

Psalms, Teacher's Guide

Week 5: Forgiveness and Restored Joy

Psalm 32

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Psalm 32 is the first of the two great penitential psalms in this study (the other is Psalm 51), and it carries real doctrinal weight because it deals with the heart of the gospel: how a guilty person is forgiven. What is at stake is a clear, scriptural account of forgiveness, that it is granted by God's mercy on the basis of Christ's blood, received through genuine repentance and confession, and never earned by our own suffering or sacrifice. Paul himself quotes the psalm's opening in Romans 4 to describe the person to whom God credits righteousness apart from works, so this psalm stands very near the center of how the New Testament explains salvation.

Handle the application with care so it lands squarely in the New Covenant. For the lost person, forgiveness comes not through a 'sinner's prayer' and not through any Old Covenant sacrifice, but by hearing the gospel, believing in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repenting, confessing Him, and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27). For the Christian who sins, John teaches ongoing confession and cleansing through our Advocate (1 John 1:9–2:2). David could speak of forgiveness in advance of the cross because God forgives on the basis of what Christ would do; we look back on the cross as the accomplished ground of our pardon. Do not let the lesson drift toward the idea that confession itself earns forgiveness, or that mere private regret is the same as repentance.

This psalm is also profoundly formational, perhaps more immediately than any other in the study. Nearly everyone in the room is carrying something. The psalm names the physical and spiritual toll of hidden sin with startling honesty, and then it shows how quickly the burden lifts when we come into the light. Aim to send students home both clear about how God forgives and actually moved to stop hiding, to confess, and to recover the joy of being a forgiven person.

Question 1

Student Question:

The psalm opens, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity" (vv. 1–2). What does it mean that true blessedness begins not with our achievements but with being forgiven, and why does Scripture treat forgiveness as the foundation of a happy life rather than an optional extra?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice that the psalm opens with the same word that opened Psalm 1: "Blessed." But where Psalm 1 located blessedness in the person rooted in God's word, Psalm 32 locates it in the

person whose sin is forgiven. Together they frame the whole Christian life: we are blessed by being rightly related to God's word and by being forgiven.

Press the counter-cultural claim. Our world locates the good life in achievement, comfort, and self-actualization. Scripture locates it first in being forgiven. Until the sin problem is dealt with, no amount of success can produce a truly blessed life, because guilt poisons everything else.

Explain why forgiveness is foundational and not optional. Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), and fellowship with God is the source of all real blessing. Remove the barrier, and joy can flow; leave it, and even our pleasures are shadowed. Forgiveness is the doorway back into the relationship for which we were made.

Keep it warm. This is good news before it is duty. The psalm is not scolding; it is inviting. The happiest fact a human being can know is that their sin can be, and in Christ is, forgiven.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Blessedness grounded in forgiveness, echoing Psalm 1's 'blessed.'
- The contrast with the world's achievement-based vision of the good life.
- Sin as the separation that must be removed for fellowship with God (Isaiah 59:2).
- Forgiveness as the doorway back into the relationship we were made for.
- The gospel as good news before it is duty.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Scripture make forgiveness the foundation of a blessed life?
- How does unresolved guilt poison the other good things in life?
- What would change if you truly believed forgiveness is your greatest blessing?

Question 2

Student Question:

David says that while he kept silent, his very bones "wasted away" and his strength "dried up" (vv. 3–4). Can you recall a season when carrying something hidden affected even your body, your sleep, your peace, your energy? What did that teach you about the cost of keeping sin in the dark?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the vivid physical language of verses 3–4. David is not exaggerating for poetic effect; hidden sin really does take a toll on body and mind. Invite honest reflection on seasons when carrying something hidden disturbed sleep, drained energy, or stole peace.

Help students see the integration of the person. We are not souls trapped in unrelated bodies; what burdens the conscience often surfaces in the body, in tension, exhaustion, and unrest. David's testimony validates what many have felt but never connected to unconfessed sin.

Move gently toward hope. The point is not to deepen anyone's misery but to show that the burden has a cause and therefore a cure. The same David who groaned in verses 3–4 shouts for joy in verse 11. The toll of hidden sin is real, and so is the relief of confession.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The real toll of unconfessed sin on body and mind.
- The integration of body, conscience, and soul.
- Hidden sin as a diagnosable burden with a remedy.
- The movement from groaning to gladness available to the confessor.

Discussion Prompts

- When has carrying something hidden affected even your body or sleep?
- Why do conscience and body so often suffer together?
- How does knowing the cause point you toward the cure?

Question 3

Student Question:

David uses three different words for what God forgives, transgression, sin, and iniquity (vv. 1–2, 5), and three pictures of forgiveness, lifted away, covered, and not counted against us. What do these different words and images together teach us about how thoroughly God deals with the sin of those who come to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk through the three words for sin in verses 1–2 and 5. 'Transgression' pictures rebellion, crossing a line. 'Sin' pictures missing the mark, falling short. 'Iniquity' pictures crookedness, the twistedness in us. Together they cover the full range of our wrongdoing, nothing is left outside.

Then walk through the three images of forgiveness. 'Forgiven' means lifted up and carried away, the weight removed. 'Covered' means hidden from view, no longer exposed to judgment. 'Counts no iniquity' is an accounting term, the debt not charged to our account. God forgives comprehensively and from every angle.

Stress the thoroughness. God does not forgive partially or grudgingly. Micah 7:19 says He casts our sins into the depths of the sea; Psalm 103 says as far as the east is from the west. The piling up of words and pictures is meant to convince the doubting heart that the forgiveness is total.

Apply pastorally to those who cannot feel forgiven. Many believers intellectually know they are forgiven but live as though the debt still hangs over them. This verse is medicine for them: God has lifted it, covered it, and refuses to count it. Their feelings must learn to follow the fact.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Three words for sin (transgression, sin, iniquity) covering the full range of wrongdoing.
- Three images of forgiveness (lifted, covered, not counted).
- The thoroughness and completeness of God's forgiveness (Micah 7:19; Psalm 103:12).
- Forgiveness as fact, which our feelings must learn to follow.
- Comfort for believers who struggle to feel forgiven.

Discussion Prompts

- What do the three words for sin together tell us about ourselves?
- What do the three pictures of forgiveness tell us about God?
- How would you help someone who knows they are forgiven but cannot feel it?

Question 4

Student Question:

David's relief came only when he stopped covering his sin and said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" (v. 5). What makes genuine confession so hard for you, pride, fear, shame, the wish to seem to have it all together? Which of those most often keeps you from coming clean with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question names the barriers to confession. David's turning point was the decision to stop covering and start confessing. Ask students to identify what most often keeps them from that decision.

Name the usual culprits honestly: pride that hates to admit fault, fear of consequences or exposure, shame that believes the sin is too ugly to speak, and the deep wish to appear to have it all together. Each is a different lock on the same door.

Counter each with truth. Pride is answered by the gospel that levels us all as sinners saved by grace. Fear is answered by the character of a God who forgives the moment we confess. Shame is answered by the cross, where the worst has already been borne. The image-management is answered by the freedom of being known and loved anyway.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride, fear, shame, and image-management as barriers to confession.
- The gospel leveling all as sinners saved by grace.

- God's forgiving character as the answer to fear.
- The cross as the answer to shame.
- Confession as the path to the freedom of being known and loved.

Discussion Prompts

- Which barrier, pride, fear, shame, or image, most blocks your confession?
- How does the gospel answer that particular barrier?
- What would it free you to do if you truly believed God forgives at confession?

Question 5

Student Question:

David testifies, "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity... and you forgave" (v. 5). Notice how directly forgiveness follows confession, with no period of earning it back. What does this teach us about the character of God toward repentant sinners, and how does it guard us against thinking we must somehow pay for our own pardon?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the speed of verse 5: "I said, 'I will confess'... and you forgave." The forgiveness follows the confession immediately. There is no probation, no period of penance, no earning back of favor. This is the heart of grace.

Guard against a subtle error here. The point is not that the act of confessing earns forgiveness as a kind of payment; rather, confession is the honest turning that receives a forgiveness God freely grants on the basis of Christ's work. We do not pay for pardon by our confession or our sorrow; we receive what mercy offers.

Contrast this with every system in which people try to atone for themselves, through self-punishment, through making it up to God, through a season of misery they hope will balance the scales. The gospel says the scales were balanced at the cross. We bring nothing to purchase forgiveness; we bring honest repentance and receive it.

Anchor it in God's character. The reason forgiveness can follow confession so quickly is that God is, by nature, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love" (Exodus 34:6). He is not reluctant to forgive; He is eager. The father in Luke 15 runs to meet the son.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Forgiveness following confession immediately, by grace.
- Confession as receiving, not purchasing, forgiveness.
- The rejection of self-atonement and penance as means of pardon.
- The cross as the ground on which forgiveness is freely given.

- God's eager, merciful character (Exodus 34:6; Luke 15:20).

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it important that forgiveness follows confession with no earning in between?
- How do people try to 'pay' for their own forgiveness, and why does it fail?
- What does the speed of God's forgiveness tell you about His character?

Question 6

Student Question:

David moves from groaning to gladness, ending the psalm with, "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy" (v. 11). Has the joy of being forgiven grown dull for you, taken for granted or forgotten? What would it look like to recover a genuine gladness at being a forgiven person?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes up the joy of verse 11. Forgiveness is meant to produce gladness, even shouting joy. Ask students honestly whether that joy has gone dull, whether being forgiven has become a background fact they rarely feel.

Diagnose the dullness. Joy fades when forgiveness is assumed rather than remembered, when we stop marveling that our sin is actually lifted. Familiarity, not doubt, is often the thief. We forget what we were rescued from.

Prescribe the recovery. Joy returns as we keep the size of our debt and the greatness of our pardon in view, often through remembering the cross at the Lord's Table, through honest confession that keeps the relationship fresh, and through gratitude. Encourage one concrete practice for recovering the gladness of being forgiven.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Forgiveness meant to produce real, even exuberant, joy.
- Joy fading through familiarity and assumption, not only doubt.
- Remembering the cross (especially at the Lord's Table) as a renewer of joy.
- Gratitude as the natural air of the forgiven life.

Discussion Prompts

- Has the joy of being forgiven gone dull for you? Why?
- What tends to steal that joy over time?
- What practice could help you recover gladness at being forgiven?

Question 7

Student Question:

After being forgiven, David hears God say, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go” (v. 8), and warns against being “like a horse or a mule, without understanding” that must be controlled by bit and bridle (v. 9). What does this teach us about the relationship between forgiveness and a new life of glad obedience, and why is the forgiven life meant to be one of willing instruction rather than forced compliance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 8–9 turn from forgiveness to the new life that follows it. God promises to instruct and teach the forgiven one, and warns against being like a stubborn horse or mule that must be forced. Forgiveness is not the end of the story; it is the beginning of glad discipleship.

Teach the relationship clearly. Forgiveness and obedience are not rivals. We are not forgiven so that we can keep sinning freely (Romans 6:1–2), nor do we obey in order to earn a forgiveness already given. Rather, the forgiven heart, grateful and free, wants to follow the God who pardoned it.

Draw out the contrast in the imagery. The horse and mule obey only under compulsion, bit and bridle, because they have no understanding and no love for their master. God wants children who follow with understanding, willingly, because they trust and love Him. Grace aims to produce the second, not the first.

Apply it to the Christian life as a lifelong walk. After we obey the gospel, discipleship is a daily following of the Lord’s instruction. The forgiven life is meant to be teachable, responsive, and faithful to the end (Hebrews 3:12–14), not a single transaction followed by drift.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Forgiveness as the beginning of glad discipleship, not the end of the story.
- Obedience and forgiveness as partners, not rivals (Romans 6:1–2).
- Willing, understanding obedience versus forced compliance (the horse and mule).
- Grace producing love-driven obedience.
- Discipleship as a lifelong, teachable walk (Hebrews 3:12–14).

Discussion Prompts

- How are forgiveness and obedience related rather than opposed?
- What is the difference between following God like a child and like a stubborn mule?
- Where is God calling you to be more teachable in the forgiven life?

Question 8**Student Question:**

David urges that “everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found” (v. 6), confessing while there is still time and not putting it off. Is there a confession or a reconciliation you have been delaying? What would it mean to take David’s urgency seriously and not wait?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes up the urgency of verse 6: pray “at a time when you may be found,” while there is still opportunity. Confession and reconciliation delayed tend to become confession and reconciliation never made.

Help students see the cost of delay. Procrastinated confession lets sin settle deeper, hardens the heart, and prolongs the very misery David described. ‘Later’ is the enemy of ‘blessed.’ The mercy available now should not be presumed upon for tomorrow.

Press gently toward action. Is there a specific confession to God, or a reconciliation with a person, that has been put off? Encourage one concrete step this week, while the door is open.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The urgency of confessing and reconciling without delay.
- Delay as a hardener of the heart and prolonger of misery.
- Not presuming on tomorrow’s mercy (today as the day of salvation, 2 Corinthians 6:2).
- The danger of perpetual ‘later.’

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a confession or reconciliation you have been delaying?
- What does delay tend to cost us?
- What one step could you take this week while the door is open?

Question 9

Student Question:

The apostle Paul quotes this psalm’s opening as a description of the person God counts righteous apart from their own works (Romans 4:6–8). How does the New Testament show us the way God’s forgiveness actually reaches us, through the blood of Christ rather than our own sacrifices or efforts, and how does a lost person come to receive that forgiveness, and a Christian keep walking in it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with Paul’s use of the psalm. In Romans 4:6–8 he quotes Psalm 32:1–2 to describe “the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.” David’s experience of

free forgiveness becomes Paul's proof that God justifies guilty people by His grace, received through faith, not earned by merit. This places the psalm near the heart of the gospel.

Make plain the ground of forgiveness: the blood of Christ. David offered no sacrifice that could finally take away sin; the Old Covenant sacrifices could not (Hebrews 10:4). God forgave David, and forgives us, on the basis of what Christ would accomplish and has now accomplished at the cross (Romans 3:25–26; Ephesians 1:7). Be careful not to import Old Covenant sacrifice as the means of pardon; the one sufficient sacrifice is Christ Himself.

Then teach clearly how a lost person receives this forgiveness, consistent with the New Testament pattern. When the crowd at Pentecost was cut to the heart and asked what to do, Peter did not lead them in a 'sinner's prayer.' He said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The gospel response is to hear, believe in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repent of sin, confess Him, and be baptized into Christ (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27; Mark 16:16). Forgiveness is God's free gift, received in God's appointed way.

Then teach how the Christian keeps walking in forgiveness. Believers still sin, and John writes to them: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We have an Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1). Ongoing confession keeps the relationship open and the joy fresh; it is not a re-purchasing of salvation but the honest housekeeping of a child with a forgiving Father.

Guard the boundaries one more time. Forgiveness does not come by a feeling, a formula prayer, or our own suffering; it comes by grace through the blood of Christ, received in repentance, confession, and baptism, and maintained in a faithful walk. Keep the wonder central: the same free pardon David tasted is offered fully to us in Jesus.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul's use of Psalm 32 to teach forgiveness credited apart from works (Romans 4:6–8).
- The blood of Christ, not Old Covenant sacrifice, as the ground of pardon (Hebrews 10:4; Ephesians 1:7).
- The lost receiving forgiveness through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4).
- No 'sinner's prayer' as the means of salvation; God's appointed gospel response instead.
- Ongoing confession and cleansing for the Christian through our Advocate (1 John 1:9–2:1).
- Forgiveness as God's free gift received in God's appointed way, not earned by suffering or formula.

Discussion Prompts

- On what basis does God forgive sin, and why not through our own efforts or sacrifices?
- How does the New Testament say a lost person receives forgiveness?

- How does a Christian keep walking in forgiveness after they sin?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole psalm, from the crushing weight of hidden sin to the shout of joy at being forgiven. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through it. What is the single truth from Psalm 32 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone traces the whole movement, from the crushing silence of hidden sin to the shout of joy, and asks students to name one way Jesus is forming them. Give them quiet, and expect this one to land deeply.

Press toward the specific. For some the formation is to finally stop hiding and confess; for others it is to recover the joy they have lost; for others it is to extend to someone else the forgiveness they have received. Help each name their next step.

Close by lifting their eyes to the cross, where the iniquity of us all was laid on Christ, and to the Father who runs to meet returning sinners. The psalm ends in singing, and so should the lesson. The forgiven life is a glad life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The movement from hidden sin to the joy of forgiveness as a pattern for the Christian.
- Christ as the ground of the pardon the psalm celebrates.
- Extending to others the forgiveness we have received (Ephesians 4:32).
- The forgiven life as a glad, singing life.

Discussion Prompts

- Where on the psalm's road, hiding, confessing, or rejoicing, do you most need to move?
- What single truth from Psalm 32 will you carry into this week?
- Is there someone to whom you need to extend the forgiveness you have received?