

Romans 4:4-8 The joy of complete forgiveness

Introduction

Paul knew that his understanding of the Gospel was radically different from typical Orthodox Judaism in his day, and for which he had been the most passionate advocate for so many years, prior to his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9). However, having had the good news of Jesus revealed to him he knew that his explanation of it would be challenged by his critics. In Romans 4 he has begun by looking back at how God's grace and forgiveness were received prior to the coming of Jesus. Most of Romans 4 concentrates rightly on Abraham, but a second witness, Israel's greatest king David is called to testify how God dealt with him, with reference to his sins. Did David earn God's favour by good works, as Paul's critics allege? Or was it as a result of God's amazing grace to an undeserving sinner? Why did Paul call for a second witness? He and his critics knew that Old Testament legal practice required two independent witnesses to testify for a case to be upheld in a Jewish court of law. Deuteronomy 19:15 states: *One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offence they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.* Therefore, it is very likely that the apostle has this point in mind in bring two witnesses forward to declare, through the written account of their lives from the Old Testament, that they too were saved and had their sins forgiven in a manner consistent with the Gospel Paul is proclaiming, rather than by attempting to gain merit with God through good works, for salvation.

Abraham and David are two of the best known and revered figures in Israel then and now, but in the choice of David and the Scriptural passage Paul quotes, it is clear that this famous king would have struggled by anyone's standards to earn his way to heaven by good works in the light of some of the sins he had committed. David's specific sins that are being referred to in this context included adultery, murder and his attempted cover up of this dark period of his life. At the human level he might have been successful in covering it up but God revealed the details to the prophet Nathan, his pastor, who courageously then confronted the king and called him to repentance. II Samuel 11-12 gives the details of this story. In the immediate aftermath of his repentance from sin and being restored to fellowship with God, David wrote Psalm 51. At a later time he reflected on that appalling time in his life and was so relieved and overjoyed that God was willing to forgive him. Psalm 32 is the song written at that time. David did not get away with his sin. The disastrous consequences in his family as his sons copied his moral failures, in two cases committing murder and rape respectively, plus other sources of family heartache, made it very plain that no-one simply gets away with wrongdoing. Someone may or may not receive judicial justice, but their and our accountability to God stands unchanged. How did God deal with David in this situation and on what basis was their relationship restored then and indeed on other occasions as well? It is probable that in chapter four of Romans Paul is enlarging on his answers to the questions raised in Romans 3:27-31. Here in Romans 4:1-8, with reference the first question, he is affirming very clearly that we have no grounds for boasting in our standing before God, except in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. If Abraham and David needed salvation as a result of God's unmerited favour then none of us can expect his favour on any other basis, declares Paul to his critics. What does David highlight in Psalm 32?

1. The negative assertion (Psalm 32:2)

Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them (Psalm 32:2)

Paul has highlighted two different aspects of a wonderful truth here. In the first instance Abraham has done something that is good –trusting God to take care of his future; believing His promises that God will do what He has agreed to do. As a result he was put in a position of right standing before God. In a sense this is the positive side of the gospel of grace. In this context with David he has seriously messed up and could have had no complaints if God has chosen to say: ‘I’ve had enough of you. I’m going to ‘throw the book’ at you for such heinous crimes.’ Yet this was not what happened, and some years later David could write these words: *Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them* (Psalm 32:2). A minority of people like Martin Luther and Charles Spurgeon were actively concerned prior to their conversion with how a holy God could forgive their sin and still be true to Himself. To the best of our knowledge they did not have any particular major sins that were specific problems that required attention, instead it was the principle at stake to them. In our day and cultural context far more people struggle with particular issues of sin which either they have committed or have been committed against them. In the former case there can be issues of significant guilt which has remained with them over many years, or unresolved issues around forgiveness that need to be addressed to allow the individual concerned to move forward with their life.

In our society I am convinced that there are many people who live with a huge burden of guilt which they carry often in silence, issues that they withhold from family members or work acquaintances because so often people don’t understand or because others have implied you just need ‘to get over it’, as if it is merely an act of the will to erase memories from our minds of good or bad things from our past. Simply trying to outweigh our negative failures from the past by more good works in the present may appear to be a constructive course of action, and indeed much good might be accomplished through these exertions. However, the individual concerned may feel no better for all this activity no matter how beneficial it has been to their friends or family or local community because it hasn’t addressed the root issue of an issue from the past. Some time ago I with another Christian had a conversation with a man who confessed to killing someone in a truly tragic context. He didn’t mind that other people were present and could overhear the conversation. He had duly paid the judicial price imposed by our society and served his time. He was genuinely sorry for what he had done and had been forgiven by the key people that mattered in his life –something that cannot be guaranteed under these circumstances. I can only assume that his actions had been so out of character and his sincere regrets for his actions so obvious that this course of action was perceived as the right one to take. However, his all-pervading sense of guilt overshadowed his life and coloured every moment of daily life. The good news of the Gospel as Paul has explained it and as David has testified here is so applicable to this person –and to us all when we make mistakes and need God’s forgiveness. *Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them* (Psalm 32:2). Far more prevalent in our society and for whom secular society fails to address in its counselling programmes is the guilt that is felt by many women and a smaller number of men as a result of decisions to terminate pregnancies. To the agencies carrying out abortions it is just a medical procedure removing unwanted human tissue or a foetus. Yet for these individuals dealing with the fact that ‘they killed their child’ or consented to its killing can haunt them for years to come. Years ago I got an unexpected phone call from a woman I had never met or spoken to before. From that day to this I don’t know her name and didn’t need to. She was a member of a Christian Church and had been a faithful member of it for many years. For a lot of years she had carried a dark secret that she had kept from her family, her friends and church family, because she was too ashamed to tell any of them what had happened. Her request was simple could we meet in an agreed public place where I as a pastor could hear her story and somehow help her to close that painful chapter in her life. It was a sad story of an abortion carried out without the knowledge of a

close-knit family and the pain of keeping that dark secret, which no-one had suspected, had been a heavy burden. I sought to offer assurance of the love and grace of God and His forgiveness that is granted the moment we sincerely repent of any sin. I hope and pray that she was able to have some closure of the issue and go forward released from that burden of years ago. In pastoral ministry there are a range of people that may cross our paths but once and we never see them again or know how their lives progressed, but simply entrust them to the Lord who watches over all His children. I would want to emphasize as strongly as I can that the Lord does not want His children to have the failures of the past caused by our own mistakes or the misconduct of others weighing us down and preventing us experiencing the fullness of life He desires us to experience. This does not mean we don't face fresh struggles or grief, heartaches or disappointments, that is sadly part of the human story, but that we don't get weighed down unnecessarily by things that can legitimately be brought to a point of closure and from which we can, given enough time move on from. This in serious cases will not mean forgetting they happened, that is impossible, but if we can prevent them from defining or damaging our future, with God's help, then progress has been made.

2. **The happy declaration** (Psalm 32:1)

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered (Psalm 32:1)

David did not deal with his sin at once. It took the intervention of his pastor Nathan and the inner working of the Holy Spirit to convince him to do the right thing before God. Psalm 51 records the early impressions in his heart and mind as he came to terms with what he had done.

(a) **The honest confession of sin** (Psalm 51:1-12) *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.⁴ Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight; so You are right in Your verdict and justified when You judge.⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; You taught me wisdom in that secret place.⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed rejoice.⁹ Hide Your face from my sin and blot out all my iniquity.¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.¹¹ Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me.¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me* (Psalm 51:1-12). David began by asking for God's mercy. He knew there was no point in waffling or denying the reality of what had gone on. He sought God's mercy and compassion to deal with his situation. He had no merits and could never atone by good works for the murder and mayhem he had caused in several families, not just his own, by his actions. He had caused other people to sin by collusion in his schemes. It was a complete mess. Like the tax-collector in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:13) David cries out 'God be merciful to me the sinner'. He knows he is totally reliant on God's grace and only by God's inner cleansing of his heart could his issue be addressed. He had no ground for boasting before God in the light of this mess. On the contrary the Gospel was the only hope for David. He needed God's incredible and unmerited generosity to a degree that was beyond anything he dared ask for. He opens his life to God and says: You know me inside out, better than I know myself. I would be foolish to do anything except humble myself before you. In this respect David was no different to us as he sought a pardon from God.

(b) **The fruit of confession of sin** (Psalm 32:1-2,5) *Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.² Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' And You forgave the guilt of my sin.*

God did indeed answer David's prayer of repentance and allowed for a new beginning in their relationship. Psalm 32 is a later reflection on the difference this has made in his life. It was a profoundly transformational experience for him; although he had to endure the later consequences of his actions at the human level, he did regain the joy of his salvation and as an older more humble man learned a painful lesson the hard way. Here in the opening verses of this Psalm David highlights some of the blessings he has received from God through this experience. (i) **The forgiveness of sin** *Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven* (Psalm 32:1a) The idea here is that his sins have been taken away. They are no longer attached to his account. God has separated the sinner (David) from his transgression (murder and adultery etc); although the wrongdoing had to be punished and the consequences of his actions naturally followed in civil society. It implies here that God is willing to separate the sinner's transgression and guilt from the sinner. At a human level there is no way of doing that and as a result an offender is usually –if due judicial procedure is followed, punished for their crime. Yet God, by contrast, separated us from our sins by placing them upon Jesus on the cross. Hebrews 9:28 states: ... *Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.* Peter expressed it this way in I Peter 2:24: *He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed.* Sometimes in the ancient world a murderer was sentenced not to death or life imprisonment but to carry attached to his person the corpse of his victim. Inevitably disease and decay would be the fate of the murderer from such a sentence. It is possible that Paul might have had such a picture in mind when he was speaking about sin and its attachment to us throughout our earthly lives, in these words from Romans 7:24: *What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* The good news is that he immediately answers this question in the next verse: *Thanks be to God –through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (Romans 7:25). In the light of such a glorious revelation we can rejoice with words like these from Horatio Spafford's hymn 'It is well with my soul' (C.M.P.757): *My sin- O the bliss of this glorious thought – My sin not in part, but the whole, Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more; Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.*

(ii) **The covering of sin** *Blessed is the one... whose sins are covered* (Psalm 32:1b). This is familiar vocabulary here and recognisable from his teaching in Romans 3:21-26; it refers to the covering of human sinfulness by the work of atonement performed by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. On that day after a sacrifice for his own sins, the priest took the blood from another sacrificial animal and sprinkled it on the mercy seat, on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. This special chest contained the stone tables on which the moral law, the Ten Commandments had been written. Sinful humans had broken God's law, but it was atoned for by the sacrifice of the chosen animal. An innocent victim had died in the place of the guilty. God had to maintain His holy standards but in the shedding of blood the cost of the forgiveness of sins was made plain. David had tried to hide his sin by covering it up. This was no solution at all; it was only postponing the judgement and the day of reckoning. By contrast God covered David's sin by the atoning sacrifices made in his place. In this situation the sins were not hidden, rather they were dealt with and the due punishment was laid upon Jesus our substitute and sin-bearer. In that ceremony on the Day of Atonement one goat was sacrificed and the blood shed but the other was taken away into the wilderness and released, highlighting the visual picture of the sins of the people being taken away from them. Have your sins been covered by the sacrifice of Jesus or are they still reckoned to your account? When Jesus willingly gave His life for sinful humanity on the cross it seems pointless us insisting that we will take care of our sin problem ourselves. Had that been possible in the first place then Jesus would not have gone to the cross.

(iii) **The erasure of the record of sin** *Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them* (Psalm 32:2a) This word here is from the world of the accountant or bookkeeper.

It refers to entries in an account. In essence David is saying the entry marked sin that should have been retained in our debit column has been moved across to that of Jesus. Instead our negative record has been wiped clean. It speaks of a fresh start of being a new creation in Christ. What a joy to have our record wiped clean. This I think can happen with driving licences after they have been endorsed with penalty points. If the driver commits no other motoring offences over a number of years then they can apply for a fresh driving license on which the previous offence is no longer recorded. Has your record been wiped clean? Do you want to have a fresh start with God today? It is possible by God's grace as it was for David. This was not just a one-off promise to David, but repeated in a number of other places. Jeremiah 31:34b states: *For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*' and Psalm 103:10-12 declares: *He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.* If this truth was correctly proclaimed in the Old Testament, as we accept, how much greater in the light of Jesus' death on the cross is our grasp of the significance of what this means. It is immensely reassuring to know God loves you and me this much. Yet once again on the basis of His unmerited love not as a result of us being so good He had to treat us this way!

3. **The finality of the forgiveness of sin** (Psalm 32:2)

Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt (Psalm 32:2 NLV). In life there are a few occasions when a person has the special pleasure of knowing an account has been settled for ever. Imagine making that last payment of a twenty-five year mortgage on your home or some other lengthy repayment scheme. A cause for celebration at the end! What about a person who has served twenty-five years in prison for a serious crime they did not commit who has just received confirmation that they have been totally vindicated and cleared of any association with the crime. After a similar time period probably some very different emotions? Where would we place on the emotional spectrum someone who had served a lengthy sentence for something they had committed, but are now cleared to resume their lives in society? I suspect in that context mixed emotions of happiness that the sentence has been completed, but maybe real fear of how they would fit into society again. Is it possible to rebuild your life and make a fresh start under such circumstances? Well in effect David was like the latter person, and the one he had offended by his actions was God. Yet he could look back and few years later with great joy because of the amazing treatment he had received from God. *Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt* (Psalm 32:2 NLV). Do you need a fresh start with God? Has there been something getting in the way of you putting your faith in Him? Or as a Christian do you need to renew afresh your dedication as a follower of Jesus?

David is abundantly clear. I was a sinner. I could not make myself right with God, but I did for a time try to fix my life myself, but it was a bad move as it was a failure. Psalm 32:3-4 records how he felt at that time: *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.* Thankfully this is not the last word. David had the courage to do something about it. *Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.'* And You forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:5). I hope and pray that this is our experience too, that each of us has known the joy of sins forgiven, completely, for Jesus' sake, Amen.