

The Joy of Forgiveness

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[0 : 00] But do keep your Bibles open at Psalm 32. Let me pray for us and then we'll think through! Heavenly Father, we want to know the joy of the righteous that David speaks of. So would! you open our hearts to receive your word now and give us the courage to respond to it.

In Jesus' name. Amen. There is a joy available, a deep well of happiness, a source of peace and contentment that is only known to the true Christian. And in comparison, all the joys of family and experience and beauty, all the joys of celebrating with days like this, all the things that we might buy with our money or access through our position, they all pale into insignificance by comparison. And according to this Psalm, Psalm 32, this kind of happiness flows from one source.

The knowledge that all our sins and transgressions have been wiped clean, that all our past failings have been covered over, that our guilt has gone, and that as a consequence we can stand confidently before God, knowing that we are loved, accepted and welcomed at his beloved son or daughter.

That, according to Psalm 32, is the source of the greatest joy possible. How does that work? How can that be? It's because it frees us from things that seek to crush us and grieve us and humiliate us and ultimately will destroy us. And secondly, because it frees us to enjoy the kind of deep fellowship with God that brings us that deep, lasting joy. It frees us from things and it brings us into things.

And if you come here today and in the back of your mind, whenever in those moments of quiet you are, you know you are carrying guilt or shame with you, if things in your past continue to haunt you, if you know that voice inside you that says that what you did was so bad that you can never know peace with God, that he will never accept you, then I hope the next 20 minutes or so will help you see that that isn't true. And that you'll know, you'll leave this place knowing that whoever you are, whatever you have done, God's forgiveness and grace is available to you today, just as it is to Arthur, just as it is to me. But please don't stop there. Don't just walk out thinking, actually, I've got God's forgiveness. Hurrah. Life as a Christian begins when we receive God's forgiveness, but it isn't where it ends. Now, don't get me wrong. If you have been bowed low by failures and sins, if you're haunted by guilt and shame, if the gap between the person you know you should be and the person you know that you are breaks your heart, then as you come to experience God's amazing forgiveness, it will be utterly glorious. It will be like a massive weight has been lifted off your shoulders.

[3 : 04] And the peace that will flow into your heart as a result will be truly wonderful. But that's only the beginning. That's where the Christian life begins. That's what makes it possible to bring us to the kind of overwhelming joy that David speaks of here. See, David speaks of forgiveness, bringing this joy because it allows us to enter into a living, loving, deep, intimate, close fellowship with Almighty God. That's where the joy grows. And that's where our lasting happiness is found.

Those of you who know me, this won't surprise you, because you know that I'm far from perfect. But occasionally, sometimes more than that, I do things or say things that upset my wife. And even though I'm a man and obviously, therefore, emotionally crippled, I can sense that something has gone wrong. I can sense a coldness, a distance, and something needs to be done about it. But imagine that one day I did something or said something far more serious. And at the end of that day, we're sleeping in different bedrooms. The next day, we're eating at different times. And we go through a while when we're not actually speaking at all. Something that serious. And when I come to my senses and realise that actually it was absolutely my fault, and I go to Judy and I say, my darling, I'm so sorry for what I did and what I said. What do I want from her? Well, I want her forgiveness, don't I? I want her to say,

I forgive you. But is that all I want? Well, of course it isn't. I want our relationship restored. I want that closeness back. I want Judy back. That's why as we think about the joy of forgiveness from God, we need to keep in mind that the joy of forgiveness is just the beginning.

Our relationship with God is stunted at the moment. It can't work while there is sin there. But forgiveness is just the beginning. It leads to the joy of a full relationship with God. So how do we get this joy that flows from that? And if we once had it, how do we get it back?

And if we know it now, how do we make sure that we don't lose it? Those are the three questions we're going to talk about today. But before we get there, let me just take us back a little more and help us understand why we need God's forgiveness in the first place. Because unless we get that right, nothing else will make sense. So why do we need God's forgiveness? Sometimes kid songs that we learn in Sunday school carry around with them amazingly deep truths.

[5 : 47] When our grandson William was about seven, I think he was on a train and he was listening to his walkman and singing along to a song that he was listening to. No one else could hear it, but William was doing the echoes. And it went like this. God is a holy God. So William would go, God is a holy God.

We can't be friends because of our sin. We can't be friends because of our sin. Jesus died to wash us clean. When we put our trust in him, God opens his arms and welcomes us in. God opens his arms and welcomes us in. I'm not sure what the people in the carriage thought. But that little song explains wonderfully why we need God's forgiveness. It speaks of God's holiness. It speaks of our sin being a blockage to that. And it tells us what God has done to bring us back to himself. Because God is a holy God. He is perfectly light, perfectly true, absolutely good. And there is no darkness in him.

You and I are not like that. You and I are like that. We have sinned in thought and word and deeds. We do things wrong, sometimes through negligence because we're not paying attention, sometimes through weakness, sometimes because we deliberately want to do it. And it's not just what we do, but what we are. There is something in us which is broken. We are marred deep down. That's why we never have to teach children how to be naughty. And it's why even as adults, there are times when we know what is right and we don't do it. Our sin and our sinfulness, and David uses both of those kind of words here, make us unfit for God's presence. And what's worse, there is nothing we can do to change ourselves. We can't go through some religious ceremony to get it all washed away.

We can't do lots of good works to undo it. Our only hope is that God will step in and do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. And how does that little song end? Jesus died to wash us clean.

It ends with the good news that God has done something outrageous. Out of his great love for us, God became one of us in Jesus Christ. He lived the perfect life we should live but can't.

[8 : 14] And then he died the death our sins deserve. And he did that so that Christ's perfect life might match up to the righteous requirements of the law and that his death might pay the price of our sin so that God's justice might be satisfied. So because of Jesus' life and death, there is now a way that our sin can be dealt with. Without that, we are stuck away from God, both now and in eternity.

But Jesus had made a way for us to be forgiven, to know the joy of that deep fellowship with that brings. Because of him, this kind of joy David speaks of is available for me and for you. But it isn't automatic.

It isn't automatic. So how do we get this great joy in God? What David tells us in the psalm, doesn't he? Verses one and two, begin with the word blessed or happy. But not just, hey, I'm happy my football team.

This is a deep happiness, a deep, deep joy, a lasting joy, overwhelming pleasure. And David says it comes when we know our transgressions are forgiven, when our sins are covered and that our guilt will no longer be counted against us. It's knowing that God has forgiven us that opens up the way to true joy.

And how do we get that? Well, David tells us as well, doesn't he? It's through making an honest, humble confession to God and asking for his forgiveness. I think we often find that difficult, actually. We live in a culture that tells us always to think the best of ourselves, that we can do it, that we are worth it, that we can conquer all. Our culture tells us to think the very best of ourselves, to cover over our faults, to excuse our failures, to find someone else to blame.

[10:13] If you ever see a politician standing up to make their resignation speech, that's what you'll see. Yeah, I've done something that was silly, wasn't really my fault, and I'm sorry I got caught.

That's what they say. There's no honesty there, is there? There's no repentance. But forgiveness from God requires absolute honesty. Seeing the content of our lives and the content of our character, not against the people who get on the front page of the Daily Mirror, or the Daily Star, or the Daily Telegraph, whatever. You know, we can compare ourselves to them, and we always look good.

No, comparing ourselves against God's perfect standards. If we want the joy of forgiveness, we need to be absolutely honest before God. On its own, that may well crush us, when we see how far we have fallen. But if we carry on and do what David says here, well, that isn't the case. And what does David suggest? He says, come to God for forgiveness. He doesn't just mean a quick sorry, and go and do the same things again. When the Bible talks about forgiveness and repentance, it means a number of things. A sorrow over our sin, so we know what we've done is wrong, and we wish we hadn't done it. And a determination that with God's help, we won't repeat it. We'll live differently by God's commands. If we stop at just recognising our guilt, we're going to be crushed by failure. If we seek God's forgiveness without honesty or a willingness to change, we will never know the joy David speaks of here. But if we come with honest humility, wanting God's help to change, then this is the promise from 1 John chapter 1. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

not just some of it, not just a bit of it, but all of it. Absolute honesty before God, humble confession to God, brings about full forgiveness from God, and that leads to that deep fellowship with God. And it's there that we find the joy that David knows.

If you're a Christian this morning, you would have made that step at one point. You would have come to God in confession, turned to him and asked for his forgiveness. And you will have known some measure of that deep joy. If you're not yet a Christian, then that is available for you today, no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter what level of guilt you carry around. If you want to know that forgiveness today, then as we come to communion later on, why don't you come to the rail and kneel there and make your confession to God there and receive the gift of forgiveness that Jesus lived and died to give you. We get true joy through seeking and receiving God's forgiveness, being drawn into a deep fellowship with him. But according to David, it's also possible for us, having received that to experience distancing from God, to lose that closeness, to feel as if our hearts are heavy and our strength is wasting away. So how might we lose that joy? Well, verses three and four tell us that, don't they? When I kept silent, and David's talking about his sin and disobedience, when I kept silent, my bones wasted away. When we lose our joy, when we drift away from God, repent and fall back into sin. And although our consciences may be pricked and maybe even screaming at us, we're refusing to come to God and repent. Like many others of the Psalms, we don't quite know what was going on in David's life when he wrote this. But I know that there has been a time in my life when I felt exactly as he felt here. I'd heard God's call. I knew the way my life should be lived.

[14:23] And I was ignoring both of them. I thought that if I didn't think about it, didn't dwell on that fact, the problem would go away.

It didn't. It didn't. The days were okay. I was busy. That was fine. But in the nights where the dreams came and the peace left, and those nights, those dreams and nights were dark and disturbing.

When I did think about it, I tried to excuse myself. You ever tried to do that? I wasn't really wrong because. Like the church in Corinth we thought about earlier this summer. I brought to mind my freedom in Christ. Lord, there's nothing in your word that says I have to do this. So therefore, maybe it's okay.

I'd lift up one part of God's word against another and kind of close the Bible down a few pages. And say, actually, there's some really good news here, Lord. Just put those bits on my mind.

But that didn't work either. I knew that was daft. And then I looked for someone else to blame. Some circumstances or actions of other people that had forced me into thinking this way, but actually there was no one to blame but me.

[15:43] And the more I refused to God to come honestly and to seek his forgiveness, the more it felt as if the hand of the Lord was on me. That the weight of my conscience was getting heavier and heavier as the day went through.

It took me about eight months to come to my senses, to be honest with myself, to find the courage to seek God's forgiveness. But I have to tell you, on that night when I finally opened up before God in prayer, when I poured out my heart to him, on that night I knew more about God's love than I had ever done before. Because on that night I knew what it meant to be truly forgiven, to be washed clean, to be secure and precious in his sight, to be a child of God.

I knew it that night. Now it isn't always the case, but far more often than not, if we do not feel close to God, if we do not know his joy in our lives, it's more often than not because we have distanced ourselves from God, from some sin, or because we have refused to repent.

It might not be a great act of deliberate defiance, it might not be some front page making scandalous wickedness, but somewhere in our hearts and our lives, we will have ignored God's commands, denied his truth, and taken God off the throne of our lives and replaced him with someone else or something else.

And as we close our minds, that small voice of our conscience, as we busy ourselves with other things, as we make excuses or blame people or circumstances. So that coldness and that distance from God grows and grows and grows until our joy in Christ has run dry.

[17:28] Our faith may still remain, but it won't feel like it. And our lives certainly won't show the joy of the Lord. That's how you feel today.

Can I encourage you to examine yourself honestly before God and turn to him again? Why not over today or tomorrow, spend some time in Psalm 32, read it again.

Read Psalm 51, Psalm 139. Meditate a little bit on the early chapters of 1 John. Remember that being a Christian is about just keeping a moral code or coming to church on Sunday.

It's a fellowship with God through Jesus where we know the joy of the Lord as we walk and talk and live with him. How do we gain this joy?

By honest, humble confession to God. How do we lose this joy? Through a failure to repent when we wander away. How do we keep this joy? How do we keep it?

[18:29] Well, based on what we've said already, this won't come as a surprise. We keep this joy by continuing to live in fellowship with God through obedience to God's word and swift repentance when we fail.

Down in verse eight, it's the Lord's voice, not David's voice that takes up the song. And what does he say? He says, I will instruct you and lead you in the way you should go.

And God doesn't do that from a voice on high or from a dry book. God does that by bringing his word to life by his spirit in us and walking with us through life, showing us, leading us in the right paths.

That's the fellowship we've spoken about. God has spoken to us in his word and his word never changes, but he doesn't leave us to obey and follow on our own.

He leads us through life. The Lord is walking the right path and he invites us to walk with him. If only we will. And if we fail, if we wander off or slip up and feel that distance between us and God growing, what do we do?

[19:39] How do we restore that fellowship again? Well, Psalm 32 has been telling us, hasn't it? In honest, humble repentance before the foot of the cross.

That's, see, when we look at Jesus on the cross, the means by which we can be forgiven, we see there both the reality of our sin, because that's why Jesus had to die, and the cost of our sin.

But it's also there that we see the wonder of God's love and grace in all its glorious fullness. If we want to know the deep and lasting joy that flows only from a close relationship with God, it is to the cross that we must begin and the cross that we must come and at the cross we must stay.

Because it's in the death of Jesus in our place that we find the means for our forgiveness and the doorway to true and lasting fellowship with God. That's where the joy is.

That's where the joy is. You want real joy today? Come to God in honest confession and walk with him. There's nothing like it.

[20:53] Amen.