

# Psalms for the Summertime: The Great Cover-Up

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 32

A local church is having what they are calling a testimony night. One friend sees it posted on social media; a second one hears about it from a relative. The featured speaker will be portraying King David. “We should go,” the one friend says to the other. “It would be great to hear about the experiences of one of Israel’s greatest leaders, told in first-person point of view, no less.” They continue the conversation, reflecting on stories they might hear that night:

- how God surprisingly chooses David as leader of Israel -- even though he is not the oldest son in his family -- for God looks at the heart of someone, rather than at outward appearances
- how David, as a musician, uses his God-given gifts to sooth the troubled soul of Saul by playing his lyre
- how David, as a shepherd, kills bears and lions -- with the strength God provides -- to protect his father’s sheep
- how David defeats Goliath, the giant, with just a slingshot
- how David, led by the Holy Spirit, crafts the most famous song in the Psalter – Psalm 23

The two friends arrive at the church, and the place is packed. They scramble to squeeze into a pew just as one of the ministers of the church, who appears to be serving as the liturgist, steps forward, and the chatter of the crowd settles down.

He looks out at the audience and offers these words: “Oh, what joy, what blessedness for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is covered and put out of sight! Yes, what joy, what blessedness for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty! But,” he says, “when lives are not lived that way...” He suddenly steps down from the microphone and the main speaker, the one all have come to hear, the one portraying King David, steps up to the platform.

“He’s right,” he says. “That was me. When I kept quiet about what I had done wrong, I was miserable. My friends heard me moaning and groaning and knew something was not right, for day and night I was tormented by the thought that there was something out of alignment between me and the Master of the universe. I could feel his hand heavy upon me, and it haunted me so much that my strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.”

The audience squirms a bit in the pews, and one of the two friends nudges the other and expresses probably what others are thinking as well. “What a downer,” he whispers. “We came to this place tonight to hear about sin?”

The topic that makes that audience uncomfortable is one that makes many people uncomfortable. Often people don’t want to think or talk about the things they do wrong. Just keep quiet. It will eventually go away. It’s my business and nobody else’s.

And those feelings are shared by people not just outside the church; they include many people in the church as well. We heard about this last fall when we did a series here at LaGrave on worship and the different elements that comprise our standard Sunday morning liturgy. In a sermon on confession, Pastor Jonker noted how that element has gradually disappeared from many worship services today including those in our own Reformed circles. “Focusing on sin just brings us down,” some would say. “We don’t need that. We need things that will lift us up and makes us happy.” Others argue that the place for confessing sins is not in Sunday worship but in our personal devotional times. Several commentators, however, believe that Psalm 32, this Psalm about confession and forgiveness, was actually used in Old Testament worship and is an example for us yet today.

Why is it, though, that we hold back when it comes to confessing our sins? Pride can certainly be a factor. Sometimes we simply don’t want to admit that we’re wrong. Some of you will remember or have heard of President Nixon and the Watergate scandal that took place in the 1970s when a group of burglars broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex. Eventually it led to the President

resigning, but that incident alone is not what drove the president from office. No, his demise came because he attempted to cover up his own involvement in the fiasco. It was his unwillingness to admit his own guilt that really brought him down.

And if we are unwilling to confess our wrongs, then we may feel as David does in verses 3 and 4, when he uses the analogy of the almost-intolerable summer heat in Palestine, where temperature soar upward, wells go downward, and dust chokes a person's palate. David seems to be choked by his silence for there is drought in his soul.

Guilt can also be a problem when we allow it to overwhelm us and lead us to a sense of despair. We don't confess our sins because we don't believe that God can possibly forgive us, especially when our sins seem severe or extreme.

Psychologists note that guilt is one of the most crippling diseases among people and is a major cause of mental illness, suicide, and depression. It prompts millions of Americans to gulp down pills to tranquilize their anxiety. A study in 1991 discovered that the average person spends approximately two hours a day feeling guilty. And for 39 minutes of that time, people feel moderate to severe guilt. Can you imagine what those numbers must be today, given the rise in mental illness?

Before we beat guilt up too much, though, let's remember that guilt can be constructive at times. God can use it like an electric fence that gives us a jolt when we begin to stray beyond his boundaries. He uses it as an alarm to wake us up when something needs our attention. Like pain, guilt can tell us that something is wrong. When you get that feeling, though, you shouldn't just sit there; you should do something about it.

That's what David does following his testimony in verses 3 and 4. After feeling that his bones are wasting away and that God's hand is heavy upon him, David, led by God's Spirit, does something about it. The turning point begins at verse 5.

"Then," David says, "Then I confessed all my sins to you, God, and I stopped trying to cover up my guilt. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.' And you, you, my merciful Lord, forgave my sins and took my guilt away."

The first step to finding relief from the weight of our guilt, as David discovers, is admitting the wrongs we have done, a strategy used by many support groups that meet today. Their members begin by saying, "Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am an alcoholic." In this passage, in essence, we hear the words, "Hello, my name is David, and I am a sinner."

For what misdeed is David unloading his burden? We don't know for sure, but some commentators believe that this Psalm, like Psalm 51, was written in response to his guilt for forcing sexual relations with Bathsheba and for having her husband killed to cover up the entire scheme.

And while we don't know David's exact sin, we do know the exact way the confession affects his life. David is a new man. He is now like the one described in verses 1 and 2: How joyful (blessed) is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How joyful is the one the Lord does not charge with sin and who lives in complete honesty! David is now enjoying blessed joy and happiness; happiness that God gives to all who confess their sins and are forgiven of them.

Do you see the word play in this? David no longer covers his sins (verse 5) but confesses them to God. So God covers his sins (verse 1) by his mercy and grace. It's the same Hebrew word, *kasah*, that is used to help describe this joyous transformation.

I don't know if President Nixon ever found the happiness that King David experienced. He did accept President Ford's pardon on September 8, 1974, and while accepting a pardon means an admission of guilt, Nixon did so not necessarily because he wanted to, but because he was advised to do so, for it would bring an end to his legal troubles.

One of the people involved in the Watergate scandal that did admit his guilt was Chuck Colson. An ex-marine lawyer, Colson became special counsel to President, a position where Nixon would call on him at all hours. It was a position of prestige and power, a position that should have brought him great satisfaction. Yet for Chuck Colson, there was still an emptiness in his life, an emptiness that became even worse as the Watergate scandal began to unfold. In August of 1973, Colson's friend, Tom Phillips, brought him a copy of *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis and read to him a passage on pride. It cut Chuck to the heart, and as his

daughter said in an interview, “The Holy Spirit touched my dad at that moment, for this is when he encountered God.”

When Colson was convicted of obstruction of justice for his role in Watergate, he was given a backdoor offer where they would cut him a deal instead of him serving his 1-3 year prison sentence. Colson turned it down, however, and admitted his guilt. “I have committed my life to Jesus Christ,” he said, “and I can work for the Lord in prison or out of prison.” The media had a field day with this, mocking him left and right, but he was undeterred. The words from Chuck Colson may have been slightly different, but the message is the same: I confessed my sins and stopped trying to hide my guilt, and, God, you forgave me. All my guilt is gone.”

If you know Chuck Colson’s story, you know that he served God faithfully during those months in prison, including starting Bible studies and caring deeply for his fellow prisoners, which included Mafia informants and former members of the Nixon administration. Following his release from prison, Chuck received many offers from companies and businesses, trying to entice him to come work for them, but he couldn’t get the men in prison out of his mind. This eventually led him to form Prison Fellowship, a far-reaching ministry to prisoners that continues to this day. And all of this because he did not hesitate to admit his guilt.

Hesitation can get us into trouble at times. For example, if I were to ask you what would you do if you are on an empty tank with a gas station right beside you? What would you do if you are starving and a full refrigerator is in the next room? What would you do if your insulin level is reaching the danger zone, and the needle is lying next to you on the table? Hopefully, in each of these situations, you would not hesitate to act, nor should we in your spiritual life.

If you are troubled in your faith because of some past act, some questionable thought, some unkind word, listen to how the Holy Spirit is prompting you, for in verse 6 of this Psalm we are urged not delay our confession to God. Listen to these words: “Therefore, let all the godly pray to you, Lord, that they may not drown from the surging floodwaters or from the dangers and judgment that threaten their lives and may they do so while you can be found, while there is still time.”

God is saying to all of us today, don’t hide your sin and don’t delay in doing so. Instead, as we read in verse 7, let him be your hiding place, your shelter, so that he can assure and surround you with songs of deliverance and victory. Let him cover all your sins.

There have been, of course, many cover-ups throughout history, times like Watergate when information was hidden and not disclosed, times when the truth was not made known, but the greatest “cover-up” event of all time was not when truth was hidden, but when it was revealed; when Jesus Christ, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life, came into this world to become the sacrificial lamb who would die on the cross and shed his blood for you and me, blood that is enough to cover all of our sins. That, dear friends, is not a downer. That is good news. That is a reason to rejoice. That is a reason to be glad. Amen.

### **Prayer of Confession:**

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. We need your mercy and your grace to cover them completely for we have done things we should not have done, and we have left undone things we should have done. Father, hear us as we lay before you now our specific sins in silent prayer...

Lord, thank you for hearing our prayer. In the name of Jesus, the one whose blood was shed to cover all our sins. Amen.

The Words of Assurance: from Psalm 32:5,11 Then I acknowledged my sin to the Lord, and he forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore, rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart.

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