

The Heavy Hand of God's Love

Psalm 32:1-11

An elderly woman walked into a church. An usher, in response to her request that she be seated on the front row, said: "You really don't want to do that. Our pastor is really boring."

"Do you happen to know who I am?" asked the woman.

"No," said the usher.

"I'm the pastor's mother," she replied indignantly.

"Do you know who I am?" the usher asked.

"No," she said.

"Good."

Sometimes, anonymity "ain't so bad." As much as we cherish the notion that God is intimately aware of every detail of our lives, right down to the number of hairs on our head, there are times that we might prefer NOT to be the object of His undivided attention. In particular, it would be nice to think He is not paying all that close of attention to certain sins we are reluctant to confess. He's got enough to do. Perhaps, we have acted in anger, selfishness, or greed. When we suppress dealing with these things, we might numb our conscience, but that will not put the issue to rest.

Such evasiveness cannot go on indefinitely. This is what Psalm 32 addresses. David had sinned and then, tried to act as if nothing was wrong. But, something did not allow him comprehensive peace. Something kept him up at night, wearing him down both physically and mentally. We might call that something "divine discipline." David saw it as God's heavy hand. That's right, God's hand had made him utterly miserable, but David still recognized God's love in that hand.

I. God's Heavy Hand Produces Devastation (1-4)

¹Blessed is he

whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

²Blessed is the man

whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.

³When I kept silent,

my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night

your hand was heavy upon me;

my strength was sapped

as in the heat of summer. *Selah*

A. Divine Forgiveness Is Man's Greatest Need

The psalm begins with a premise that no thinking person could question. Blessedness belongs to anyone that God has forgiven. "Happy" is not a bad synonym for "blessed" so long as we remember that blessedness is a condition and not an emotion. We do not always feel "happy" as the world thinks of that term, but we will always know we are "blessed" when we know that our sin are not counted against us. Sin is a great breach that keeps us from knowing God in His holiness. If we were indeed created in the image of God, then sin is specifically what renders us unlike God. We cannot enjoy blessed fellowship with Him until the sin issue has been resolved.

The introduction of sin into this world spoiled the Garden of Eden for us all. Sin renders all people hopelessly lost, at odds with God - an "object doomed for destruction" as Paul put it. David's assertion: "Blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven ..." is a no-brainer.

Christians know that God made provision for sin when Jesus died for us. That truth is at the heart of our faith. But, whenever any presentation of the gospel of the cross does not include a good treatment of sin as an offense against God, people tend to try to seize the gift of salvation even as they become desensitized to the problem of sin. We don't generally consider it too difficult to obtain forgiveness for our sins. Jesus came to forgive sin. He died on a cross to do that. Now we can get forgiveness just by asking. We say that we're sorry. God forgives. Cool! The mechanism works every time. But, have we really ever recognized just how much God hates our sin?

During these seasons that we are desensitized about our sin - when we are not really facing them or confessing them, be that for moments, months or years - God still loves us, but He does so in a tough-love kind of way. "Day and night, your heavy hand was upon me ..." David is describing God's discipline, a discipline designed to compel His people to face their sins grittily and specifically rather than in vague generalities. "Forgive us our sins, Lord, whatever they are."

B. David Had Been Hiding Some Specific Sin

At some points in the psalm, David speaks of his "transgressions" and "sins." At other points, he uses singular nouns: "I acknowledged my *sin*." "I have not covered up my *iniquity*." It was not just sin-in-general that David had in mind. It appears some specific, harbored sin may have been tormenting him. The text does not tell us what the sin was, but it must have been a doozy.

Upon the death of Pope John Paul II, Rogers Cadenhead, a self-described "domain-hoarder," registered www.BenedictXVI.com before the new Pope's name was announced or Rome knew they would need it. The right domain name can prove lucrative, but Cadenhead didn't want money. A Catholic himself, he was happy for the church to own the name. He was not interested in angering 1.1 billion Catholics, not to mention his grandmother. However, he did ask for something in return. In exchange for the name, Cadenhead sought:

1. One of those hats;
2. A free stay at the Vatican hotel;
3. Complete absolution, no questions asked, for the third week of March, 1987.

David had his own "March, 1987-caliber secret." We explored Psalm 51, which was prompted by his most notorious sin, when he committed adultery and impregnated another man's wife. Then, in his scheming to cover up matters, he eventually orchestrated that man's death. If this was a different sin than the one that prompted Psalm 51, apparently, David once again had never faced the heinousness of his act. That's not something a man typically does once. Avoidance becomes habitual. We quickly learn to just trudge forward as if nothing has happened. Trudging forward like nothing has happened - ring any bells? Is that how you prefer to address (or not address) particular kinds of failings?

David probably continued making sin offerings, asking "forgive us our sins" in that general way that we hear prayed in church every Sunday. After all, a king must keep up appearances. But admitting one's general sinfulness and observing a prescribed ritual is not a hard thing to do, and if David had been maintaining a façade of confession and worship, he eventually learned that this silly catchall way of confessing sin was not bringing him peace. Rather than experiencing grace from a forgiving Father, his avoidance was taking a toll on him. David felt God's heavy hand upon him night and day. His strength was sapped. He felt as if he was wasting away.

David's experience is not unique to humanity in general. Dishonest communication destroys relationships. Evasiveness creates friction. This is true of relationships with spouses, friends and also of one's relationship with God. Prayer is communication, talking with God. But if there is an issue, a point of friction between ourselves and God, we sense immediately that praying is a little harder. It becomes awkward and not spontaneous. God appears far off, unhearing.

The fellowship between God and David was not complete. God's hand continued to bear down. It ate at him. It stole his sleep. It robbed him of joy. How stupid not to come clean. There's no joy when God's heavy hand is wearing us out. And like David, it's our own stubborn fault. Again, we find it easy enough to admit that we are sinful, in a generic sense, but to get specific about some hidden or cherished sin, calling it what it really is – that's a whole other challenge.

II. God's Heavy Hand Produces Liberation (5-7)

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, "I will confess

My transgressions to the LORD"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

⁶Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you
while you may be found;

surely when the mighty waters rise,
they will not reach him.

⁷You are my hiding place;

you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. *Selah*

A. God's Forgiveness Comes Quickly Where There is Repentance

Confessing specific sin is humbling. It requires little humility to admit the general truth that "everyone makes mistakes," that we're all prone to evil. But to take responsibility for our specific wrong requires eating a lot of pride. It was so perplexing for a king that God had to discipline him harshly. David's body had to waste away. His life had to be all groaning. His strength had to be dried up before he understood that he had no alternative but to own up to his transgression.

The term David uses for "forgave" is striking. Literally, he speaks of God "lifting" the guilt of his sin. "Lifting" gives us the image of a burden being taken off David's shoulders. But if a burden is to be lifted off, the implication is that your sin is a burden. David's unconfessed sin was a burden in his life. But now that he has confessed his transgression, a load of guilt was lifted from him. In other words, David can now face life without this heavy weight on his back.

Burdened; that's what happens says the inspired Psalmist, when you don't confess sin. Covering up iniquities, refusing to admit transgressions; this creates a weight on your back day by day, and that weight, that burden, is God's heavy hand pressing you to repent. You can go for counseling. You can take a handful of pills everyday. You can take long vacations. You can spend, eat, work out – every escape imaginable, but none of these can free a Christian from God's hand of discipline. Where there is sin we refuse to address, nothing can free us. God loves us too much.

B. David Must Have Wondered, “Why Did I Take So Long?”

A 2004 study at Temple University School of Medicine found that lying actually takes more brain energy than telling the truth. Participants were divided into two groups. Those in the first group were asked to shoot a toy gun and then lie and say they didn't do it. The second group watched what happened and then told the truth about it. An MRI indicated that the liars had to use seven areas of the brain in their response. Those who told the truth only used four areas. Now if one lie uses 76% more mental energy in the first place, how much is required to maintain one?

Once there's the humility to admit, “It was sin, and I am sorry,” only then can God's hand be lifted, and only then, is there blessedness. So complete is this forgiveness that David can now sing: “Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him.” These mighty waters are anxieties and problems, not the basic challenges of life. Other pressures do rise when we choose to abide in a place where God can bless us. The psalmist adds in verse 7 that God remains a “hiding place,” a shelter in the face of storms. Such is the blessed consequence of confessing sin. Nothing blocks praise like sin, but God also restores our song, surrounding us “with songs of deliverance. *Selah*”

III. God's Heavy Hand Produces Submission (8-11)

⁸I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you and watch over you.

⁹Do 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.

¹⁰Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.

¹¹Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!

A. Would You Rather Approach God as a Child or as a Stubborn Mule?

In *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin says to his tiger friend, Hobbes, “I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it.”

“Maybe you should apologize to her,” Hobbes suggests.

Calvin ponders this a moment and replies, “I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution.”

When sin has damaged your intimacy with God, remember, God prefers that obvious solution. Part of the blessedness of forgiveness is that God promises us a relationship with Himself that is intimate and real. He will teach us. He will counsel us and protect us. As we learn of Him, we will learn to love the presence of His holiness and rather than being desensitized to our sins, we will become more acutely aware of them. To be acutely aware of our sins is not to love them. On the contrary, our love of God's holiness will cause us to want to distance ourselves from them.

This is what is being described in verse 9: “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.” A dumb animal may have to be harnessed, beaten and driven before it will do what it is supposed to do. It is not God's first preference to discipline us, to bend our wills and to break our spirits. He desires that we will choose to be in harmony with Him, and as a result of that choice, we will come to Him because we have learned that with Him is where we ought to be and where we want to be. Don't make it necessary for God to discipline you, to make you sick or weak, to steal your sleep, or to cause your sins to come forward in a way that hurts everyone around you.

David is teaching us: “I did not confess my sin. God, with His loving heavy hand had no choice but to drag me like a dumb animal to a realization of my need to repent.” His council to his people is to save themselves from the pain he has invited upon himself: “Confess your sins, expose them all before God now, so that you can experience what forgiveness is, what grace is.”

B. Confession Truly Is Good for the Soul

Later, the Apostle John would echo David, not in poetry, but in straightforward letter:

⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

- 1 John 1:8-10

David could hardly be expected to understand it, but the basis for his forgiveness would be the cross of Jesus, and not his own discipline of repentance. Nevertheless David, as well as any other believer can appropriate that grace only when his heart bears evidence that he wants it. David understands the holiness of God. He sees his own unholiness, and he desires not to keep anything alive that keeps the chasm between himself and God in tact. David can go free because there will one day come a Righteous Man Who will satisfy God for the adultery, murder, theft and cover-up of the king. That heavy hand of God on David's shoulders can be taken away because another Man's shoulders will bear the full weight of God's wrath on sin. On Christ Jesus, there will be the utter fulfillment of the discipline of God that David experiences in his life now.

Again, we do not receive grace because of an act of confession, but because of Jesus' redemptive work. Still, the point of this psalm remains that we have to see our sin somewhat as God sees it, or we do not invite the free gift. The sacrifice is applied when heaven and your prayer closet agree on this matter of sin. Our statements of faith that Christ died for us, our insistence that we believe Him and, therefore, are assured of forgiveness – ultimately, you know better. God's heavy hand of love simply won't allow any agitation-free assurance when a rebel is His child.

Confession is more than just calling a spade, “a spade.” It is an acknowledgement that God is holy. If you think that confession of sins in vague generalities will capture the relationship God has in mind for you, you are dead wrong. That is just one more avoidance mechanism, and the human heart has a million of them. David experienced that God is not satisfied with generalities. Sure, there was a time when David asked God to show him his sins: “See if there is any offensive way in me ... (Psalm 139:24), but that was simply a plea for complete purification. God does not expect us to immediately recognize every thing in our life that is sinful. The Fall runs too deep. But, David was not playing games with things in his life that he *knew* were wrong.

In a few moments, we will come to the Lord's Table. Paul warns the unrepentant to be careful. Don't miss the point. You will be encountering a proclamation of the death of Jesus. God does not want to frighten any Christian from approaching, but He does want all surrendered sins and secrets laid down. Fortify your walk with God by using this as a time of confession if that is what is needed. After all, only you and He know what is really going on. Do not recite some empty limerick about the forgiveness of that innocuous package we call “all our sins.” Deal with God now. Don't make it necessary for Him to press His hand on your back because you are stubborn.