

Sermon 25: Romans 4:6-8: Free Forgiveness

OUTLINE

David's experience of sin

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INTRODUCTION

The story of David and Bathsheba is well known. David was middle aged, and at the time of year when kings were leading their armies off to war David was sitting idle at home. One night he saw Bathsheba bathing herself, and violating the Lord's command not to commit adultery he abused his office as king and took another man's wife. There was no remorse or guilt. However, shortly after that Bathsheba revealed that she was pregnant. So David connived to have Uriah come home in the hope that he would have relations with Bathsheba and think that the baby was his. This scheme failed so David had Uriah killed. David was guilty of two particular sins that had no sacrifices provided in the OT system because anyone who committed these crimes was given the death penalty, adultery and murder. However, David did not own his sin nor confess his sins. In 2 Samuel 12 we see Nathan going to David with a parable of a man who had a single lamb and a rich man who had many. The rich man took the poor man's lamb for a party. David condemned the actions of the rich man and by his own mouth pronounced sentence upon himself. Nathan applied the story to him telling him, 'You are the man!' And only after a rebuke and the prophecy of disciplinary action going to be taken by God did David confess his sins (2 Sam. 12:13).

Now most of us would be familiar with Psalm 51 which David wrote expressing a true although belated repentance. It opens with David casting himself on the mercy of God (1-2); then shows David owning his sins, recognising the guilt and judgeworthiness of his sins, and the very nature of sin (3-6); David then asks for forgiveness and restoration (7-12); and closes the psalm with a recommitment to the LORD (13-19). Out of all the psalms this is the one that I have turned to over and over again in my Christian life, the one that has been the most relevant to me in more situations than any other. And it is here that we find words to take to God that we know He will receive because He has written them. And as I have counselled people, especially prisoners who have committed some terrible deeds like murder and sexual crimes, I have found it to be a very fitting way to preach grace to sinners.

Another psalm traditionally associated with David's sin with Bathsheba is psalm 32, and this is the psalm that Paul quotes from in Romans 4:6-8 as he continues to show that justification is by faith not by works. Psalm 32 is part of a group of psalms called the penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 130, 143). If you turn to the psalm you will see that Paul has quoted from the first two verses of the psalm, he has quoted word for word from the Greek Translation the LXX (Septuagint). The first half of the psalm deals with David's experience of sin and forgiveness, the first two verses open the psalm with a conclusion, v3-4 describe the inner torture and torment that David experienced, and v5 describes to us his act of confessing. The second half of the psalm 6-11 is instruction given by David as he

reflects on his own experience. Some have thought that this aspect of instruction in the psalm is the fulfilment on David's part of his commitment to instruct sinners in Ps 51:12-13, 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.' Psalm 32 certainly does begin with the joy of salvation and move into teaching sinners.

Paul's method in employing this psalm in his argument in Romans 4 goes something like this: Abraham was saved by faith not by works he received his righteousness as a gift by faith not as a wage on account of works. Paul now wants to add weight to this example by adding another witness, in this instance the very important and crucial person of King David. The reason Paul has included this particular quote is because of the repetition of a word he has been using so far, the word 'count' in verse 8. You will remember that this is an economic term similar to putting money into another's name/account. Abraham has had righteousness counted to him. Paul references this word as it is applied to David in the negative. David did not have his sins counted to him. Abraham received the positive counting of righteousness to his account and David negatively did not receive the counting of sin to his account. As Paul draws in this example our view is focused from the wider overarching theme of righteousness being credited in justification to the non-imputation of sin in forgiveness. As we look into David's experience of the grace of God we will first look at David's experience of sin and its terrible effects, and then we will explore the blessedness of being freely forgiven.

David's experience of sin

Psalm 32 begins with the word 'blessed' which means, 'O how happy!' However, this was not David's experience when for the period of about a year David did not confess his sin, he writes in v3-4, 'For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah.' Before we look at the blessedness David is talking about it would be instructive for us to first appreciate the terrible nature of guilt. It should be born in mind that we need to make a double application of David's experience, to both the believer and the unbeliever. Although sin no longer has its killing power in the life of the believer, it still has the power to maul and do damage. There are lessons to be learned for both the believer and the unbeliever about sin and confession.

When David refused to own and confess his sins he describes his spiritual suffering in four ways: it felt like his bones were wasting away; he would groan all day long; day and night he felt the heavy and strong hand of the Lord on him; and his strength was dried up. David was dealing with spiritual depression. In particular he was dealing with a depression that was brought on by his own sins. David was deliberately putting himself through the grinder by not confessing his sins to God. God has made us in His image and built into our natures a conscience. We do not need an external Jimmy the Cricket to tell us what is right or wrong we know it intuitively, innately. However, the conscience is much like a spiritual nerve. To sin continuously against your conscience is like driving a needle under your finger nail. The nerves in the fingers are there to warn you of the damage you are doing to

yourself and that you should avoid such behaviour. Likewise your conscience is a nerve warning that alerts you to self-destructive behaviour. To persist in pushing the needle into the nail bed will result in further pain, infection and finally the killing of the nerve/amputation/rot. The persistent wounding of the conscience builds up a callous and finally the sinner can sear their consciences that they can act without guilt. This is the developed state of the conscience of a serial killer. David was experiencing the crushing pain of his sin, a self-inflicted injury. And it resulted in depression, joylessness, heaviness, weakness, etc. You can imagine the state of David's prayer life, how he worshipped, obeyed and studied the Scriptures at this time. Avoiding God would have been the only way to get some relief. Add to this the convicting work of the Spirit and we do not doubt that David would have been a very unhappy man. It was by confession and repentance that David found relief. Now we know why he asked God to restore to him the joy of his salvation.

But what about the unbeliever's experience of sin, David was regenerated and had the Spirit, but how much worse is it for someone who is not yet born again? An unbeliever's experience is worse and better. Firstly, the believer experiences worse for he/she is awakened to the full horror and God-hating nature of sin. The believer is indwelt by God Himself whose influences are made to be felt when we grieve and quench the Spirit by our sins. In fact it has often happened that the young Christian has been more terrified of judgement and broken under the weight of their sins than when they were an unbeliever. It is for this reason that the persistent preaching of the Gospel needs to be an ongoing thing for the believer, they need to know again about the sufficiency of Christ's work on their behalf when they gain a new deeper sense of their sins. Secondly, the unbeliever experiences it worse for the following reasons: The unbeliever has not yet learned of Christ and can see no remedy for their guilt, this can result in total hopelessness and terror. The unbeliever is dead and captive to sin's power and is often under the tyranny of various addictions. The unbeliever due to the lifestyle of pursuing sin often feels not only weight of sin but its many offspring in the consequences that it bears. Our actions follow us, we reap what we sow, and those who have not been walking on the path of holiness have been set off more bombs of destruction that wound and burden the unbeliever. How can the unbeliever find relief? Like David the unbeliever must come to Christ in faith and repentance, confessing their sins.

Let's consider David's confession of sin. Last week we focused on faith. We argued that justification is by faith alone. We showed how faith is a gift and it is an instrument and not an offering. We stressed what has been called the 'extraspective' nature of faith. Extraspective is the opposite of introspective and highlights how we do not look within ourselves but to Christ for the righteousness we need to justify us in God's sight. We stressed that faith itself is not an earning work but a receiving action, and that even repentance is not the instrument God uses in justifying us, we are justified by faith alone. Conviction of sin, confession of sin and repentance towards sin are not the instruments of our justification, we are justified by faith alone. However, justifying faith because it springs from the regenerating work of the Spirit is always accompanied by conviction of sin and repentance. It is not the conviction and repentance that looks to Christ in trust, that is faith,

but faith is always accompanied by a sin hating sin forsaking repentance. Faith is not a confidence in our repentance to declare us righteous to God that is introspective. The bible teaches us an extraspective faith where we look away from ourselves to Christ and His righteousness as the only sufficient righteousness to justify us. However, every Spirit taught look to Christ is also a Spirit taught look away from sin. The sinner who sees that they need a saviour from sin in Christ alone will also forsake their sins in clinging to Christ. We can never separate faith and repentance but they must remain distinct. If we do not keep them distinct we will create believers who are trusting in their moral renovation not Christ's life and death for justification. And when they fall into sin their assurance is grounded on their repentance not Christ. Now it is true that every person who turns to Christ must also turn from sin, this is done in confession of sin. In every clinging to Christ there is a forsaking of sin. If you say you have trusted in Christ, but have carried your sins with you and not left them behind then you have not exercised a Spirit wrought trust but have merely tried to take out (hell) fire insurance.

In Ps. 32:5 David says, 'I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah.' Firstly notice that David acknowledges sin. He calls sin what God calls it and does not refuse to see it any longer. In this one verse he calls sin, sin, iniquity and transgression. Sin means 'falling short'; iniquity means 'corrupt, twisted or crooked' and transgression means 'departure.' These words are honest about sin and do not call them, white lies, faux pas, indiscretions, lapses in judgement, or antisocial behaviour. Secondly notice that David does not try to cover his sins. Adam and Eve made coverings by their own hands which were inadequate and God had to provide coverings. We can cover over our sins by blaming someone else, '...it's Bathsheba's fault she seduced me.' We can cover them with self-justification, '...I am the king after all.' We can make excuses based on health, '...I was going through a mid-life crisis.' We can cover them by appealing to what someone else does, '...other kings do it why can't I?' Some may try and justify it with false theology, '...God will forgive me because He loves me.' Some even try to make up for them with good works. You can try and cover your sins yourself or as David tells us know the joy of God covering them (v1). Notice the last phrase at the end of Ps. 32:2, 'and in whose spirit there is no deceit.' Coming to God in repentance and confession is not a situation where you argue your innocence but are totally honest about your guilt. Total honesty, naked truth and revealing all, this is true Spirit wrought confession and repentance. It is the broken and contrite heart that will receive grace not the self-justifying, excuse finding, blame-shifting heart.

And here we need to remind ourselves of some very important promises, 1 John 1:9-10, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.' Ps 51:17, 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.' James 4:8-10, 'Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.'

David's experience of forgiveness

Now we turn to David's experience of forgiveness in Rom 4:7-8. Paul begins with the word 'blessed.' It literally means, 'O how happy!' 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven.' As we begin looking at this doctrine of forgiveness we must not overlook the fact that joy is the result of forgiveness. Peter talks about a joy that is inexpressible and full of glory, this is it. It is the joy of a man on death row who is acquitted, a man who has been held hostage in a POW camp who hears the news that the war is over. The joy as if Adam were told that the angel with the sword has departed and he may return to Eden.

David tells us in three words what God has done with regard to our sins, 'forgiven,' 'covered' and 'not' counted. The word forgiven means 'lifted off' as if to picture sin as a burden that is cut away from our backs. Or in the context of biblical imagery you can think of them as lifted from you and nailed to the cross so that you bear them and their consequences no more, Colossians 2:13-14, '13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having *forgiven us all our trespasses*, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he *set aside, nailing it to the cross*.' Applied to David this means that his criminal acts of adultery and murder were cancelled and nailed to the cross. Applied to us we can see the long list of our sins nailed to the cross already punished in the person of Jesus Christ.

The second word 'covered' reminds us of a particular image in the OT. Remember the Ark of the Covenant/mercy seat, the box where the 10 commandments were kept that was hidden away in the most holy place. The high priest would go in once a year and he would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the Ark, putting a covering of blood over the broken law of God. Symbolically God would look at the box and in the place of a broken law He would see the blood of the innocent sacrifice and overlook the sins of the people for another year. The sins of the people were 'covered' and a holy God would continue in fellowship with them as a result. Likewise the Blood of Jesus Christ is our Propitiation that is a better offering that secures a better result. All of God's wrath towards all of our sins has been turned aside as our sins are more perfectly covered by the better sacrifice of Christ. Is this the covering you want for your sins, or will you continue to try and create a covering of your own? In the OT we see that sins are forgiven but it is in the NT that we see how God was able to forgive them.

The third idea is 'not count' and this is the particular idea that Paul was after in quoting this text. Abraham had righteousness counted to him as a gift when he believed, correspondingly we are shown some of the other inner workings of justification on the negative side, David did *not* have his sins counted to him; the imputation of righteousness and the non-imputation of sin; the righteousness he needed for justification was put into his name, and the sins that were against his name were removed. Paul gives us a further clarification on this whole idea of not counting sins to believers in 2 Cor. 5:19, 21, '19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' In

verse 19 we see that God does not count our sins against us, but what does He do with them, does He simply ignore them and pretend that they are not there? No we see in v21 the mechanism behind our forgiveness. Although our sins are not counted to us, they still need to be counted, and we see that they were counted to Christ. They were taken out of our names and put in His name. And likewise, just as with Abraham, we received Christ's righteousness into our names His righteousness was counted to us. Luther called this 'the great exchange.' Robert Haldane quotes Luther as saying the following, 'Learn my dear brother, to know Christ, and Christ crucified, and learn to despair of thyself, and to sing to the Lord this song:-Lord Jesus! Thou art my righteousness, but I am Thy sin. Thou hast taken what belonged to me; Thou hast given me what was Thine. Thou becamest what Thou wert not, in order that I might become what I was not myself.'¹ We now experience the joy of being the righteousness of God in Christ, unassailably saved to the uttermost and nothing can now separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. I will close by reading the lines from the famous hymn written by Count Zinzendorf which was translated by John Wesley into English. Before I do let me quickly remind you of John Wesley's conversion and how this translation came about. John Wesley grew up in a very religious home but it was full of legalism. He essentially believed that he would work his way into heaven. He went to Georgia, America as a missionary to save his soul. He encountered a storm and while the ship was being tossed about he realised that he had no peace and assurance that he was a Christian. But on the ship he encountered Moravians who were singing and peaceful in the storm, he realised that they had something he did not. He sought out the Moravians for fellowship and when he returned to London it was in the famous Aldersgate meeting where one of Luther's commentaries on Romans was being read that he felt himself to be born again, his heart was strangely warmed as he spoke about 'absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon my own works of righteousness; on which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it not, from my youth up.'² Well shortly after his conversion he went to Germany to meet the Count Zinzendorf, the main force behind the Moravian missionaries that Wesley had encountered. Wesley had gone there to learn more about Luther and the Moravians, so the Count got Wesley to translate some German hymns, this is one that the Count wrote:

Jesus Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

When from the dust of death I rise
To claim my mansion in the skies,
E'en then shall this be all my plea,
Jesus has lived and died for me.

1 Robert Haldane, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (Chiltern Street, London, The Banner of Truth Trust: 1963), p172.

2 Iain H. Murray, *Wesley and the men who followed him*, (Edinburgh, UK, The Banner of Truth Trust: 2003), p20.

Bold shall I stand in that great day,
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

This spotless robe the same appears,
When ruined nature sinks in years!
No age can change its glorious hue;
The robe of Christ is ever new.

O let the dead now here Thy voice,
Bid, Lord, Thy banished ones rejoice;
Their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus, the Lord our righteousness.