

forgiveness because of course it's only when we experience forgiveness that we can know the security of God's love. And he says in verse 10, many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him.

So we'll only ever understand the unfailing love of God when we know the forgiveness of God.

There's a great short story, I love it, it's about forgiveness, it's Ernest Hemingway, he's got a short story called The Capital of the World and it begins with these words, Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the diminutive of the name Francesco.

And there is in Madrid a joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of El Liberal, which said, Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday.

All is forgiven, Papa. And then a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the 800 young men who answered the advertisement, all named Paco.

[22 : 34] So forgiveness is powerful, isn't it? It is powerful. If it's there and you can get it, it can change you. And it's part of the fabric of the Christian faith because it comes from a loving God who doesn't need to forgive us but chooses to forgive us so that we might be accepted by him.

And so we can only be free of guilt when we confess our sin to God. That's how we experience forgiveness. So as we close, our fourth point, when guilt ends, joy.

When guilt ends, there is joy. Verse 11, rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous. Sing, all you who are upright in heart. So David has come full circle in this psalm because the end really echoes the beginning.

He began by saying that he was blessed because he had his sins forgiven and that's what causes him to rejoice and be glad. And so David tells us that we've all got something to sing about if we know the forgiveness that comes from God.

And so he urges the righteous to do the same as him, to rejoice and be glad. But being righteous before God doesn't mean we're perfect. Nobody is perfect.

[23 : 55] But we're declared righteous before God when our sin has been dealt with and our sin has been forgiven. Well, how does that happen? It only happens through Jesus Christ.

And so this psalm is good news for the guilty because it points us to Jesus. In Psalm 32, it's David's voice we hear. And who was David?

He was a sinful king who found forgiveness and was put right with God. But his words show us how Jesus, our sinless king, won forgiveness for us and gives his righteousness to us.

Because the fact is we're all guilty sinners before God and the only way we find forgiveness is through Jesus Christ. That's why Paul quotes this psalm 32 verse 1 and 2 in Romans chapter 4 and he says that David declares the blessedness of those to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.

It's because the righteousness of Jesus Christ has been imputed to sinners. Sinners like you and sinners like me. It's given to all who repent of sin and believe in Jesus.

[25 : 19] And so through Jesus' death on the cross our sins are counted against Jesus and his righteousness is transferred to us. And that's why he came.

So later on in the New Testament John says in his first letter if we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

So Christianity tells us that Jesus paid the infinite debt for our sin. We are guilty and he's innocent, and yet he swapped places with us on the cross so that we who are guilty could be declared righteous before God.

God gave Jesus a status he didn't deserve so that he could give us a status we don't deserve. And isn't that why we don't need to hide or cover up our sin?

But we need to confess it. And so for any who aren't Christians they should never let a psalm like this pass them by. Thinking that this psalm doesn't apply because they don't think they need forgiveness because we all do.

[26 : 40] Or perhaps you think this psalm doesn't apply because well you're not really that bad. There's not really a problem with your sin.

And yet what David is telling us is that there is forgiveness for all. He was an adulterer and a murderer who found forgiveness with God and so anyone can find forgiveness with God.

And so whatever condition we find ourselves in when we walk through that door today there could be nothing more important for us than to walk out knowing that we are completely absolutely freely forgiven in Jesus Christ.

And that's good news.