

psalm 32

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Psalm 32.¹⁻²

¹Truly happy is the one whose rebellion is borne away
and whose sin is buried.

²Truly happy is the one whose guilt YHWH does not consider
and there is no intention to obfuscate (author's translation).

Luther called this psalm a "Pauline Psalm." It is easy to see why. These first two verses were central to Paul's understanding of the doctrine of justification—justification being a right standing with or acceptance by God achieved through His forgiving of sin.

"But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying,

'Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.'"¹

Paul believes that no human effort can achieve a right standing with God or acquire forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness is the work and prerogative of God alone. The ineffectuality of human effort in acquiring right standing with God through forgiveness is the consequence of several factors, but, as Paul sees it, the main factor is that human sin is continual and constant. Thus, in order to acquire right standing with God through forgiveness, one must trust Jesus' promise of forgiveness and believe that he was serious and earnest when he announced God willingness and ability to forgive.

We appreciate Paul's witness. He is on to something deep and profound about human nature. That said, we find that Paul, like so many before and after who have utilized scripture to make a legitimate and narrow point, played a little fast and loose with the first two verses of this Psalm.² What do we mean? The reader will notice that these first two verses are composed of four lines of poetry. However, Paul only quotes the first three lines, leaving out the fourth and last: "And there is no intention to obfuscate."

Or, as the KJV has it, "and in whose spirit there is no guile." Now, we are not accusing Paul of dishonesty. He had a point to make and the three lines make the point well. When it comes to forgiveness, God does all the heavy lifting. Perhaps Paul feared that adding the last line would produce uncertainty and misunderstanding—uncertainty and misunderstanding that would force him to explain the final line and thus distract him and his readers from his main thesis. What sort of uncertainty might he have feared? I can't say for sure, but I can imagine that it went something like this: "God forgives those who possess no guile. Guile is sin. To be without guile requires personal thought and effort. So, if those who are forgiven are those who have achieved life without guile, doesn't this suggest that human effort does play a role in having a right standing with God through repentance?"

Paul, of course, knew such thinking to be nonsensical and that the line could not and should not be

¹ Romans 4.⁵⁻⁸

² A parade example of this is to be found in Ezra Taft Benson's fast and loose use of DC 84.⁵⁶⁻⁵⁷ to focus more attention on the Book of Mormon—a worthy effort that ignored the larger point of the verses to make a more narrow point.

utilized in any such fashion. At the same time, the line does introduce an element of human agency in the forgiveness of sin. And it can be quite difficult to act upon, as we will see in the lines of verse that follow these four lines. But discussion of this difficult act must await a future homily associated, especially, with verse 3. For now, we wish to return to the line Paul chose not to quote.

“And there is no intention to obfuscate.”

The word that we translate here as “obfuscate” (obfuscation) and that the KJV translates as “guile” is *r^émîyâ*. This word means “deception,” “deceit.” The verb can mean to “dissemble,” “pretend,” “deceive.” The word group most often “refers to a situation in which reality differs from appearance. Such situations involve interpersonal transactions in which someone acts or speaks consciously and deliberately to conceal or cover up certain facts.”³

The question becomes, what is the nature of the forbidden obfuscation. What is being hidden through pretense and deceit? As the context will make clear, that which is hidden here is sinful rebellion. There is an unwillingness on the part of the sinner to face up to the reality of his or her life. Further, and worse, there is an unwillingness to acknowledge to God the reality of sinful rebellion in his or her life. This unwillingness is a sign of distrust in God.

This line, then, suggests that while only God can forgive sin unto salvation, the human plays a small role through the exercise of personal agency. Individuals must avoid the temptation to deny their sin—to self, certainly, but especially to God. For forgiveness to come, the sinner must give more credence to God’s faithfulness than to their own unfaithfulness by confessing his or her sin openly, without deception.

We can liken this line’s truth of human agency in relation to forgiveness with something Nephi taught toward the end of his writings. Nephi was aware of the Holy Spirit’s role in cleansing sinners from sin and in guiding them in their successful navigation of a dark and misty world filled with temptation. Thus, Nephi taught them the role they played in receiving the Spirit with its cleaning and directing influence. The would-be-forgiven individual must “follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, *acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God* but with real intent...”⁴

The avoidance of deception and the truthful confession of sin does not earn the sinner God’s forgiveness. God’s forgiveness continues to be bound up in the very nature of His divine disposition. Confession of sin is an act of faith, of trust in the reality of God’s forgiving disposition and the sincerity of His invitation and promise.

As will become apparent in the following verse, there was a time when the Psalmist engaged in refusal to confess and in attempting to deceive God. Only after much mental and spiritual anguish did he exercise his agency and do what had appeared to him before to be a humiliation: acknowledge, confess, and lay bare his sins. Upon doing so, he found, as we all can, that God is faithful; that He is, indeed, “slow to anger, and long suffering, and of a forgiving disposition, and does forgive iniquity, transgression and sin.”⁵

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

³ Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament

⁴ 2 Nephi 31.¹³. You see how I did it too... focused on the point, avoiding other items that would require explanation and thus divert me from my object?

⁵ See *Lectures on Faith*, “Lecture 3.”

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Psalms 32.¹⁻²

¹ Truly happy is the one whose rebellion is borne away
and whose sin is buried.

² Truly happy is the one whose guilt YHWH does not consider
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In our first meditation on these two verses, we focused on the promise that God will gladden individuals through forgiving rebellion, sin, and guilt. This forgiveness is, first and foremost a consequence of God's generous divine character. However, an individual's exercise of personal agency in acknowledging and confessing sin plays a role. This confession of sin is not so much a command obeyed or unobeyed as it is a reflection of individual character. An individual unable or unwilling to confess will like not trust God or possess the capacity to feel a sense of emotional or spiritual release that forgiveness brings.

We have spoken of "forgiveness" repeatedly. Yet, the word nowhere appears in the author's translation above. The word does appear in the King James, but, really, does not capture the meaning and imagery of the Hebrew word it tries to signify. English, "forgive," from *for-giefan*, literally means something like, "completely give," or "completely give up." This could almost make it seem that the sinner is the subject of the verb, suggesting that the sinner is responsible for the absence of sin because he or she has, themselves, "completely given up" their sin. While we believe very much in God's interest in our character development and in the importance of our own efforts in character development, it is not only true that "all *have* sinned."¹ It is also true that we are "evil continually"² and "liable to sin continually."³ There can be no thought, then, of our "giving up" sin before "happiness" is found or bestowed. If we think happiness can only come to us when we, ourselves, have accomplished this impossible task, we will never know happiness.

We should note, then, that the Hebrew word that the KJV translates as "forgive" literally means "to lift," "carry," "take." "The main emphasis... resides in the notion of carrying or bearing." Further, "the fundamental meaning 'to carry a burden' manifests itself frequently."⁴ We carry sin as a burden, it is true. But we cannot carry the burden off and away. We cannot lift it up and off our shoulders. As the Psalmist reminds us elsewhere, only God can perform this herculean task. Only He can put distance between us and our sins.

"As distant as east is from west
so far does he remove our offenses from us."⁵

Therefore, the Hebrew's choice of, essentially, making us the object rather than the subject of the verb is significant. God is the weightlifter. Not us.

In the second line, the Psalter shifts metaphors from "carrying off" to "burying." The Hebrew word is *kāsā*. "The primary meaning... is 'cover,' either to render invisible what is covered or to protect it or keep it..." In the present instance, it is certain that the idea is to render sin invisible rather than to protect it.

¹ Romans 3.²³

² *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 3, questions

³ Ether 3.²

⁴ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*.

⁵ Psalm 103.¹²

Such hiding away, however, does not annihilate sin. It simply removes it from view. While there can be no thought of God hiding sin from Himself, we might, perhaps, think of God hiding the sin away from us. This is a powerful psychological act. For we humans have pretty good memories—not as good as God’s perfect memory, but pretty good, nonetheless—especially when it comes to personal disappointment, failure, and error and the feelings that accompany them. We have dickens of a time letting go and forgetting. We fear cutting ourselves the least bit of slack.

Yet, it was just this sort of “covering,” “hiding,” or “disappearing” that Alma the younger experienced through God’s mercy.

“And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.”⁶

Note that it wasn’t the memory of *sin* that disappeared, but the memory and continued experience of the *pain of sinning*. Truth is what really was, what really is, and what really will be. Thus, the fact of sin’s presence in our lives, even when it is no longer harrowing, or even no longer present, is not annihilated. It will always be part of the truth of us.

So, the truth of our sin always remains. God does not forget or lose his capacity to observe. But, the Psalmist testifies, He does make a conscious choice to disregard. He makes a choice to disregard sin when considering how to relate to us. Though He, if He wishes, can see our ever-present sin, He does not choose to. He can relate to us as if it were not there, though it is. Again, the Psalmist of Psalm 103 speaks to this truth.

Devoted and generous is YHWH;
slow to become angry and abounding in fidelity.
He is not always condemning.
He is not always annoyed.
He does not relate to us as our sins deserve
or deal with us as our iniquities might suggest.”⁷

So, taking the first three lines of this Psalm together, we find that God carries our sins far away, barriers them far off, and then chooses to ignore their existence.

As we see in the final line, and as we discussed in the first meditation on these verses, our willingness to acknowledge our sin or, better, our sinful state, plays some role in the carrying away, burial, and disregard of our sin. It may be a tiny role, a very minor supporting acting role, in the carrying off, burial, and disregarding of sin, but it is a role, nonetheless. Still, we must acknowledge, the leading role belongs to God. He is the muscular hero who, alone, can bear the load away and bury it deep enough for it to never be seen or considered again. He knows it’s there. He can’t forget. But He will not be controlled by it. He will not allow it to control His relationship with those who also know it is there and trust His generosity enough to acknowledge it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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⁶ Alma 36.¹⁹

⁷ Psalm 103.⁸⁻¹⁰

Psalms 32.³⁻⁵ (Lent)

³Because I remained silent, my frame wasted away
while I raged all day long.
⁴Because Your power rested heavily upon me day and night
my moisture turned into summer draught.
⁵I'll confess my sin to You
and no longer hide my guilt from You.
I decided, "I'll confess my rebellion to YHWH,"
and You, You bore away my sinful guilt (author's translation).

I don't know about you, but I can relate to the Psalmist's stubborn refusal to acknowledge his sins—both to self and to God. There might be many reasons for such refusal, but I have recognized three in myself. First, I have at times refused to acknowledge sin and error out of self-pride. I simply couldn't admit that I had erred. My ego was too wrapped up in the error. It was vitally important to me and my sense of worth that I be right in whatever it was I erred. At times, it was important to me that some other be blamed so that I could maintain my imagined superiority.

I have also refused to acknowledge sin and error out of a different sort of self-pride. Although I realized an error, in this pride I disliked and shunned the idea of being dependent upon another for forgiveness. This hatred of dependence, it seems to me, is at the very heart of Korihor's rejection of Christ. "There could be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength..."¹ To accept Christ is to acknowledge that we are not sufficient in ourselves, but have needs that require our dependence upon another. Refusal to confess due to the distaste for dependence upon another is a doctrine of anti-Christ.

But, perhaps, the number one reason for my occasional refusal to acknowledge sin, I think, is a lack of faith or trust in God. I don't trust Him with my sin. I don't trust what He might do with it. I do not believe God is as merciful as scripture claims—which mercy is immense, by the way. I do not believe He is as merciful as Jesus portrayed Him with his every mortal breath. I fall prey to one of the great sins, itself a form of idolatry. It is described by Zenock when he laments, "...this people... will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son."²

This distrust of God is, in my reading of it, the error Adam and Eve made in the garden. Satan put it into their hearts to distrust God; distrust that He was committed to them above all else; that He was committed to them even if it meant pain to Himself. They yielded to and acted upon this distrust thus creating the fallen man—the man who distrusts God and thinks of God as an enemy.

Maybe I, maybe all of us can use this Lent and Easter Season to revisit God's commitment to us, to more faithfully confess our sins and thus receive a remission of sins and become more like God's Son and more like God, Himself.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 3, 2025)

¹ Alma 30.¹⁷

² Alma 33.¹⁶