



the blessedness of confession  
psalm 32

Introduction

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Psalm 32, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of 7 Penitential Psalms, interests and inspires us for a number of reasons. For example, in the hands of Paul, the first two verses become foundational for the Christian doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>1</sup> But for the purposes of this homily, we are interested in other features of this Psalm.

thy hand was heavy upon me

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In a homily on Psalm 130, we listed several elements that are often found in Penitential Psalms. The first is “a candid acknowledgement by the Psalmist of personal sin.” In Psalm 32, the “candid acknowledgement” seems not to have come easily or quickly, but to have been labored and tardy.

When I kept silence,  
my bones waxed old  
through my roaring all the day long.

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<sup>1</sup> See Romans 4.<sup>7-8</sup>

For day and night  
thy hand was heavy upon me:  
my moisture is turned  
into the drought of summer.

Here, we interpret the Psalmist's silence as a refusal to acknowledge his sin. Day after day and night after night, this prideful refusal brought the Psalmist great suffering. The Psalmist comes to see his suffering as evidence of God's continuing presence in his life. The hand of God, we are told, rests "heavy" (*kābed*) upon the Psalmist. Under similar circumstances the hand of God "comes down hard" (*nātaḥ*) on the Psalmist.<sup>2</sup> In another place, God's hand is "threatening" or "hostile" (*gārah*) toward the Psalmist.<sup>3</sup>

While we can agree that the hand of God might actually be heavy and come down hard on the Psalmist, we question the truth of the Psalmist's perception or feeling that it is hostile. Such feelings are, more likely, a projection of his own inner feelings upon God. The impression that God's hand is "threatening" or "hostile" seems to accurately reflect the Psalmist's very human psychology in the face of personal disappointment.

The idea, however, that God's hand is "heavy" seems to reflect something more than accurate anthropology. It reflects a real and true *theology*. The word for 'heavy,' *kābed*, seems literally to indicate something that is added to something else. The Psalmist has a "natural" weightiness all his own. In this case, the "weight" is his inner awareness of wrongdoing with its accompanying distress and pain. God has not added—we might say imposed—something utterly "new" and foreign upon the Psalmist, but has, perhaps, simply magnified what is already there. And far from being "hostile," this "adding upon" is a great boon to the Psalmist. Of course, we are only saying what so many have said before, and what the Psalmist himself will admit in another place:

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 38.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 39.<sup>10</sup>

“Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O LORD...”<sup>4</sup>

God’s chastisement is not that of a vindictive injured party or a punitive-minded judge. It is that of a concerned and loving Father.<sup>5</sup>

“Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee.”<sup>6</sup>

“...the people of Nephi hath he loved, and also hath he chastened them; yea, in the days of their iniquities hath *he chastened them because he loveth them.*”<sup>7</sup>

The objective of God’s chastisement is the improvement and advancement of his children through repentance and forgiveness, which leads to righteousness and holiness, and, ultimately eternal glory.

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.”<sup>8</sup>

“Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you whom I love, and whom I love I also chasten *that their sins may be forgiven*, for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance in all things out of temptation, and I have loved you.”<sup>9</sup>

“And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children,

‘My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord,  
nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:

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<sup>4</sup> Psalms 94.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> So much of what is said about God, and so much that is written about the Atonement is based on the courtroom metaphor. But if God is really a father, then such metaphors conceal and confuse as much as they reveal. I have, truthfully, come to be very suspicious of such metaphors, believing that they accurately reflect the person and professional backgrounds of those who use the metaphor, but fail to reflect the true character and relationship of the true and living God. It seems that to understand God and His Atonement, a well-developed metaphor focused on family would be much more productive and true to cosmic realities.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 8.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Helaman 15.<sup>3</sup>; emphasis added

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 3.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>9</sup> DC 95.<sup>1</sup>; emphasis added

For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth,  
and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.’

If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he *for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.*

Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward *it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness* unto them which are exercised thereby.’<sup>10</sup>

This, then, is the “heavy hand of God” that presses upon the Psalmist. It is God’s corrective measure that seeks to humble the Psalmist, bring him to acknowledge his sin and rely upon God for the remedy.

**I** acknowledged my sin unto thee

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We are happy to report that the Psalmist got the message and responds according to God’s hope and purpose.

“I acknowledged my sin unto thee,  
and mine iniquity have I not hid.

I said, “I will confess  
my transgressions unto the LORD...”

Though the Psalmist’s confession may have been belated, the entire Psalm, written after his experience, demonstrates that the Psalmist has learned his lesson well. We note the fearless

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<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 12.<sup>5-11</sup>; emphasis added

and faithful repetition of “negative” vocabulary. The Psalmist speaks of his “sin,” “transgression,” and “iniquity;” repeating each twice. We might remember Joseph Smith’s “confession” on the night of September 21, 1823. In recounting this night, he tells us what occupied his thoughts. He speaks of his “errors,” “weakness,” “foibles,” “imperfections,” “sins,” and “follies;” all of which made him feel “offensive in the sight of God,” “guilty,” and “condemned.”<sup>11</sup>

Such honest and uncompromising confession or acknowledgement of sin is vital. There can be no forward spiritual progress without it. To assert anything about self other than this is a lie.

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”<sup>12</sup>

Even worse, to assert anything else makes a liar of God!

“If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”<sup>13</sup>

In speaking of confession, we are, of course, talking about something far more important than the formal ecclesiastical confession, as essential as that may at times be, that often accompanies “serious” sin. Acknowledgement of sin is, first, about admitting the inevitable and continual sin that we commit. This confession is not so much verbal as it is internal. Note the very real and very effective “confession” of sin that takes place among King Benjamin’s people.

“And now, it came to pass that when king Benjamin had made an end of speaking the words which had been delivered unto him by the angel of the Lord, that he cast his eyes round about on the multitude, and behold they had fallen to the earth, for the fear of the Lord had come upon them. And *they had viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth.*”<sup>14</sup>

This acknowledgement of sin is only the first part of the necessary confession. The second

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<sup>11</sup> JSH 1.<sup>28-29</sup>

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 1.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>13</sup> 1 John 1.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Mosiah 4.<sup>1-2</sup>

part is the acknowledgement of our need for help dealing with our inevitable and continual sins. Again, we'll let King Benjamin's people show the way.

“And they all cried aloud with one voice, saying: ‘O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified; for we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who created heaven and earth, and all things; who shall come down among the children of men....’”<sup>15</sup>

We all remember Alma's long and torturous “confession” of sin. Again, we see an acknowledgement of sin followed by an acknowledgement of dependence upon God.

“O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.”<sup>16</sup>

This cry for mercy is at the very heart of confession and repentance. It may, in fact, constitute the very thing that we call “repentance.”

“Therefore may God grant unto you, my brethren, that ye may begin to exercise your faith unto repentance, *that ye begin to call upon his holy name, that he would have mercy upon you.*”<sup>17</sup>

**b**lessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity

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The Psalmist informs us that his humble confession did not fall on deaf ears. He experiences the blessing that God's earlier chastisement was intended to bring.

“Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.”

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<sup>15</sup> Mosiah 4.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Alma 36.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Alma 34.<sup>17</sup>

Having personally experienced the “forgiving disposition” of God, he partakes of the blessedness spoken of in the very first verses of the Psalm:

“Blessed is he  
whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.  
Blessed is the man  
unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no guile.”<sup>18</sup>

We should pause here and discuss this matter of “blessedness.” The Hebrew word is *'ašrê*. Generally, the most widely accepted translation is “happy.” This seems to be bolstered by the Septuagint’s translation *makarios*. A few, assuming a different root, would read “upright,” or “righteous.” So here we have individuals pronounced happy or righteous whose “sin,” “transgression,” or “iniquity” is “forgiven,” “covered,” or not “imputed.” It is important to point out that blessedness is not pronounced upon him who has not transgressed or sinned. It does not pronounce him blessed who has no iniquity to be imputed. We must not lie, or make a liar of God. Outside of the Lord Jesus such a being has not walked the dusty roads of this globe. Paul’s verdict must stand unchallenged. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”<sup>19</sup>

We should have a look at this business of “forgiveness,” “covering,” and “not imputing.” We begin with forgiveness. The word here is *naša'*. It means to ‘lift,’ ‘bear,’ ‘carry,’ ‘bear off,’ ‘take away,’ and such. We might think in terms of our sins being “borne” by another. This concept is certainly well represented in scripture. This indicates that someone other than ourselves bears the weight of our sin.

“The Son of God suffereth according to the flesh *that he might take upon him* the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his

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<sup>18</sup> Some think of this pronouncement as coming from the Psalmist himself after his experience. Others propose that another, perhaps a priest, speaks these words to the Psalmist, who, moved by the promise, responds by giving up his proud ways and humbly acknowledging his sins.

<sup>19</sup> Romans 3.<sup>23</sup>

deliverance.”<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, we might think of our sins being “borne off.” While the idea of someone else carrying the burden is present, the focus of “borne off” is not so much on the who as the what. Our sins are removed from us. Here we think of the Psalmist’s incredible, near incomprehensible testimony concerning the scope of God’s forgiveness.

“As far as the east is from the west,  
so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.”<sup>21</sup>

We might mention in passing that another Hebrew word, *nāsā*, looks and sounds a good bit like *naśa’*. One must always consider the possibility that the Psalmist, aware of the similarity, hopes that the similar word might come to mind. If so, then, the Psalmist would also have us know that God “forgets” or “chooses not to call to mind” transgression.

That man is happy whose sin is “covered.” This is Hebrew *kāsā*. It means “to cover,” “hide,” “conceal.” Presumably God would “cover” sin as deep under the ground as he bears it off into the cosmos.

This brings us to “impute,” Hebrew *hāšab*. This word means ‘to account,’ ‘to count,’ ‘to reckon,’ or ‘to credit to’ That man is blessed, who, though guilty of having committed sin, does not have those sins credited to him. They are not placed in the ledger. In another place, the Psalmist testifies that

“[God] hath not dealt with us after our sins;  
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.”<sup>22</sup>

We heard the Psalmist’s question in Psalm 130,

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<sup>20</sup> Alma 7.<sup>13</sup>; emphasis added

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 103.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Psalm 103.<sup>10</sup>



“If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities,  
O Lord, who shall stand?”<sup>23</sup>

We found there that iniquities are not “marked” because the Lord chooses to forgive, or, we could say, cancel them. The Apostle Paul picks up this refrain.

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.”<sup>24</sup>

Such amazing generosity is almost too much for us to grasp.

“*Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful as to have snatched us from our awful, sinful, and polluted state? Oh then, why did he not consign us to an awful destruction, yea, why did he not let the sword of his justice fall upon us, and doom us to eternal despair?*”<sup>25</sup>

Let us turn again to King Benjamin’s people to demonstrate the nature and extent of such generosity and blessed remission of sins.

“The Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy, having received a remission of their sins, and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ...”<sup>26</sup>

**h**e that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him

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The Psalmist has learned a valuable lesson. God can be trusted. He can be trusted with sin.

“If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Psalm 130.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>24</sup> 2 Corinthians 5.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Alma 26.<sup>17, 19</sup>; emphasis added

<sup>26</sup> Mosiah 4.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 1 John 3.<sup>20</sup>

“For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee  
in a time when thou mayest be found:  
surely in the floods of great waters  
they shall not come nigh unto him.  
Thou art my hiding place;  
thou shalt preserve me from trouble;  
thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance.”<sup>28</sup>

While sin needs to be dealt with, both by the individual and God, it is the cover-up that causes the greater problems. Hopefully, the Psalmist has learned his lesson. However, God knows “how false, and also the unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men.”<sup>29</sup> And so the Psalmist is admonished.

“I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go:  
I will guide thee with mine eye.  
Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule,  
which have no understanding:  
whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle,  
lest they come near unto thee.”  
Many sorrows shall be to the wicked:  
but he that trusteth in the LORD,  
mercy shall compass him about.”

The Lord will graciously instruct the Psalmist in any number of ways from this day on. Increasingly, but not perfectly, the Lord will assist and strengthen the Psalmist so that he makes good choices and avoids sin with ever increasing consistency. However, sin, error, weakness, shortcomings, follies, foibles, transgressions, iniquity—they will remain a barb in the Psalmist’s soul. He must not stop trusting God’s mercy; must never cease to confess—

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<sup>28</sup> In upcoming homilies, we will want to discuss the imagery of this Psalm at some length. We will want to examine the “bones waxed old,” the “draught of summer,” the “floods of great waters,” and the “hiding place,” as examples.

<sup>29</sup> Helaman 12.<sup>1</sup>

must never consider the possibility that now he should know better and so God is no longer to be trusted with such error. “Do not force me to “compel” you to be humble, as has been the case in your most recent past,” might seem to be a part of the Lord’s instruction here. “Always make candid confession. Never stop trusting in the Lord’s mercy, his ‘forgiving disposition.’ Never trust in your righteous above that of God’s.”

Finally, we witness the Psalmist, grateful for the blessedness of forgiveness, act once more the part of Evangelist.

“Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, ye righteous:  
and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.”

Now, we have to be clear. We must not think that the “righteous” and “upright” who are invited to “be glad” and “shout for joy” are those who do not sin. Outside of the Lord Jesus Christ, such a being is a mere phantom, a figure of our imagination. Perhaps we should consider the first two verses of this Psalm and this final verse as matching bookends, mirror images of each other, which cast light one upon the other. The “righteous” and upright” are those

“whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered...  
Unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity.”

This is surely Paul’s view in quoting verses 1-2.

“Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.”<sup>30</sup>

To be justified is to be thought righteous. It is to be right with, or in the eyes of, God. This comes to those only who have been forgiven, whose sin has been covered, whose iniquity is

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<sup>30</sup> Romans 4.<sup>4-5</sup>

not imputed. These are the blessed ones. Only through forgiveness of the sins that we inevitably and continually commit can we be right with God. Only through the experience of God's forgiveness can we freely experience the reality of an open and healthy relationship with God.

Paul, the great Apostle to the gentiles, found all of this in the thirty-second Psalm. He dedicated his life to this message. More important, the Lord Jesus Christ gave his life to reveal the existence of a God so great and so good and so merciful and of such a "forgiving disposition."<sup>31</sup>

Knowing such truths today, we want to shout. We want to sing. We want to praise. We want to evangelize. Oh come, come.

"Taste and see that the LORD is good."<sup>32</sup>

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>31</sup> We have used these two words several times to characterize God. They come from the Lectures on Faith. In order to have faith in God we must know that he is of a "forgiving disposition." Here is the quote in its context.

"But secondly; unless He was merciful and gracious, slow to anger, long-suffering and full of goodness, such is the weakness of human nature, and so great the frailties and imperfections of men, that unless they believed that these excellencies existed in the divine character, the faith necessary to salvation could not exist; for doubt would take the place of faith, and those who know their weakness and liability to sin would be in constant doubt of salvation if it were not for the idea which they have of the excellency of the character of God, that He is slow to anger and longsuffering, and of a forgiving disposition, and does forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin. An idea of these facts does away doubt, and makes faith exceedingly strong."

<sup>32</sup> Psalm 34.<sup>8</sup>