

O N E

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## Becoming Right with God

### *Psalm 32*

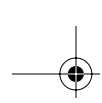
*D*o you remember the first time you realized you'd done something wrong? Maybe it was when you were reaching your hand into the proverbial cookie jar and suddenly it crashed to the floor. Now you had to face Mom. How did your agony get resolved? Or did it?

Recall now that you stand before the holy God. You know you've not always pleased him with your behavior. How do you feel? In Psalm 32 we come to see our situation in bold relief and understand its impact on our soul. Still, if we let this psalm sink into our soul, not only will our relationship to God be restored, but we will be learning to pray with a community of saints that stretches back to ancient Israel. And we will be learning how to pray through any psalm.

Psalm 32 has long been a part of my spiritual furniture. So let me introduce you to it in a way I hope will lead you into a constantly growing understanding, not just of this psalm but of almost every psalm you learn to pray.

The best way to approach any reading is simply to begin. In most cases, whether we are reading a sacred or a secular text, we don't need an introduction by an expert. After all, we have already chosen a particular psalm, poem, novel or essay. We have our reason for choosing it. So we just read.





INITIAL READING OF PSALM 32

*Psalm 32*

Of David. A Maskil.

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup>Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

<sup>3</sup>While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength dried up as by the heat of summer.

*Selah*

<sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

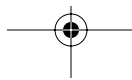
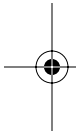
*Selah*

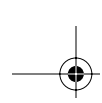
<sup>6</sup>Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.

<sup>7</sup>You are a hiding place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

*Selah*

<sup>8</sup>I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;





I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup>Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.

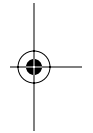
<sup>10</sup>Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

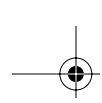
<sup>11</sup>Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

This first reading is just the beginning. Read the psalm again, this time more slowly. Then read it for a third time. Read it until the words seep easily into your conscious mind. With each reading, observe and absorb the words and sentences, the images and ideas. Do this with a completely open mind, without prejudging what it is the psalmist is concerned for.

You will find yourself resonating with some parts of the psalm more than others. Certain words or pictures will pop into your mind. Some will be pleasant, some painful, some enticing you to settle into the reading with more attention, some causing you to hold back, even to resist what seem to be the implications for your own life. But neither draw conclusions nor harbor reservations. Let the words, sentences and ideas work on you.

It is important not to analyze the text too soon, not to reach a settled judgment about what it is saying, especially what it is saying to you. There will be plenty of time for that later. In these initial readings, let down your defenses and let the psalm work on you. Let it paint its holy picture on your soul. You are listening to the voice of God through the voice of the psalmist. You can trust this voice. So you mustn't presume to judge even what that voice is saying, especially what it is saying to you. You must first *hear* the voice, and that requires attention, an intentional leaning of the soul toward





God. At the beginning, this sort of reading is a discipline—a spiritual discipline—requiring effort. With repeated practice over weeks and months, this way of reading and hearing will become second nature.

### GETTING AT THE MEANING OF PSALM 32

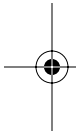
Such initial readings are the foundation for any really fruitful understanding of a psalm—or for that matter any poetry or highly intense form of writing. They help prevent our reading into the text (what the scholars call *isogesis*) rather than reading out from it (*exegesis*). Only the latter will assure our grasping what God is saying to us through the words of the ancient writers.

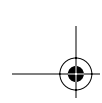
Still, we should not think we have read well if we do not go deeper. We need to move on from a basic absorption of the text to a fuller understanding by the mind and a richer experience in the emotions. Several steps are involved. They do not need to be taken in any particular order; in fact, in the final analysis they merge as the mind and emotions grasp the results of these steps in one single act of apprehension. We then can recognize, and talk about, the impact of Psalm 32 on our spiritual life as a unitary experience. In other words, to get at the meaning of the psalm, we take it apart, then put it back together. Or, better, God leads us to see the parts so clearly that we see the whole more fully.

So what are the parts we need to examine? They include the *rational structure*, the *emotional structure*, the *meanings* of the individual words and the implicit *context* of the psalm. Let's take up each of these in turn.

#### *The Meaning of the Words*

This is an easy psalm to understand. We scarcely need the comments of scholars, important as they are for understanding many biblical texts. Except for two words we will look at shortly, there are no odd words or





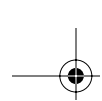
names of obscure places or people. The key words give name to basic ideas: our problems with *transgression, sin, iniquity, deceit, guilt*, and the solutions of *confession, forgiveness, deliverance*.

But there are some arresting personal images—our body *wasting away*, God's *heavy hand* on us, our strength being *dried up by the heat of summer*. There's also a vivid image of nature in turmoil—the *rush of mighty waters*. To modern readers, this picture of our human plight is almost comic, but we are likely to find it apt nonetheless. We are *horses* and *mules* who have to be *bridled* lest we charge off to our own destruction.

Only two words invite a comment from scholars. The first is *Selah*. That's a transliteration from Hebrew, not a translation. Though it appears seventy-one times in Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, no one has figured out exactly what it means. As the *New Bible Dictionary* says, scholars generally hold that it is a musical or liturgical sign “whose precise import is not known.” Its presence gives evidence that this particular psalm was set to music or was part of a liturgy. Since there is no way to judge its significance, we can ignore its presence in the poem.

The second word is the first one in the poem: *happy*. Translators have not quite resolved whether the Hebrew word should be translated *happy* or *blessed*. *Blessed* seems too formal, too religious, too distant from our experience. On the other hand, *happy* seems too common, signaling an emotion that is too ordinary. When God reaches down with his marvelous forgiving grace, his absolutely unmerited favor toward us, we are surely more than merely *happy*. We are something else too. We have been endowed with something touching the divine. We have been *blessed*. Another way to see the difference is to see the contrasts to both. *Happy* contrasts with *sad*, while *blessed* contrasts with *cursed*. Surely it is better to be *blessed* than to only be *happy*. It is this more profound state of being that is being signaled. So let's stick with *blessed*.





### ***Overall Rational Structure***

The rational structure of a psalm or poem is the structure or flow of its main ideas. In the case of Psalm 32, this structure is easy to discern. There is a new set of ideas in each set of verses.

### **The happy state of those who are forgiven**

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup>Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

### **The painful state of those who are unforgiven**

<sup>3</sup>While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength dried up as by the heat of summer.

*Selab*

### **Confession and its results**

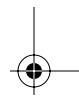
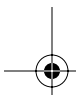
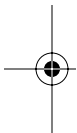
<sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

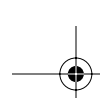
*Selab*

### **God's protection of his people**

<sup>6</sup>Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.

<sup>7</sup>You are a hiding place for me;





you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

*Selah*

**God's word to his people**

<sup>8</sup>I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup>Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.

**Concluding moral and sustaining counsel**

<sup>10</sup>Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

<sup>11</sup>Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

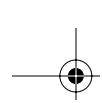
Psalm 32 has a clear progression of ideas. It begins with the declaration of how things are in God's world—the happiness of the forgiven and unhappiness of the unforgiven—and proceeds to the solution for the unforgiven and on through an affirmation of the protection of God, his counsel to all people and a concluding moral.

***Emotional Structure***

Psalm 32 also has an emotional structure. It begins in happiness and ends in joy, but in between there is profound agony. Notice the progress:

- happiness (vv. 1-2)
- agony (vv. 3-4)
- a yielding spirit (v. 5)
- a turn to thankful, expectant prayer (v. 6)





- a slowly returning sense of the peace of God's deliverance (v. 7)
- a reflective acceptance of God's counsel (vv. 8-9)
- a survey of the course of emotions (v. 10)
- a joyful ending shout (vv. 10-11)

The emotions themselves, however, do not drive the psalm. They follow the lead of the ideas. Because of the consequences of sin, we groan; because of the consequences of forgiveness, we find comfort, peace and joy.

Through this psalm we are learning about prayer—both the conditions that should prompt prayer and the prayer that should be prompted. Sin leads to torment; confession leads to deliverance. The equation is simple, and the implication for us is clear. We know that we are among the sinners; we therefore need to confess.

#### THE IMPLICIT CONTEXT OF THE PSALM

The psalm is a straightforward poem, a Hebrew hymn, used perhaps in some worship ceremonies. The presence of *Selah* marking the ends of some verses suggests such communal use. But unlike Psalm 51, which is prefaced by a historical note relating it to King David and his affair with Bathsheba, Psalm 32 does not contain any obvious allusions to specific sinners or their sins. It is in this sense a generic psalm, readily adaptable to current use by both individuals and communities. After all, we all sin and we all need to confess. The whole pattern of the psalm is universally human.

#### PRAYING PSALM 32

Most knowledge worth knowing involves doing. This is as true in the spiritual life as it is in swimming, painting or writing a novel. One cannot become a nuclear physicist by merely reading physics texts. One must read the books, to be sure, but then one must become attached to a mentor, enter a laboratory and begin slowly to act like a physicist.





Yes, we may have slowly absorbed Psalm 32, understood its words and observed its rational and emotional structure. But when we pray in its light, we come to know by doing. We put ourselves in the way of God's doing for us what he has done for the psalmist and countless others over the past several millennia.

What follows here, then, is a guide to such a prayer.

Read through the entire psalm again. Then with eyes open, read and pray section by section.

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup>Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Respond: *O Lord, I know in my mind that this is true. Write this truth on my heart. Burn it on my soul.* Add your own reflections on these two verses.

<sup>3</sup>While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

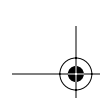
<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength dried up as by the heat of summer.

*Selab*

Respond: *Lord, I hear the psalmist proclaim the agony of his soul. I would not have thought to put it in these words, but I know his situation well. I too have felt the effect of my guilt.* In your own words, describe to God how you have felt under his watchful eye.

<sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" . . .





Respond: *I have (often) made confession of my sins. But I do so now again, not just the ones I know but the faults that I have bidden and blocked from consciousness. You know my sins—all of them—and I do not want to try any longer to hide them from myself. The knowledge of them may crush me, and I may groan as I recall them, but I want to put before you a slate of sins that you can forgive and erase without trace. Bring them now to mind. Begin to place before God, first, all those sins you easily remember and, second, those he brings to mind now.*

Pause in inner silence for five to ten minutes. Let what you have confessed settle down. Let your emotions (whatever they now are) relax. Then continue to read:

. . . And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Respond: *Yes, as Jesus said on the cross, it is finished—done, over. You have forgiven me. Pause in silence for a time. Do you feel the peace of God flow through you? Are you amazed that God forgives? Then respond: Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! . . . Rest for some moments in his acceptance. Then read:*

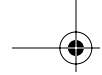
<sup>6</sup>Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.

<sup>7</sup>You are a hiding place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

*Selah*

Respond: *These words, Lord, are my words too. They are not just my words; they are and will be a message I will give to my Christian friends. You have preserved me, delivered me. You have also delivered them. I will encourage my community of faith, (name of your community here), to pray in times of distress, especially the distress caused by sin.*





*You are my hiding place. You shield me from the trouble of temptation. When I remember your presence and focus on your care for me, I can stand firm in your way.*

*I am curious about the glad cries of deliverance that surround the psalmist. Where do they come from? Are they the voices of your angels? I can almost hear them, rejoicing for a sinner's repenting. So I too rejoice, and I thank you! Thank you! Thank you!*

Then read:

<sup>8</sup>I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup>Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.

*Who speaks these lines? Is it the psalmist? Or is it you, Lord? I think it's your voice the psalmist is transmitting here. I know your eye is upon me. Not only do you know what I do right and wrong, but you know me, for your eye is on me. I can trust you.*

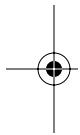
*Your counsel is certainly sound. I am indeed much too much like an unruly horse, chafing at the bit, straining against the bridle, resisting the reins. May I yield to your direction!*

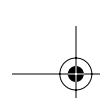
Keep inner silence now. Reflect on those things God is putting on your mind, things that you should do or stop doing, attitudes you should cultivate or lay aside. In your inner soul, yield to his direction. Then read:

<sup>10</sup>Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

<sup>11</sup>Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Respond: *Thank you, Lord, for pointing out your place in my life as my Creator, my Redeemer, the lover of my soul, the lover of all of me. Shout it out: Praise God! Hallelujah!*





### SOME FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Praying Psalm 32, no matter how intently we have done so, does not end our need for confession. We may expect to find ourselves gradually—sometimes suddenly—getting rid of some of our sinful tendencies and behavior. We can look forward to substantial improvement, but not perfection, at least not on this side of glory, until God completely purifies our soul.

An expression I heard years ago sums it up. We are saved, being saved and yet to be saved. That is, we are saved from the penalty of sin (utter separation from God forever); we are being saved from the power of sin (usually gradually); we are yet to be saved from the presence of sin. In the middle time of being saved from the power of sin, we will find ourselves yielding to temptation and will feel frustrated because of that. But if we continue to return to God, pray for his forgiveness and discipline ourselves, we will find a growing satisfaction in our relationship with God, a growing joy of life in his presence and a growing hope of the coming of the kingdom of God—God's entire reign over all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small.

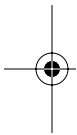
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

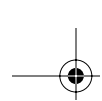
Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases these lines in *The Message*:

Celebrate Yahweh!  
Sing together—everyone!  
All you honest hearts, raise the roof!

### LEARNING TO PRAY THROUGH THE PSALMS IN COMMUNITY

Each of the psalms presented in this book can be prayed in community





as well as by individuals. In fact, some if not all of them were written for communal use in various ceremonies in Hebrew communities. Even those that seem to us late Western-minded people to be solely individual may have been intended for the Hebrew people as a whole, the “I” being a stand-in for Israel as a nation.

Eugene Peterson puts great emphasis on prayer as a communal activity:

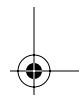
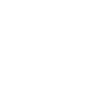
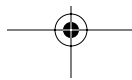
The assumption that prayer is what we do when we are alone—the solitary soul before God—is an egregious, and distressingly persistent, error. We imagine a lonely shepherd on the hills composing lyrics to the glory of God. We imagine a beleaguered soul sinking in a swamp of trouble calling for help. But our imaginations betray us. We are a part of something before we are anything, and never more so than when we pray. Prayer begins in community.

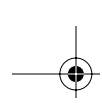
This does not mean that we should not pray alone. Jesus himself often went off by himself, away from his disciples, and prayed. But it does mean that all of our private, lonely prayers are to be seen as linked with those of our community. Even alone we are communal, and never more so than when we are praying the psalms, for then we are joining the community of an ancient king who himself was a member of the community of the King.

It makes no difference which of the psalms might be the product of an individual psalmist such as David. All of them were set in the context of a community. They are as relevant for twenty-first-century Christians as for the ancient Hebrew nation. They fit our needs as our own answering speech. We can see how this is so with Psalm 32.

#### THE LEADER

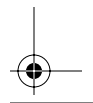
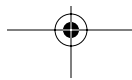
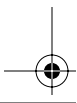
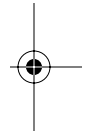
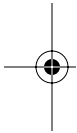
For a psalm to be prayed in community, a leader will be necessary. The best leaders will be those who have already studied the psalm and have

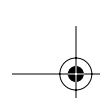




prayed it for themselves. The deeper the leader's grasp of the psalm, the wiser will be the leadership, for some on-the-spot adaptation will probably be necessary to fit the circumstance.

The following guide assumes familiarity with the present chapter. First comes a small group study guide designed to be used by the leader, followed by a guided prayer in which each member is invited to pray silently and occasionally aloud together with specific words.





## Small Group Study of Psalm 32

The following comments are directed to the leader.

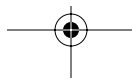
### *Introduction*

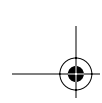
Introduce the group to the concept of praying through the psalms by briefly summarizing your own experience of praying Psalm 32. Don't mention any of the details of the psalm itself, its content or its ultimate aim. Just describe the general idea. Then lead the group into the psalm by asking the following questions.

### *Group Questions*

1. Have one person read Psalm 32 in its entirety at an ordinary pace.
2. Have another person read it very slowly, with a pause after each verse.
3. A third reading would be appropriate—but not if it looks as if people in the group are getting restless.
4. What is the main topic of the psalm?
5. Summarize the flow of ideas in the psalm. (If this is found difficult, refer to the section on rational structure earlier in this chapter.) Then focus on the details by asking the following questions.
6. Who is happy? Who is unhappy? Why? (See vv. 1-4.)

(The following questions could prove awkward, embarrassing or too personal for some in the group to answer. So stress that you and the group do not have any interest—morbid or otherwise—in learning what sins are being recalled. This study is not designed to create a “confessional” in which you as leader or the group as a community provide forgiveness or absolution of guilt. Only God can forgive sins against God or





even sins against others, for these sins are also sins against God. You are trying to get each person to focus on his or her own past, its troubles and its violations of God's design for us.)

7. Drawing on your own experience of guilt over sin, do you find the imagery too extreme or not extreme enough? Explain.
8. How does verse 5 reflect your experience? (Some may wish to recount their conversion experience. If they do, encourage them to keep it short. Then ask them if they have ever felt a need for confession of new sins.)
9. What encouragement do verses 6-7 give those who repent?

What attitude does heaven itself have toward the repentance of sinners? (You could refer to Luke 15:7.)

10. Look at how God instructs his children in verses 8-9. What is your reaction to being likened to a horse or mule?

What images reflect your own experience of rebellion against God?

11. Trace the emotional flow in the psalm from happiness to joy. (See earlier in this chapter, pp. 23-24, if help is needed for this.)
12. What should be our response to God's forgiveness and our restoration to peace with him (v. 11)?

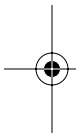
Does this response seem reasonable or appropriate to you?

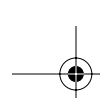
#### DIRECTED PRAYER

The following can act as a script for the directed prayer.

*Leader:* Let us pray through Psalm 32. (You as leader read the psalm and direct the group.)

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,





whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup>Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

*Leader:* Reflect silently on what is required for happiness before God.

(Pause.)

<sup>3</sup>While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength dried up as by the heat of summer.

*Selab*

*Leader:* Remember your experience with God as you realized the depths of  
your sins and your strong propensity for continuing in them.

(Pause.)

<sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" . . .

*Selab*

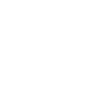
*Leader:* Now silently confess those sins which have sprung to mind, espe-  
cially those that are the most troublesome (pause),  
those you keep committing though you know you should not (pause),  
those that are recent and not really fully acknowledged (longer pause).

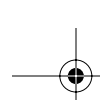
. . . And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Let the fact of God's forgiveness sink deep in your consciousness.

(Pause.)

<sup>6</sup>Therefore let all who are faithful





offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.

<sup>7</sup>You are a hiding place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

*Selab*

*Leader:* I invite several of you to pray aloud for strength to live lives worthy of God's call to you.

(Pause. You may wish to model such a prayer in a *few* words. This time of public prayer is for the group members to solidify their commitment.)

<sup>8</sup>I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup>Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.

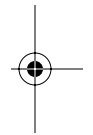
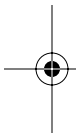
*Leader:* Thank God for his counsel, for reminding you of what you probably already know. And pray silently for the spiritual stamina to sustain your side of your relationship with God.

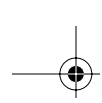
(Pause.)

<sup>10</sup>Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

<sup>11</sup>Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

(Sing together a hymn or a praise song—one that will be known by most of the group.)





*Leader:* (as a closing to your time together) And all the people said:

*Group members:* Amen!

**PARTING WORDS**

There is no way to tell what the experience of each of the participants will have been at the end of such a session. Invite participants to talk with each other about some of what they have learned and felt—about God, themselves, prayer, the psalm itself.

