

Psalm 32

6th Sunday Year B
11th Sunday Year C
Evening Prayer Thursday Week 1

The psalmist was profoundly depressed until he acknowledged his sin and pleaded with God for forgiveness. The experience of forgiveness brought profound joy and a sense of deep gratitude. He is advising others to follow his example. The title reads: ‘Of David. A Maskil’. This is the first of thirteen psalms designated as *maskil* [מִשְׁכִּיל], from the verb *šākal*, meaning to have insight. It may indicate a psalm that teaches, or perhaps one that is to be played with special skill (see 2Chronicles 30:22).

¹Happy* the person who is absolved from transgression*, whose sin* is buried and forgotten.

²Happy the person to whom YHWH* imputes no guilt*, whose spirit is not darkened.

For the meaning of ‘happy’ see the article in the Introduction. The focus is on what we need to do to welcome God’s blessing.

See also the articles on ‘Transgression’, ‘Sin’ and ‘Guilt’ for the distinctions between these words, and under ‘Sin’ note the various verbs used for ‘forgiveness’.

‘Spirit’ refers to the ‘life-breath’ which has its source in God (see Genesis 2:7). The psalmist is acclaiming the happiness of a person who has not polluted the breath given by God. Such a person enjoys the purity that comes with communion with God. Paul quotes these verse in Romans 4:7-8. We might reflect on the following texts from the New Testament:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

– 1John 1:8-9

Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

– James 5:16

That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins — Jesus then said to the paralytic— ‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’

– Matthew 9:6

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

– John 20:23

Sin has its effects in our lives. The psalmist describes what was happening to him while he refused to face up to what he was doing.

When he finally admitted his sin, he experiences God's forgiveness and release.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

– 1John 1:8-9

He tells others to do what he has done. They will be blessed in the same way. The 'faithful' (Hebrew *ḥāsîd*, חָסִיד) are those who welcome God's kindness* by being faithful to the covenant. Linking distress and waters reminds us of the following from Jonah:

You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows passed over me.
Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight;
how shall I look again upon your holy temple?'
The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me ...
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
YHWH my God.
As my life was ebbing away, I remembered YHWH;
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.

– Jonah 2:3-8

Compare the following:

YHWH is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble;
he protects those who take refuge in him,
even in a rushing flood.
He will make a full end of his adversaries,
and will pursue his enemies into darkness.

– Nahum 1:7-8

³While I kept silence, even my bones wasted away, and I moaned all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength dried up as in the summer heat.

[Selah*]

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin* to you. I did not hide my guilt*. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions* to YHWH,' and you forgave my guilt* and my sin*.

[Selah*]

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful* offer prayer to you. At a time of distress, the rush of the mighty flood shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me; you free me from danger. When I cry 'help!' you surround me.

[Selah*]

The kindness of God

The sinner has just expressed his joy because of the experience of forgiveness that came when he confessed his sin. Some read the following verses as advice given to sinners by the psalmist who wants them to learn from his experience. Others read them as words spoken by God. If the latter is intended, God is intervening to tell us that we still have work to do in making sure we do not fall back into sin.

⁸I will instruct you. I will show you the road to follow. I will give you counsel and keep watch over you.

Compare:

I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
When you walk, your step will not be hampered;
and if you run you will not stumble.
Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life.

– Proverbs 4:11-13

We are reminded of Jesus' words:

There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

– Luke 15:7

⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, who cannot be approached unless your temper is curbed with bit and bridle.

We will experience relief from tribulation caused by sin only if we humbly listen to God and learn wisdom.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked, but kindness* surrounds those who trust* in YHWH.

This is a concluding reflection and an exhortation to the assembly. For a fuller understanding of the terms used here consult the articles in the Introduction: 'Kindness', 'Trust', 'Just', 'Upright' and 'Heart'.

¹¹Be glad in YHWH and rejoice, O you just*. Shout for joy, all you upright* of heart*.