

Prayer

In the gentleness of your compassion, Lord God, forgive all my sin and make me new again. Calm my aching soul and pour Your soothing balm on my spiritual wounds, that I may recover that wholeness of spirit only You can give. Search my every thought and deed and show me what I must confess, for I wish that nothing comes between us; O Master of my soul. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly theme: Those who struggle with faith

People often struggle with faith because of critical prayers which remain unanswered; prayers for the healing of a loved one, for example, or prayers for an innocent child who suffers. These are times when it can be most hard to accept that God's greater plans may encompass that which is difficult or deeply troublesome for us. Pray for all who you know who suffer in this way.

Meditation

Let it be; there are times to leave things in the Lord's hands.

When there are no answers to your questions,
He will speak to us in the silence of love:

When there is no time left to do what is right,
He will take up what we must leave undone:

When there is nothing you can do to help,
He will charge His angels to bring comfort:

When evil appears to hold everything in a vice-like grip,
He will send the fire of His Spirit to defeat the enemy:

When love appears to have been compromised,
He will rise from the grave and demonstrate the truth!

Let it be; there are times to leave things in the Lord's hands.

Bible Study - Psalm 32:6-11

⁶ *Therefore let every faithful person pray to You
whilst You are there to be found;
When flood waters threaten,
they will certainly not reach them.*

⁷ *You are my hiding-place
And You protect me from trouble;
You surround me with songs of deliverance.
Selah*

⁸ *I will instruct you and teach you the way you must go;
I will counsel you and watch over you.*

⁹ *Do not be like the horse or a mule without understanding
whose path must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not stay with you.*

¹⁰ *The sorrows of the wicked are numerous,
but the LORD's faithful love surrounds those who trust him.*

¹¹ *Be glad and rejoice in the LORD, you righteous;
and sing aloud, all you who are true of heart!*

Review

Psalm 32 is called a 'Penitential' psalms because it speaks about repentance from sin and the forgiveness given by the Lord to those who turn to Him with a genuine desire to be liberated from their sins. This psalm is remarkable because the first five verses (which we read

yesterday) explain the nature of sin in detail and closely mirror the New Testament teaching of Jesus about sin, repentance and forgiveness. The opening verses of the psalm also tell us about how un-confessed sin prevents spiritual growth, and can even be the root of physical and spiritual sickness (32:3,4). Certainly, the impression we gain whilst reading the psalm is that the writer is teaching us something very important for faith. Indeed, the title of the Psalm says that it is a 'maskil', a Hebrew word which probably means 'teaching'.

Our reading today is the second half of the psalm which changes tone completely. It begins with the word 'therefore' (32:6), and a brief glance shows that the rest of the psalm is about a variety of things to do with living a life of faith in the Lord; it mentions prayer (32:6), the Lord's protection and deliverance (32:7), the importance of the Lord's counsel and guidance (32:8,9) and the worship offered to God by the faithful (32:10,11). The overall message of the psalm therefore seems clear. It begins with essential teaching about our relationship with Almighty God, telling us we must be open with Him and confess all our sins honestly and without deceit (32:1-5); and having done this, it describes our walk with the Lord in a way that is strangely like that of the New Testament. For example, many of Paul's letters begin by teaching some truth about the Gospel of Jesus, and then after a significant and crucial 'therefore' (e.g. Romans 12:1, Eph 4:1, Phil 2:12 etc.) goes on to tell the consequences of that teaching. Both Paul's letters and this psalm therefore have the same teaching formula, and it is simple and compelling; 'if such and such is true, therefore, live like this and like that ...'

It is obvious to anyone reading this psalm that the writer is speaking to us, but who is the writer, and who is speaking to us? This seems a very academic question until you look carefully and discover that the person speaking in the opening verses (32:1-5) is someone speaking of their experience of confessing sin; for example 'I admitted my sin to You, I did not hide my guilt ...' (32:5). However, in the second half of the psalm, we begin with the same sense of someone telling us something about the Lord and offering a prayer 'You are my hiding place, and You protect me from trouble' (32:7). But then something changes in verse 8 where it sounds as if someone else speaks; 'I will instruct you and teach you the way to go ...' (32:8). Great debate has surrounded who this might be. Some have suggested that at this point in the psalm, a priest says these words to a worshipper who has come and confessed their sins to the Lord, and others suggest they are a prophetic word.

The trouble with these suggestions is that there is absolutely no evidence for priests using a psalm like this either in the Bible or anywhere else, and it is almost impossible to tie down this 'who said what' debate. There is one more simple suggestion. If the psalm was indeed written by David or one of his sons (a king of Judah in the line of David), then there is no real difficulty. For if this is David speaking, then the great man tells us of his experience in the importance of confessing sin to God in the first verses (1-5) and then goes on to instruct the people for whom he has responsibility about what they should do as a consequence. By this theory, God has used a great man to teach us truths about the life of faith, and the whole psalm can be read simply like this. Such an understanding seems by far the best to me!

Going Deeper

There is a store of teaching in these verses which we shall now examine. In the psalm, it is given to those who are prepared to follow the path of repentance without deceit, and it is passed on by them for the benefit of those who need to learn about the truth of the path of faith.

Some may object that this gives status to those who have repented and experienced the forgiveness of God and that others are left out. This objection misunderstands the very nature of Salvation as given to humanity by God. The spiritual life is certainly a journey of growth in which we all experience a wide range of things, but the authentic Christian experience is one which has a unique starting place and a unique end; and these are the same for all people. The starting place is repentance, and the Gospel of God starts nowhere else (see Jesus' preaching at the beginning of His ministry; 'repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand' – Matt 4:17); and the end of our spiritual journey is to be united with our Father in glory. Those who have started must teach and pass on to others the truth about how to do the same, and move on in their spiritual journey on which they will find that what they experience is similar to that of many people who have gone before, and from whom they can learn. The psalm is saying no more than this.

Discipleship in the Old Testament; prayer

The first spiritual principle is in verse 6, and it is that we should make a priority of prayer. Why should this be so fundamental? Because prayer is speaking to God, and unless we speak to God and keep our channel of communication with Him open, then we can hardly say that we have a relationship with Him.

How rude it would be not to talk to someone who has helped you? Have you experienced the awkwardness that comes in a relationship when you have helped someone and they do not talk to you again? Imagine therefore how God feels when we do not pray. It says in the psalm that if we keep up our communication with God, then we will be protected, 'when flood waters threaten, they will certainly not reach them' (32:6). In other words, the Lord who saved us when we repented will still be with us when trials come to us again. But what a presumption it would be to have accepted God's forgiveness, then not spoken to him and assumed that His assistance would be forthcoming again in the midst of trouble at the snap of our fingers? And some people regard prayer as just this, like emergency action in times of trouble. Yet we insult our Saviour and our God by such presumptions.

For those who live a life of talking to God through prayer, then verse 7 becomes true; 'You are my hiding place, and You protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of deliverance!' The function of a song, in the popular sense, is to provide a simple and memorable way of recollecting something. There is nothing like a tune or a song to express love between two people, for example, and songs are good at expressing our love for God. Hymns, with their more substantial poetry and deeper theology have an important place in worship, but songs should never be forgotten as a means of prayer, and there are many within the Psalms (e.g. psalm 100). In our psalm, the writer gives thanks for 'songs of deliverance' because they remind him of the Lord's power to save and are a source of joy and encouragement.

Discipleship and teaching.

I would like to suggest that verse 8 is best read as a prophetic word spoken to us by the writer of the psalm, who, if it is David, has experienced a great deal, and probably more than we are likely to encounter in a lifetime. As words of prophecy they come from the Lord, and they are brought to us through David, and from David through the psalm which he wrote down; 'I will instruct you and teach you the way you must go; I will counsel and watch over you'. David was conscious of his role in passing on the truth of his experience of God to others, and this is why he has a traditional reputation as a writer of psalms. Yes, God does teach each new generation the truths of His Word, but they are the same truths, and they cannot be assumed, they must be passed on. Although this is not said specifically in the psalm, these words tell us that it is our privilege and duty to pass on the truth of God's love and His desire to forgive us our sins. If, as I wrote a couple of days ago, some who teach theology today have no personal knowledge of the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ, and do not believe in it, then the authentic Christian faith has been compromised. God watches over His truth.

There is a fascinating illustration in verse 9 of the futility of such ignorance, and the way that the human intellect and imagination tends to go its own way and diverge from that of God. It is not a verse designed to make fun of animals, but to speak the honest truth about the spiritual ignorance of those who ignore God. People are made by God as spiritual beings and as such are naturally conscious of God. Animals are frequently highly intelligent, but are not spiritual beings and are not conscious of God. We are called to rise above the futility of animal intelligence and learn from our history and accept the training given to us by the truths of human experience that have been handed down to us. In verse 9, animals such as the horse and mule are non-spiritual creations of God and not made in His image. They cannot be expected to respond to God with understanding; but we should respond to Him as creatures who are. When people today behave with stubborn resistance to the will of God it is as if we are going against our very nature as spiritual beings, and behaving as animals!

The Psalm concludes with an exhortation to us to live in trust, and surround ourselves with the practical evidence of God's unfailing love. Unless we live like this, we will find ourselves troubled again like the wicked (v10). It is my constant advice to Christian people to find ways of surrounding themselves with Godly things; listening to music which honours God and reminds

the soul of His benefits (v11), spending time with the company of the faithful (v11), and more practically, having objects in the home such as a Cross which reminds us of the Lord, or developing simple family customs from saying grace before meals to praying regularly together. All of these things help to keep us in touch with our Maker, and are invaluable in the path of Christian discipleship.

Application

Psalm 32 is certainly a very deep Psalm, and one that has much to teach us. It reaches beyond its setting in the Old Testament and speaks to every believer with clarity about repentance, the forgiveness of God, and the path of discipleship. It is always worth a second read!

Today's passage has, amongst other things, reminded us of the importance of prayer, and if you are reading this study, you will know that it is part of a structure of personal devotional guidance which includes prayer as an essential ingredient. It is my experience that too many Christians have been put off prayer and do not feel able even to pray to God by themselves. When asked to pray in church, they may be happy to read a prayer, but the prospect of speaking to the Lord from the heart is almost impossible.

Why is it that so many traditional features of the Christian life have been lost, not in society as a whole, but within the church? Saying grace at meal times, regular family prayers or the reading of the Bible in the home, for example? They have been lost where God's people have been disenfranchised by teaching that has drawn them away from the truths that are clearly demonstrated in this psalm; a relationship with God that is based upon recognition of sin, repentance, and the saving forgiveness of God. These are the heart and driving force of real faith which is lived out by God's people throughout the world and throughout the centuries. You may live in part of the world where the Christian church is vibrant and alive, and where the Lord's people hunger for His Word and lead their lives around the truths of the Gospel, so clearly taught in this psalm. It is my prayer that you remain hungry for God's Word and all that it teaches you. If you live in the Western World, you will know what I mean when I say I am sad about the state of the church in lands such as England that have such a great heritage of faith. We have become spiritual 'mules' (see 32:9), and God's judgement is upon us already.

The only way forward for all God's people is to reconnect with the truths of His Word which begin with His desire to forgive us when we repent from our sin; the starting place for the whole Gospel which we find in Jesus Christ. Psalm 32 points us to this truth and this Gospel.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Are there times when you feel uncomfortable with the presence of God? Why is this so?
2. Should all those who have experienced the benefits of God's saving grace be teachers of others? Should there be conditions upon this, if so, what?
3. Do you find it easy to sing songs by yourself, or do you need to be with others to benefit from a song? Discuss the benefits of songs in sustaining the Christian life.

Discipleship

The whole of psalm 32 is a challenge to Christian discipleship, and it is not easy to pick out one part of it and suggest that it is essential to our walk with God. But if the first half had a clear focus on repentance and forgiveness, then I do suggest that prayer (verse 6 of our text today) is an essential part of our discipleship. Whether prayer is easy or difficult for you, the Lord is always revealing more, and our spiritual ears need to be attuned to what He would like to say to us. Consider whether your prayers are really a means whereby the Lord can speak to you.

Final Prayer

Stay close, Lord God, in the vigour of the day, and in its quiet moments. Accompany me this day through all the perils that the enemy would place as traps before me. You can see them when I do not; warn me and keep me vigilant, so that all my life may give glory to God.
AMEN