

Psalm 32

The Happiness of the Forgiven Person

1. Introduction

The title of the Psalm is “A maskil of David”. The word “maskil” derives from the verb “sākal” which denotes using and improving one’s intelligence and understanding. Thus a “maskil” is a poem/song which exhibits and gives insight.

The “wisdom” motif of Psalm 32 is strengthened by the opening double affirmation of vv. 1 and 2, “O the happiness of!”, usually (mis)translated “Blessed!”

Interestingly the verb “sākal” is used in Psalm 2:10, “Therefore, O kings, *be wise*; be warned, O rulers of the earth.” This wisdom involves submission to the LORD’s Messiah, v. 11. Then in verse 12 the psalm affirms “O the happiness of all who take refuge in him” (the Son/Messiah). It appears that the first “maskil” in the Psalter is looking back at Psalm 2. In Psalm 32 David is in the position of one of the rebellious kings who has been rebuked – but he has accepted the rebuke and bowed before the King, and is thus pronounced “happy”.

What was the rebellion for which David had to be rebuked? Psalm 32 does not tell us, beyond indicating that it was a sin which David, for an unspecified period of time, did not confess or repent of. The obvious “candidate” for this sin is his adultery with Bathsheba, compounded by his attempt to deceive Uriah her husband, compounded by his instructing Joab to have Uriah killed in battle.

2. Structure

The psalm has a simple ABBA structure. The outer “wrapper” (vv. 1-2 and 9-10) is wisdom. Inside this wrapper, David testifies to his own experience of sin and forgiveness (vv. 3-5), and applies the lesson to the godly (vv. 6-8). The psalm concludes with a call to praise (v. 11).

A¹ (vv. 1-2) *Wisdom: the happiness of forgiveness*

B¹ (vv. 3-5) *Personal testimony of forgiveness*

B² (vv. 6-7) *Application of personal testimony: let the godly seek refuge in God*

A² (vv. 8-10) *Wisdom: a promise of instruction, teaching, counsel*

(v. 11) *Concluding praise*

Use of repeated words integrate the two halves of the psalm (A¹B¹ and B²A²). For example, the triad of transgression, sin and iniquity in A¹ (vv. 1-2) reappears in B¹ (v. 5); the word “cover” is in v. 1 (positive) and v. 5 (negative). More subtly, the words “godly”, “great” and “surround” in B² (vv. 6-7) are also used in A² (v. 10) where they give us the words “steadfast love”, “many” and “surrounds”.

The use of triads characterizes the psalm, e.g. iniquity, transgression and sin (vv. 1-2); forgiven, covered, not counted (vv. 1-2); acknowledged, not covered, confessed (v. 5); instruct, teach, counsel (v. 8); be glad, rejoice, shout (v. 11). Compare this with the triplication of *Selah* at the end of vv. 4, 5, 7.

3. Comments

(a) *The happiness of forgiveness* (vv. 1-2)

Until sin is forgiven there can be no true “happiness”. “Happiness” in the Bible means “experiencing life optimally, as the Creator intended” (Bruce Waltke), i.e. achieving our chief end. Sin *must* be forgiven – else life is crippled by failure and disappointment.

Transgression (overstepping), sin (falling short), and iniquity (distortion) – what is involved in disobedience – the triad first appears in Exodus 34:7, also in the context of forgiveness.

The forgiveness offered is complete – sin is carried away (e.g. by the scapegoat), covered over (like clothing nakedness), not considered (a debt wiped out).

(b) *Personal testimony of forgiveness* (vv. 3-5)

The contrast in Ps. 1 is between the “happiness” the righteous and the perishing of the wicked – the contrast in Ps. 32 is between the misery of the unrepentant sinner and the “happiness” of the sinner who repents and is forgiven.

Refusing to confess results in spiritual atrophy (vv. 3a, 4b) and agony of conscience (vv. 3b, 4a). Complete and unreserved confession (“acknowledged... did not cover... confess”, v. 5) leads immediately to relief.

(c) *Application of personal testimony* (vv. 6-7)

The application to the “godly” (literally, the *Hasidim*, those loyal to their covenant Lord) is that they should take refuge in God. This is a backward glance at Ps. 2:12 where rebellious kings and judges are promised “Oh the happiness of all who take refuge in him [the Messianic king/Son]”. David, the rebellious king, has done exactly that and found the promise to be true – it will be true for you too, he avers.

(d) *A promise of instruction, teaching, counsel* (vv. 8-10)

The promise of instruction in *the way* is reminiscent of Psalm 1.

We are naïve if we think that walking in the way of the righteous is something we can do of ourselves. In fact, such a presumption is just another example of sinful autonomy, v. 9! Instead we need God’s instruction (the word “I will instruct” is a verb form of the noun “maskil” in the title of the psalm) and his teaching (the word “I will teach” is a verb form of the noun “torah” in Psalm 1:2). In other words, we need God to write his law upon our hearts – we need the new covenant.

Verse 10 says something similar to Psalm 1:6 – but now it is clear that the affirmation of Psalm 1 must be understood in the context of confession and forgiveness – Psalm 1 must be read in the light of Psalm 2, especially 2:12.

(e) *Concluding praise* (v. 11)

The joy of God’s forgiven people is consummate – gladness, rejoicing, shouting! Their joy is not in worldly bounty but in their Saviour and their Lord (*cf.* Ps. 4:6-7).