

## **“Happy Are Those”**

March 6, 2022

*Selah: Life in a Minor Key series*

I remember a time in my childhood when I was trying to get by doing less of a job than I was supposed to – trying to rush through it to get it done quickly so I could do what I wanted to do. I knew it wasn't the right thing to do, but I did it anyway. I wanted my way and my time, and I didn't think about the effects of my actions. It didn't feel right, and there was some strain and struggle in lying, trying to cover up my less-than-stellar job. My plan went on for a while, but eventually, I was found out – thankfully! That feeling of disappointing people I loved was difficult, and the punishment wasn't fun either, but it was almost a relief - like setting down that heavy bottle of water!

Have you ever felt the pressure, strain, and struggle of holding in something that needed to be shared - those actions and inactions that weigh us down? Maybe it kept you awake at night, made you sick to your stomach, or took up a lot of your time and energy. I don't mean to say that we go and confess our deepest darkest sin to the whole world, but have you ever felt that weight on you – knowing that you needed to “come clean” from the junk you carried? Some of us carry that crushing weight for years upon years, and finally we confess. And even though it's painful when the truth comes out, there's almost a blessing of relief.

That's what we hear in Psalm 32 – the reflection of one person's experience of carrying the strain of sin, feeling God's heavy hand that moves us toward freedom from guilt and sin, finally confessing sin, and feeling great relief. We hear the move from being hard-hearted in holding onto our stuff to being genuine and honest in confession. And then we hear God's response to our confession – to protect and give wisdom and guidance. Some scholars still say this is King David's reaction to the guilt of his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba – maybe or maybe not. Whatever it is, it's raw and real.

So maybe a better way to start isn't “happy are those” but “relieved are those whose sin is forgiven.” Remember that “happy” and “blessed” are used in similar ways in Scripture – not “happiness” as a temporary condition, but a state of being in right relationship with God and understanding our need for God's forgiveness.

But we have to admit that “happiness” on our terms is what we want. We want it for ourselves, for our children and family, even for our country. And so much of what makes for happiness according to us is wrapped up in what we can get.

We're constantly bombarded with the promise that more equals happiness. But it's a false bill of goods if we pay attention to this psalm. Happiness isn't in what we can get or gain or stockpile; happiness is claiming God's love and grace in spite of our struggle with sin.

That's where we start in Lent – this acknowledgement that I need God. Confession is for us and does us good - “confession is good for the soul.” But it's also a reflection of our faith in God. We confess our sins to God – knowing that God is faithful. Confession itself is an act of faith and trust that God cares, forgives, and restores. And the psalmist goes deep.

When we gathered on Wednesday night, we were marked with ashes. It's always a holy and heavy moment for me. It's so honest to come together and say, “Yes, we're mortal and yet beloved. We need God's grace. We can't live without it, and we don't die without it either.”

But implicit in Ash Wednesday and all of this Lent-y stuff is the need for confession of sin. And if we really want to be honest, we don't do confession very well. We don't get up in the morning and think about what we need to confess. Many of us may not have a regular practice of asking God for forgiveness – for what we've done and what we've left undone.

Perhaps we hope that time passing will erase our guilt. Or we bank on forgetting to make it go away. Or maybe we're just stubborn enough and in denial enough to admit that we need God to forgive us. We're good with grace, but we don't backtrack and claim the reason why we need grace. We need it because we sin, and forgiveness is possible, even in our brokenness. We can't fully receive grace if we don't acknowledge sin.

And I wonder if that's why the word *selah* appears so many times in this psalm. If we really want to let all of this soak in, we need to practice the pause – stop and listen, consider what's being said and why it's important.

(SLIDE) image of a musical rest

I wonder if people in ancient days had as much trouble owning up to both their personal sin and their corporate sin as we do. Today we hear a personal confession, but organizations would do well to confess sin rather than to cover it up and do more damage - businesses, churches, and more. I wonder if our faith ancestors thought of themselves as sinners who needed God's grace.

I wonder if they were as quick to rationalize (at least I'm not as bad as...), blame someone else (it's not really my fault), shirk responsibility (it's not a big deal),

and try to ignore it as we often do. If Scripture tells us anything, with the constant call to repent and turn to God, I think they struggled just like we do. And so, it goes...

When was the last time we really took a good long look at ourselves and opened up enough to examine *us*? Not my family member who has problems or my friend who needs help or my neighbor whose many faults I can list – but myself. Now you might think – this is kind of a downer. I didn't come here for this. I came here to feel good. I don't want to talk about confession or sin.

Certainly, we can celebrate our belovedness, and we should. But if we desire deeper relationship with God and each other, we have to be willing to address sin, confess sin, and repent from sin – turn around and walk with God. Only then can we truly accept God's grace and move forward depending on God to lead us and keep on transforming us.

Lent is soul-searching time that calls to mind all that God can do in forty days – or even forty years. God is not playing and can make something beautiful out of this season, but it matters that we invest in it, too. Our attention to spiritual disciplines like worship, study, prayer, service, and fasting (if we can) help us to focus. They bring us clarity about our need for God, and we can celebrate that Jesus is our Savior – the One who saves us from sin and saves us for new life.

The psalmist offers us the whole experience, which is why scholars call this a wisdom psalm – a song that speaks to us and speaks for us. Psalms are the songbook of the Bible – inspiring us to pray, reflect, and be more honest with ourselves and with God. Psalms offer the range of emotions – from highest elation to the depths of despair to the call for revenge to the need for God's loving care. Those who sing psalms cry out to God for help and praise God in the midst of challenges.

In Psalm 32, we hear the transformation that happens in one who was trying to cover up his sin to his peaceful rest in God who is his hiding place and cover. When we uncover our sin and confess it to God, we experience the fullness of God's grace in Christ covering us. David isn't wallowing in guilt, but celebrating God's grace. There's a difference. We claim faith that God forgives, loves, and cares.

We hear the hope and promise of forgiveness, reconciliation, cleansing, redemption, and new life because God is faithful and offers us grace. The psalmist tells us the story of that possibility because it's real for them! And we hear that same promise in the songs we sing - *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.* During our worship in Lent, we'll use some spirituals from the African American tradition to guide us. Today we'll sing...

(SLIDE) *There is a Balm in Gilead* refrain  
*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;*  
*There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

The promise of wholeness and healing is real. Psalm 32 offers us hope and encouragement even as we enter this Lenten journey getting real with ourselves and with God about our need for Jesus. This is not an exercise in condemnation, but a reminder of the gift that we receive. God is always working for reconciliation and always willing to forgive. Still, we have to give ourselves to the hard work – keeping going even when it feels like we’ve taken a step backward – because it will happen.

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. writes that our honest confession – even when it’s painful - is as necessary as taking out the garbage. He says, “The problem is that sin is like garbage. You don’t want to let it build up. Confessing sin is like taking out the garbage. You want to do it regularly because taking out the garbage is an extremely healthy thing to do.”

Maybe confession can be a holy habit that we begin today – right now. And we can’t forget that when we confess our sins, we always hear words of assurance of forgiveness. We’re not left hanging. That assurance is a gift of God, and it’s so much more meaningful when we don’t take it for granted. As forgiven people, we can witness to God’s grace – not as a self-righteous exercise, but as a way to remind ourselves of that need for God that never ends.

So, what will you do with this time? What will we do with this time? I’d invite us today to take the step of confessing what it is that’s weighing you down, crushing your spirit, or keeping you from truly knowing God’s love for you.

As we prepare to come to the table to receive a sign of grace in a simple meal, we confess our sins and hear the assurance of God’s love. Maybe today you take time to pray here or at your seat. If you’re joining us online, pray where you are. Write your confession if that’s helpful. Take some time to be in the same spirit of the one who sings this psalm - know the blessing and relief.

But know that in all of it, there’s encouragement and hope because God is faithful to forgive. Happy are those whose sin is forgiven – that’s you, me, and all who call on Jesus, who came to save us from sin and save us for new life.

Let us pray...