

## Prayer

Gracious Lord, so touch us with the Spirit of Life that we might fulfil the purposes You have for us. Take away any tendencies we may have to focus our attention on ourselves or on others; and may our attention be always drawn towards You so that we might see all people and things in the light of You and Your love. We ask this through Jesus Christ. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly theme: Those who struggle with faith

Please pray today for those who struggle with faith because they have been inadequately taught about Jesus Christ. This can happen for many reasons; for example, poor preaching, or the overbearing influence of bad leaders. Pray for all who have experienced this, and ask the Lord to lead them to where they can hear the true Gospel and respond to it in the glory of Jesus.

## Meditation

As the keys on my keyboard convey what I type to the computer

So may all my deeds convey Your will and purposes, O Lord.

As the software on my computer allows me to perform specific tasks

So may I be available to You to do the work of Your Kingdom.

As the processor at the heart of my computer governs all the work done,

So may my faith direct what I do for You, by the power of Your Spirit.

As the ink in the printer cartridge is intricately directed onto paper;

So may my deeds and actions convey your instructions, O Lord.

As the miracle of radio waves connects my computer to the broadband internet;

So may I be connected to Your plans for my life, great and mighty God.

But I am not a machine; so when all the work is done,

I need to relax and spend some time with You, so I that can know your Love!

## Bible Study - Psalm 32:1-5

*Of David. A maskil.*

<sup>1</sup> *Blessed is he whose rebellion is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.*

<sup>2</sup> *Blessed are those whose sin the LORD  
does not hold against them  
and in whose spirit there is nothing  
deceitful.*

<sup>3</sup> *For when I kept silent, my bones wasted  
away  
through my continued moaning all the  
day.*

<sup>4</sup> *For Your hand was heavy upon me, day  
and night;  
my energy was exhausted as in the  
heat of summer.  
Selah*

<sup>5</sup> *Then I admitted my sin to You  
and did not hide my guilt.  
I said, 'I will confess my rebellion to the  
LORD'  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.  
Selah*

## Review

Psalm 32 is a powerful poem about sin and repentance, and the benefits of following the Lord's way of confessing sin and living in the light of His teaching. Even though it is a short psalm, it covers a number of important subjects, and for this reason, I have split it into two. Today we will study the first half (verses 1-5) which deals with the foremost subjects of sin and repentance, and tomorrow we will look at the second half (verses 6-11) which talks about the kind of life we can live once we have confessed our sins, together with the guidance and teaching of God this opens up for us. The whole psalm has the feel of praise to Almighty God; 'Blessed is he whose rebellion is forgiven, whose sin is covered.' (32:1). It is reported that St. Augustine had this psalm written on the wall opposite his bed towards the end of his life, for he

found it both a great personal comfort and a great challenge. It is the same for all of us who read it!

Much of the teaching within the Christian Church about sin, repentance and forgiveness comes from the New Testament and is based upon the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Some people therefore ask, how is it that the Old Testament can teach us about these subjects when they are at the heart of the Gospel of Salvation? The truth is that God consistently revealed the truth about human sin all the way through the Old Testament, and the detailed explanation of the nature of sin it contains is essential to our full understanding of the sin that Jesus has saved us from today through His forgiveness on the Cross. To be specific, Christian people too often use the word 'sin' with only a vague understanding that it means 'doing something wrong', when in reality, the human nature of sin is far more complex than that. The evils of pornography or genocide, for example, are of a different order than the things we manage to get wrong on a daily basis in our everyday lives.

Psalms 32 is a psalm which helps us 'unpack' the meaning of sin, by explaining both the nature of human sin and the way in which God responds to our confession of it. It is therefore of great help to anyone who wants to know the full power of what Jesus has done for us on the Cross. It is the second of the great 'Penitential' psalms in the Bible (6,32,38,51,102,130,143) and is very different from some of the others because of its emphasis on praising God for His acceptance of our repentance. It also presents something of a challenge, as there is a clear indication in verse 3 of a connection between illness and hiding one's sin from God. Verse 3 says 'when I kept silent, my bones wasted away'. We do not like to think that if someone is ill then we should immediately look for what they have done wrong to deserve this sickness. However, this is not what the psalm says, and the emphasis in the psalm is on the forgiving power and healing nature of God for all who confess their sins. It is not written to condemn people who are ill. This is clear in the opening verses we study today and also the final verse of the psalm; 'Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart'.

## Going Deeper

In the title of this psalm (its 'superscription') it is called a 'maskil', which is commonly reckoned to mean a 'teaching' psalm. In the first half of the psalm, we are taught about sin through the use of three different words in Hebrew. When we know what these mean, then we will understand the full extent of the power of God's forgiveness both in Old Testament times and in the New.

### ***How God deals with Sin***

If you read through our passage today in different versions of the Bible, you will discover that the word 'sin' is mentioned in several places (at least in verses 1,2 and 5) but that several other words are used for things that we might otherwise call 'sins'; such as 'rebellion' in my translation of verse 1 (which is translated as 'transgression' or 'offence' in many other versions). In addition, you will also spot the word 'guilt' in verse 5, which ties in with the general sense of the middle verses 3 and 4 which describe the experience of one who has not confessed their sins to God.

There are three different and important words for sin in this passage of Scripture, and they are to be found throughout the Old Testament. Each of them tells us something very important about the nature of sin, and if we can learn them and come to understand what they mean, then we will find our understanding of the whole subject of sin and salvation is greatly enhanced.

The first word is the one I have translated 'rebellion' in verse 1 and is rendered 'transgression' in the NIV. It comes from the word 'pashah' in Hebrew, and it means the evil state of rebellion against God, and happens when someone knows about God and His ways, but rejects them, even though they know them to be good and right. The only way that such sin can be dealt with by God, is for that sin to be brought into the open and confessed. This is exactly what is meant by verse 5 which says 'I admitted my sin to You ... I said "I will confess my rebellion to the Lord"'. This confession is what God wants so that He can forgive. Forgiveness can be offered and not received, of course, but God offers forgiveness for any of us who will be open with Him about where we have knowingly rebelled against Him, and if we will receive what God offers, then we are blessed indeed!

Secondly, the second half of verse 1 has the words 'whose sin is covered'. The word used for sin at this point is quite different; it is the Hebrew word 'hattath' which refers to those occasions in life where we have, perhaps inadvertently, strayed away from the Lord's path. All of us will know of times when we have not intended to go against the Lord, but have found ourselves doing what is wrong. We realise this sometimes immediately, and sometimes when someone points it out. Understandably, we are truly blessed if these offences against God are 'covered' rather than exposed, as for the sin of rebellion. If we stand in a right place with God, then our straying from the right path is covered by the mercy of God, and it is a great blessing that this is possible, for all of us who wish to do what is right find it painful when we discover that we have done something wrong, and not meant it.

The third word is found in verse 2; 'blessed are those whose sin the Lord does not hold against them.' The Hebrew word for sin here is 'awon', commonly translated as 'wickedness', or 'iniquity'. This is the type of sin in which someone has been ignorant of God's ways, and has not made it their business to learn enough of Him to know the difference between what is right and wrong. The Lord pronounces as blessed the one for whom this sin does not 'count against him', and although it is not immediately obvious in the sentence, the general theme of the psalm is that we should make it our business to be instructed in the ways of the Lord, so that we do not stray (see the second half of the psalm, 32:8,9).

It is very noticeable that the psalm does not give us a parade of the consequences of sinning. All it does is point out what sin is, and tell us how blessed we are when these sins are forgiven or covered, or not held against us! Clearly, this is the Lord's will and purpose, for he loves us. Psalm 32 is not a picture of a vengeful God who wants to deal with sin against Him whatever the cost; it is a picture of a loving God who understands the nature of sin in humanity and has planned a way whereby these sins may be dealt with. Ultimately, this will come through Jesus (see, for example, the extended explanations of this in Romans 3 and 4), but this psalm points towards what Jesus Christ will do; forgiving, covering and not holding our sin against us. This is the true Gospel!

### ***Silence and Praise***

There is, of course, a time for all things, as Ecclesiastes reminds us (Eccl 3:1ff), and there is time for silence as well as speech (Eccl 3:7). Psalm 32 tells us that silence is not the best policy, when it comes to dealing with the matter of our sins, whatever they are. In verse 3, it is silence that prevents the work of God's grace and forgiveness spoken of in verses 1,2. It is only when the psalmist talks to God about the sin in his life that he receives the blessings of forgiveness, as we see in verse 5.

Verses 3 and 4 are a tragic reminder of the state that many of God's people find themselves in. Initially, it seems as if the psalm is talking about physical illness; 'my bones wasted away ...' (32:3) but the second half of verse and the next all make it clear that physical illness and spiritual sickness are integrally linked 'Your hand was heavy upon me, day and night ...' (32:4). These are the consequences of those who stay silent before God, either by refusing to accept that He exists, or by avoiding His presence or by running away from Him. Physical illness can be the result of spiritual sins, particularly of rebelling against God and avoiding Him. If God offers us the right way forward for our lives, then if we choose what is wrong, then there may well be consequences. For example, many people drink alcohol. However, even a modest and rational look at the subject of alcohol consumption tells us that excess in drinking is detrimental: now God's word does tell us that drinking in excess is wrong before God (Luke 21:34, Romans 13:13 etc.), and the consequences can be illness, as those who suffer liver damage and a range of other health issues readily know.

Not dealing with sin through silence before God is likened in this psalm to the physical 'wasting' of bones, complaining (32:3), and a sense of oppression by God (32:4). This last state is a lesson we need to hear about. Many people who have attended church for years find that they grow tired of their Christian service, and are reluctant to engage in the duties of office holding or of attending meetings for prayer or teaching. Many church leaders know how hard it is to find people who will engage with the essential tasks of church life; it is all considered too much. Perhaps the answer that Psalm 32 gives us to this oppression within the church is the suggestion that we have not openly confessed our sins to God. Be careful, however, for it is easy to say sorry to God for one or two things and think that we have 'done our bit'. What God requires for the rebuilding of His

people is total openness before Him and a desire to 'search our heart to very the bottom' (to quote a well used phrase of John Wesley) in order to root out sin in any of its forms.

## Application

It does not take too much to find within this psalm a strong and vigorous call to repentance. Because we live in the New Testament times, we can still learn from the Old Testament that to confess our sins before God means to examine our souls in at least three ways. Firstly, we must find out if there is any rebellion in us. It is surprising how rebellion creeps into our lives in a most civilised way. As Christians, we are called to worship the Lord in public and with other Christians on a regular basis (I will not discuss, here, how and why the New Testament says this, so I ask you to accept this), and yet it is extremely common today for good Christian people to elect to go to church when they want to and according to whether this or that worship leader or band is playing, or whoever is preaching. Such an attitude towards the worship of the Church of God is not just unhelpful, it is rebellion against God Almighty, and the sooner this is recognised the better, particularly in today's 'select what you want' society. God's people must stand out together against this.

Secondly, we must be prepared to regularly confess our waywardness (our 'hattath' – see above). This what a Christian commonly thinks of as sin, which means those things that we have done wrong or have gone wrong in our lives with little direct intention on our part, but as a consequence of the difficulties of the lives we lead in our faulty and fallen world. It is an essential part of the liturgy of most churches to include such 'confession' within the prayers of a service; which is alright, providing people feel empowered to join in and make these prayers their own, and a personal reality!

Thirdly, we need to confess to God our 'awon' (see above). This is the sin of not knowing the difference between what is right and wrong; and this is frequently true of people who have not read their Bibles and do not know what the Bible says about deviant sexual behaviour, drinking, proper social responsibility and our duty of care to the planet, for example. Many people are shocked when they are told, for example, that their purchase of big brand name foodstuffs (Nestle is a controversial example) frequently contravenes World Health Organisation standards of good commercial practice in the food industry, let alone Biblical moral standards of employment (see Leviticus 19) across the world.

There is a great deal for us to be open about before God, so that He will hear our confession and heal us of our sin, and those sicknesses of body and soul which come from trying to live in silence before God. But the Good News is that God blesses those of us who make our confession and do all in our power to live according to His laws and His righteousness.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which area of sin is the one that you have given least thought to? How can dealing with this make a difference to your life?
2. Give examples of where silence is helpful, and where silence is unhelpful in human relationships.
3. Is there such a thing as collective guilt amongst God's people in any place? How does it work? How can it be overcome?

## Discipleship

Which of the issues I have raised above strikes you most sharply? That issue is the one, even if you disagree with what I have written in the examples, that you should explore as part of your Christian discipleship. God does not raise up something in our minds unless he wants us to pursue it and try to find a place of peace before Him about it. The important thing for each of us is to refrain from silence before God about these big and significant things for our world today.

## Final Prayer

Gracious Lord, so fill our hearts and minds that we are unafraid of Your presence and Your challenge. Lead us to the place where we can speak to You without fear, and with confidence in Your desire to forgive us and lead us in new ways. And, if we are too much in love with our own ways, show us how they will come to an end. Deal with us gently, O Lord, but sufficiently to make us respond. In Jesus' Name, AMEN