

**Westgate Church**

*Walking with God in the Meantime:  
The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms*

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## **When Sin Is Bitter, Christ Is Sweet**

### Psalm 32

We are partway through our summer series, “Walking with God in the Meantime: The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms.” Again, the Psalms are a collection of songs and hymns in the Old Testament of the Bible that have an uncanny way of intersecting with our lives today, some three thousand years after most of them were written. And it’s because they are honest about what it looks and feels like to try to walk with God in a world that remains fractured and fragmented by sin—by human rebellion against God.

Perhaps what’s surprising about this book in its raw honesty is that it is not a pessimistic portrait. The poems in this book hold no punches about how messed up things can get: “How long, O LORD, will you forget me forever?” (13:1). “All who hate me whisper together about me; they imagine the worst for me” (41:7). And yet this book is adamant that it is possible to live a blessed life even in the meantime—a full and rewarding life this side of eternity. As we’ve said before, it’s not our *best* life now (the best is yet to come, when Christ returns to make good on all the hopes and promises of God’s new creation), but it can be a *blessed* life now—a life where we enjoy God’s presence in our lives. The first two chapters of the book gave us a portrait of this blessed life—a life shaped by God’s Word (chapter 1), and a life surrendered to God’s Son, Jesus (chapter 2). Psalm 32 opens on a similar note:

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. (Ps. 32:1-2)

Psalm 32 is very interested in what a blessed life looks like amid a world given to decay and corruption, and its essential message is that *a full and rewarding life this side of eternity is one marked by God’s forgiveness, having had our sins dealt with through his eternal Son, Jesus Christ*. Let’s pray together as we take a closer look at this passage.

If you’re anything like me, there’s a certain satisfaction that comes when something really dirty or unorganized is finally cleaned or brought to order. Maybe it’s the grime on the shower wall or the stack of dishes piling up in the kitchen (when you can finally see the counter again). Every morning I get in the car to leave for work, the bushes in the front of the house mock me in their unruliness—having evaded my shears one more day. I finally trimmed them yesterday, and it felt good. We can usually tolerate the mess for a while—perhaps it’s the chaos on your desk or the clutter in your room—but there is a tangible satisfaction and relief that comes from things being in their place. A *shalom*, if you will. That’s why I like the Container Store so much.

Now, I recognize that illustration will not resonate with some of you, especially high school- and college-age males. I know, because I went my entire first year at college without vacuuming the carpet in my dorm room. But even so, work with me for a moment, and imagine how good it

feels when something dirty for so long is finally clean. Imagine the relief, the joy, the pleasure, the rest. And now imagine that feeling relative to your *conscience*—that inner part of us that registers when something is right or wrong with our behavior or attitude. Imagine the rest, peace, pleasure, and joy from having a stained conscience washed clean.

The opening lines of this psalm declare to us that one of the marks of a joyful and satisfying life in this world—a happy or blessed life—is the forgiveness of God for our sins. There is a blessing in knowing that our sins have been dealt with, that our lives have been cleansed, that we are in the right with God—that he does not count our sins against us. Note that it is not talking about God’s people as though they never sin, but rather the joy of being forgiven of sins we have in fact committed.

Now, we need to make sure we know what we’re talking about when we use words like “sin” and “forgiveness.” These are words the Bible uses a lot, and Christians tend to use a lot as well. But they’re not always well understood in the broader culture, and sometimes even in the church. So what does the Bible mean when it uses these words?

First, **sin**. What is sin? The Bible uses a lot of different words to describe this—in vv. 1-2 it’s called transgression, sin, iniquity. But when it comes down to it, sin is ultimately an offense against the person and throne of God. Sin is an offense against the person and throne of God. It’s any attitude or action or thought or word that is inconsistent with God’s character or falls short of God’s law—his rules for how life should be lived on earth. The idea of sin will not make any sense if we don’t first understand God as Creator and King. This is his world—he made it. He made us—people. And that means we belong to him, and he has the right to tell us how he wants us to live. He is our Creator and our King. He is a good king—his rules are for our good and his glory, that we might make much of God in how we live, showing the world he is like. So God our King rules over us, and any time we push against that rule or ignore it or disobey it, we sin. Not just against one another, but ultimately against God.

Sometimes we misunderstand sin because we look around us and think, “Well at least I’m not as bad as that guy. I’ve never blown up 77 people in Norway. I’ve never created a giant Ponzi scheme to cost thousands of people their retirement. I’m not as bad as those people.” But we’re looking at the wrong standard. Sin is not measured according to how sinful I am relative to the person next to me, but relative to how holy God is, whom I have ultimately offended. As an old Puritan prayer expresses: “Let me never forget that the heinousness of sin lies not so much in the nature of the sin committed, as in the greatness of the Person sinned against.”<sup>1</sup> Sin, in its essence, is rebellion against a holy God—against his person and his throne. And as a holy and righteous God—a God who is too perfect to let sin into his presence, and who is committed to doing what is right and making right what is wrong, God our Creator and King has to punish sin. Sin is evil; it’s wicked and rebellious, and it deserves just punishment. As Romans 6:23 states so simply: “the wages of sin is death.”

So what then is **forgiveness**? Forgiveness is when the debt of our sin against God is cancelled. Think of a bank ledger. When you take out a loan from the bank, or just buy something with a credit card, you have a debt. Forgiveness is when the banker picks up the Sharpie and blots it

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 79.

out of the ledger—cancels the debt. Hits the delete button, and it's gone. You no longer owe that money—it is not counted against you. It has been covered by someone else. Now, forgiveness is costly. A bank can't just erase your debt without absorbing the liability themselves. In the same way, a righteous God can't just forgive our sins without somehow absorbing the cost. The debt still has to be paid by someone—and that's what the cross is about. Jesus paid the debt to wipe away our sin. Listen to Colossians 2:13-14: "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, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (ESV). So the debt of our sin was counted against Christ in our place, and he paid it in full on the cross. His righteous life was counted to us, our sin to him, such that when we believe in Jesus, personally, with all of our hope and faith in him, we are forgiven our sins and declared in right standing with God. And the point of Psalm 32 is that there is certain joyful satisfaction in a life that is marked by God's forgiveness of our sins.

But experiencing God's forgiveness and truly enjoying a life marked by his forgiveness requires that we deal honestly with our sin. As the last line of v. 2 says, "Blessed is the man . . . in whose spirit there is no deceit." We have to be honest about our sin. As the Puritan preacher and author Thomas Watson once said, "Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet."<sup>2</sup> If we're not honest about the reality and severity of our sin, then we will never come close to knowing what David is talking about in vv. 1-2. For the grace and forgiveness of God in Christ to be sweet, sin must be bitter to us. And that's what vv. 3-5 go on to explain.

There are a thousand reasons we try to make sin less than sinful. "When I kept silent." Shame causes us to hide it, for fear that someone might find out who we really are and what we're really like, and they might not want us any more. Guilt causes us to compensate for it, trying to make it up somehow or take a shortcut in dealing with it, not because we feel bad about what we've done and how it has hurt others, but because we don't like feeling guilty. Pleasure causes us to desire it; we like how it feels. Selfishness and fear cause us to redefine it, adjusting God's Word when I don't agree with what it says is wrong, or when people I want to please don't agree with what it says is wrong. And so in our fear of not getting what we want or in our fear of not being taken seriously in the culture around us, or of not being effective, or even the fear of being maligned for what others decry as an outdated value system, we adjust God's standards, we make sin less sinful, so that we Christians can fit better in the world. And as we flirt more and more with making sin less and less sinful, our pride causes us to revel in it, to find our identity in it, to celebrate it, with a high-handed fist of defiance against God. As Romans 1:32 describes men and women who have replaced God with idols in order to pursue sin in their lives, it says, "Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."

There are a thousand reasons to make sin less than sinful. No one is immune from this temptation, least of all me. In my shame, I don't want God to know how selfish I can be, playing the "long day at work" card when I get home because in my selfishness I don't want to clean up supper or change a diaper or rock a fussy baby. I would love to minimize how arrogant I really am, the fact that I want people to think much of me, or how controlling I can be, fearing that if I

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, repr. 1987), 63.

don't do something than it probably won't be done right. I don't like the fact that those things are true about me, and it's really tempting to pretend like they're not there, or hide them, or treat them as less sinful than they really are. But what I fail to realize is that in doing so, I also make the cross less beautiful than it is. When we minimize sin, we minimize the cross. We belittle the saving work of God on our behalf and the glorious scope of his kindness and grace shown to us in sending his eternal Son to take our place and receive the punishment for sin that we deserved. Listen to what the great British preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, says here:

Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Savior. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed.<sup>3</sup>

Being honest with our sin opens our eyes to the magnitude of God's love and mercy for us, and the unspeakable joy of having been forgiven. Minimizing sin not only belittles the cross, it robs us of true joy.

Somehow we think that if we can hide or ignore or suppress the truth of our sin, then we'll finally get what we want out of life—meaning, significance, pleasure, and joy. Yet Psalm 32 shows us that the exact opposite is true: when we minimize our sin, we choose misery over the joy of God's forgiveness. Verse 3: "For when I kept silent [about my sin], my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long." Why? Verse 4: "For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer."

Hidden sin festers. It eats away at our lives and relationships, it eats away at our souls, because it eats away at our relationship with God. It's miserable, because it exacerbates the fact that the most important thing about what it means to be a human is completely out of whack—it distances us from God. And what makes it even more miserable, is the fact that God loves his people too much to let them rest comfortably in their sin. The reason David's hidden sin ate away at his life in v. 3 was because God's hand of conviction was heavy upon him. God in his sovereign mercy was not willing to give David over to his sins, so he made life miserable for him until, v. 5, he confessed and rediscovered the joy of forgiveness.

Sometimes, sadly, that's what it takes for God's people. To be brought so low that there is nowhere else to go but to turn back to God. And it's his mercy that makes our lives miserable like this. O that we would want to be miserable for a few days or even years because of our sin, rather than to face the misery of eternity in hell. It is God's mercy that draws us back to him. And we have the confidence that if we belong to God, he will be faithful to bring us back. Our sovereign God does not let his chosen, blood-bought people wander over the edge—his love will not let us go. So when we hit bottom, there's only one place to turn: back to God in confession of our sins.

That's where David went in v. 5: "Then 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." David confessed his sin—that means, he verbalized what he had done wrong to God in

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, cited in Arnold A. Dallimore, *Spurgeon, A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 14.

prayer. Confessing isn't just feeling sorry about something secretly, or having regrets. It's acknowledging to God what you have done wrong specifically, and seeking his forgiveness. As 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." And if our sin involves another, and not just God, then confession also involves going to the person you've wronged and verbally acknowledging what you've done to them, and asking for their forgiveness. Confession takes sin out of the dark and brings it into the light, where it can be dealt with. Proverbs 28:13 says, "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy." And here in Psalm 32, when David confessed his sins to God, he found mercy and forgiveness.

Now, I want to clarify a couple of things. First, Jesus is our Great High Priest (cf. Hebrews). Because of Jesus, and his blood, all God's people are invited to come directly into God's presence in confession. In the New Testament, there is no need for a human intermediary in confessing sin to God. Some traditions teach this; it does not come from the Bible. Part of the message of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus is that priest—if we have him, we have access to God (Heb. 7-10; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5).

Second, our confession opens the door to receive and enjoy God's forgiveness; it is not the basis for our forgiveness. Confession is not some magic ritual, or even less some good work we do to make it up to God. Rather, the basis of our forgiveness is the grace of God in Christ. Now, *grace* is another one of those words we need to define carefully. Simply put, grace means being given something wonderful when we deserve something terrible. So, being forgiven when we deserve to be punished. That's grace. God's grace is the ultimate basis for our forgiveness by God—even for David's sin here, a thousand years before Jesus. In Romans 3, the apostle Paul explains how:

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—[sins like David's]; he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:23-26)

It is through the blood sacrifice of Jesus that God has dealt decisively with our sin, covering over them, atoning for them, blotting them out, canceling the debt, such that we receive and enjoy his forgiveness by faith, not by works, not even on the basis of confession. This is part of Paul's point when he quotes Psalm 32 in the next chapter of Romans:

Romans 4:5: And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his *faith* is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." (Romans 4:5-8, ESV)

In Christ we have forgiveness of sins through faith; we are blessed in the fullest sense of the term. Sin really is that sinful—we don't have to minimize it. Because grace really is that sufficient, to deal with our sin and bring the forgiveness of God when we turn to him in faith. Jesus' blood really was enough.

So how do we respond to God? How do we respond to the fact that a full and meaningful life is one marked by God's forgiveness? This psalm concludes by highlighting three appropriate responses:

First, **seek God immediately**. Verses 6-7: "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. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance." When God's hand of conviction is heavy upon you, and you know that the direction you're heading only leads to death, do not delay in turning and confessing to God, in turning away from that sin and clinging freshly to Jesus. Do not presume that you have more time. None of us is guaranteed another day, let alone another hour. Seek God now at a time when he can be found. He is a hiding place and refuge from our sin. But when the rush of waters comes, the flood of God's judgment, it will be too late. Seek God immediately.

Second, **listen to God humbly**. Verses 8-9: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over 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." Whether the voice here in vv. 8-9 is the psalmist's or God's, there is a word of instruction for us: when it comes to obeying God, don't be like a horse or a mule that only responds to instruction with a bit or bridle in its mouth—constant provocation, or else it's constantly wandering away. Don't presume upon God's kindness, always pushing the envelope, seeing how far you can get with sin before it's too far, waiting for God to do something to shock you in to coming back. Don't respond to God in such a way that feeling his heavy hand of conviction on you becomes the norm for your life. Listen humbly to God. Recognize that he is God, and pray for the strength of his Spirit to treat him that way. Pray, that rather than sidling up to sin, seeing how close we can get, pray that God would help us to hate sin. To really see it as sinful and to hate it. When we have a problem hating sin, it's usually because we have a problem loving God. If we love him, we'll listen humbly to his instruction. We'll stay near to him as our protection. We'll cling to him in joyful satisfaction, having been forgiven in Christ. Listen to God humbly.

And finally, **rejoice in God boldly**. Verses 10-11: "Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!" Believe that God's steadfast love—his loyal love that will not let us go—believe that God's steadfast love is *for us* in Christ—for all who trust in the Lord. And rejoice. Sing to him in gratitude. Rejoice in the fact that God does not count our sin against us—we are set free, we have been cleansed, cleared of our offenses. Revel not in sin, but in the mercy of God. When sin is bitter, Christ is truly sweet. A life marked by God's forgiveness is a full and meaningful life this side of heaven. Celebrate God's grace boldly. And that's what we're going to do together as we come now to the Lord's Table.

### **The Lord's Table**

This meal is a celebration. It is a celebration of the very truth we have been exploring in Psalm 32—that joy and satisfaction in life require experiencing God's forgiveness, which he has lavished graciously upon all who trust in him through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The night before Jesus was betrayed, he sat down with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. Another meal of celebration of God's past deliverance of his people—from slavery in Egypt. But that act of deliverance was pointing forward to this one, where Jesus himself would become the Passover Lamb, whose body is broken for us, and whose blood is spilled that we might be cleansed and forgiven of all our sin. That's what the bread and the cup represent: the body and blood of Jesus, given for us to set us free.

This table invites us to rejoice that our sins have been dealt with—not by pretending that they aren't that bad, or minimizing them. No, it declares to us that sin is utterly sinful—so sinful that it cost the life of God's eternal Son to atone for it. And so it invites us to reflect on the sin in our lives. And I'm going to ask you in a moment to do so: to go before the Lord quietly to ask whether there is any hidden sin that you need to bring before him in confession and repentance. Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.

But the sweetness of this table is that our bitter sin has been dealt with. Sin is utterly sinful, but grace is absolutely sufficient. That is the hope we have in the cross. And so if you have genuinely placed your faith in Jesus, if he is all your hope—his life given for yours to forgive you of your sins—then I invite you to join us in this celebration this morning. Rejoice in Christ boldly. If you have not personally trusted Christ, or aren't sure what that means, then I ask you to let the elements pass this morning, and instead receive the person to whom they point—Jesus Christ, our Savior and King, who has dealt with your sins and offers true joy, peace, satisfaction, and rest to all who will trust in him.

And so as the elders and ushers come forward, I want to invite all of us to reflect prayerfully on Psalm 32—on the bitterness of sin and the sweetness of grace, as we prepare our hearts for this celebration.