

How to Deal With Guilt

A Study of Psalm 32

Characteristic of Completeness: Integrity

Big Idea: Don't conceal sin; confess it.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 51:1-19; 103:12; Proverbs 28:13; Isaiah 53:4-6; Romans 5:6-11; Ephesians 2:4-9; 1 John 1:8-9; 4:9-11

Introduction:

- A. Guilt is at the heart of much human suffering.
1. One counselor has said, "I'll never get used to it. There is no box big enough to hold all the persons with guilt."¹
 2. Talk at length to people who are depressed, lonely, grieving, abused, addicted, terminally ill, or struggling with marital problems and you will find many people experiencing guilt.
 - "I feel guilty because I'm wasting my life."
 - "I feel guilty because I'll never measure up."
 - "I feel guilty because I hit my children."
 - "I feel guilty because of my sexual immorality."
 - "I feel guilty because I'm divorced."
 - "I feel guilty because my children are in trouble."
- The list is endless.
- B. How would you diagnose your own level of guilt this morning? Here's a little self test offered by a group of well-known psychologists. See how many of the following eight statements describe you:
1. Gloom and doom are my specialty. I can out-worry anybody.
 2. I apologize all the time. I misread people's reactions to me and fear that I have angered or disappointed them. "I'm sorry" is one of my favorite phrases. "It's all my fault" is another.
 3. I don't know how to respond to a compliment. Rather than say, "Thank you" when I'm complimented, I usually negate the kind words by mentioning my shortcomings.

¹ Earl D. Wilson, *Resources for Christian Counseling: Counseling and Guilt, Resources for Christian Counselors Series*, vol. 8, Gary D. Collins, ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 11.

4. I feel fragmented. Because I overcommit myself and say “yes” too often, I feel pulled in a dozen directions.
5. I frequently overwork myself so I don’t have time to dwell on my guilt.
6. I worry that God is keeping score. I hear people talking about the love and forgiveness of God, but to me God is watching my mistakes and figuring out how He’s going to punish me for my wrongs.
7. I feel I constantly have to justify my right to exist. No matter how much I’ve achieved, I feel inadequate.
8. I don’t deserve to be happy.

According to the experts, these statements are typical of guilt-ridden people. They say if you identified with two or more of them, you are probably carrying excessive guilt.²

- C. How do you deal with guilt? I want to turn to the Bible for some answers. Specifically, we’re going to be studying Psalm 32 this morning. It is a psalm about guilt.
- D. The ► superscription of Psalm 32 gives us a couple of pieces of information.
 1. First, it says that ► David wrote the psalm. This will be useful later on, when we consider the kind of guilt David himself experienced as a possible context for this psalm.
 2. Second, it says that this is ► a Maskil. This description is given to 13 of the psalms in the Bible. The term Maskil is probably from a Hebrew root word meaning, “to be prudent, circumspect, wise—to have insight.”³ As such, it may be labeling this psalm as an instructive psalm or a psalm of understanding.⁴ Indeed, some have classified Psalm 32 as a wisdom psalm. Others classify it as a penitential psalm or even a psalm of thanksgiving because it does have themes of repentance and thanksgiving.
- F. ► Regardless of its classification, Psalm 32 gives us some great information about guilt and how to deal with it.
 1. But, it’s good to keep in mind that the information is presented in a poetic way. There is parallelism and metaphorical language. And, the thoughts

² Frank Minirth, Paul Meier, and Stephen Arterburn, *The Complete Life Encyclopedia*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 325-6.

³ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind, Book 1*, (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1988), 109.

⁴ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19*, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Baker, eds. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 264.

expressed are not always in a tidy, chronological sequence like a term paper or instruction manual might present them.

2. We're going to be going through Psalm 32 line by line in order, but along the way, I'll be using this ► diagram to cast the elements of the psalm in a more sequential way to help you see the logic of it. It'll be on the screen and it's in the sermon notes. [The diagram is shown at the end of this transcript.]

I. Let's begin by considering ► Verses 1 and 2.

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

- 1 How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
Whose sin is covered!
- 2 How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit!

A. I want you to notice the three words here that are used to describe human wrongdoing or misconduct. There's ► transgression. There's ► sin. And, there's ► iniquity. Now, we can take these three words and ► transfer them to our diagram to indicate that the starting point for our discussion is the guilt that comes from transgression, sin, and iniquity.

1. "Transgression" is an act of rebellion and disloyalty.⁵
2. "Sin" is an act that misses God's will, often intentionally.⁶
3. "Iniquity" is misconduct often associated with a conscious and willful intent to do wrong.⁷

David doesn't present these as discrete categories of sin, but as interrelated synonyms that cover all the nuances of wrongdoing.

B. Now, ► I want you to notice the three words in Verses 1 and 2 that are used to describe the Lord's cleansing of sin. Sin is ► forgiven. Sin is ► covered. And, sin is ► not imputed. We can ► transfer these terms to our diagram as results of responding to guilt properly. Thus far into the psalm we still aren't told exactly how to respond to guilt properly. We just have some of the results of responding to guilt properly. I told you that things aren't in a tidy sequence here. This is poetic.

1. To "forgive" sin literally means to carry away or remove sin and guilt.⁸

⁵ Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1991), 271.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ VanGemeren, 272.

2. To “cover” sin means to atone for sin, making it a matter of the past not to be brought up again.⁹
3. To not “impute” sin means that it’s not counted. It’s not charged to our account. It doesn’t count against us.¹⁰

Again, these are all interrelated synonyms that together emphasize the completeness of God’s forgiveness.

- C. Now, to be forgiven is a really good thing—so good in fact that the person who is forgiven is described by our ► text as blessed. Verse 1 says, “How ► blessed is he.” Verse 2 says, “How ► blessed is the man.” So, we can enter being ► blessed into our diagram as a byproduct of being forgiven.

What does it mean to be blessed? It means to be very happy.¹¹ The original Hebrew word is plural as a means of emphasis.¹² So, it means to be happy many times over. The idea is one of multiplied, numberless blessings.¹³

You want to know how to be blessed like this don’t you? You want to know to respond properly to guilt so you can be blessed, right? You want to know what goes in ► that box in our diagram, don’t you? Too bad, we’re not there yet. I told you, this is poetic.

II. Let’s move on to ► Verses 3 and 4.

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

- 3 When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
- 4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away *as* with the fever heat of summer.
[Don’t read] Selah

- A. Notice the ► weird word that is sitting by itself at the end of Verse 4. Most people don’t know that this is actually a Hebrew reference to David’s girlfriend Sheila. Not really. Selah signifies a pause or crescendo or musical interlude. It’s the author’s way of saying, “Stop and think about what I just said. Let it soak in.”
- B. ► In these verses, David is thinking back to a time when he did not deal with his own guilt in the proper way. He responded to his own guilt by keeping silent about it. And, the results were miserable. We can transfer this information to our ► diagram in this

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, D.J. Wiseman, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 133.

¹² Herbert Lockyer, Sr., *Psalms: A Devotional Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 127.

¹³ Swindoll, 110.

way. David's response to his guilt was that he ► kept silent. And the results included his ► body wasted away, daily groaning, God's hand heavy upon him, and his vitality drained.

- C. Keeping silent is way of trying to hide our guilt from God. It's a form of denial. And, it leads to big problems spiritually, emotionally, and physically. It brings alienation from God, and can bring with it depression, emotional pain, and physical weakness. It has been estimated that over 80% of all illness today may be psychosomatic in origin.¹⁴

To be sure, not all emotional or physical suffering can be tied to personal sins. Just because you're sick doesn't mean you personally have done something wrong to cause your illness. But, if I have unresolved sin in my life, I will suffer for it. David did.

- D. What did David do anyway? What was his sin? We can't be absolutely certain which ones he's talking about because he doesn't say. But, many Bible scholars believe David is referring to his sin with a woman named Bathsheba, recorded in 2 Samuel 11. You see when David was king of Israel, he had an adulteress affair with Bathsheba, and he arranged to have Bathsheba's husband killed. So, David committed adultery and murder.
- E. Some of you may be like me. I'm tempted to think, "I could never do something that bad." When I think that way, I'm deceiving myself. I've got the very same stuff in me that David had in him. In fact, our text gives us a clue that self-deception is a part of the wrong response to our own sinfulness. Look back at ► Verse 2 for a moment. It says,

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

2 How blessed is the man to whom the LORD
does not impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no ► deceit!

I believe this "deceit" includes self-deceit—the kind of deceit that says, "I'm really not that bad. I really don't need to be forgiven. I'm doing just fine." The fact is we are all sinners who desperately need to be forgiven. ► First John 1:8 says,

^{NAU} 1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, ► we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

We are deceiving ourselves if we think we don't have the same sinful stuff in us that David had in him. So, we could add to our ► diagram the idea of being deceived under the wrong response to guilt.

¹⁴ Donald Williams, *Psalms 1-72, Mastering the Old Testament, vol. 13*, Lloyd J. Ogilvie, ed. (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1986), 242.

III. Let's move on to ► Verse 5 where we have modeled for us the proper response to guilt. David says to God,

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

5 I acknowledged my sin to You,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD";
And You forgave the guilt of my sin.
Selah

- A. Just as we have three words for sin and three words for forgiveness, we also have three words for how we are to deal with guilt. First, it is to be ► acknowledged to God. Second, it is ► not to be hidden from God. Third, it is to be ► confessed to God. When David did that, God forgave him.
- B. We could transfer this information to our diagram ► this way, showing that the proper response to guilt is to acknowledge it, not hide it, and confess it to God. These are all synonyms that represent an openness and integrity before God. With a contrite and repentant heart, we are to confess our sins to God and seek His forgiveness.
- C. We can now stand back and look at our diagram and see that we have the basics in place. ► Given that we are all guilty of sin, we can respond to this truth one of two ways. ► We can conceal it, in which case we're going to suffer. Or we can ► confess it, in which case we're going to be forgiven and blessed.

This whole idea is summarized pretty well by ► Proverbs 28:13, which says,

^{NAU} Proverbs 28:13 ► He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who ► confesses and forsakes *them* will find compassion.

Don't conceal sin; confess it. That's the big idea of my sermon: ► Don't conceal sin; confess it. Don't hide it, stuff it, conceal it, spin it, rationalize it, or try to pretty it up. Instead, confess it, reveal it, admit it, disclose it, tell it like it is.

This is about integrity. In fact, ► integrity is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. It's about the outside matching the inside.

- D. At this point, some of you may be asking yourself an important question. Is the primary point of Psalm 32 to show an unbeliever how to get to heaven? Is this a recipe for what an unbelieving person must do to be saved from hell? The answer is "no." Psalm 32 applies to believers.

You may say, "Well, wait a minute. As a believer, I've already been forgiven; therefore, I don't need to ask for what I already have, do I? How can it be that I still need to be asking for forgiveness?"

1. Let me explain two basic contexts for the forgiveness of sin in the Bible using the illustration of God and me.

- a. The first context for the forgiveness of sin is a ► legal or judicial one. God is a holy Judge. I stand before him in a courtroom, guilty of sin. I rise for sentencing. God says that the penalty for my sin is death, resulting in eternal separation from Him in hell.

But God says that He loves me so much that He satisfied the demands of justice by bearing the penalty for my sin Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross in my place and on my behalf. So, He says, complete forgiveness is available for every sin I have ever committed and every sin I will ever commit.

I say, "What must I do to receive this forgiveness?" God says, "Simply trust in Jesus Christ—that He died and rose again to purchase your forgiveness and to offer you eternal life. All your sins are forgiven by faith alone in Christ alone."

I say, "I believe."

He says, "You are forgiven and free. In setting you free, I have also adopted you as my own son. I am now your Father and you will be with Me forever."

That's the legal or judicial context for forgiveness. And this enables the second context for forgiveness.

- b. The second context is a ► relational or family context that is built upon the legal context. Let's continue with the illustration.

Because of the forgiveness I received through Jesus Christ, God is now my Father and I am His son. God says, "I want to have a close relationship with you—one in which I can bless you and protect you and guide you."

I say, "I want that, too." But, before long I sin against Him and I feel really bad about it. I drift from Him. I feel guilty. Our fellowship is broken.

God says, "You are still my son. Nothing you will ever do will change that. But, I want you to confess your sin to me so I can forgive it or remove it as an obstacle to our closeness and your blessing. Don't conceal your sin; confess it so we can deal with it."

- c. In this illustration, I want you see the difference between the legal forgiveness of the courtroom and the relational forgiveness in the family. The *legal* forgiveness is appropriated ► by faith, and once for all gets us adopted into God's forever family. Once inside, the *family* forgiveness is appropriated ► by confession, and continually renews close fellowship and communion with our Heavenly Father.

Family forgiveness and fellowship is not even possible without the legal forgiveness and adoption that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. So, if you're an unbeliever, you can't just ask God for forgiveness and make everything okay. You must first trust Christ as your Savior to become adopted into the family of God.

Once you're in the family, any unconfessed sins committed in the family may break our fellowship with the Father, but they never jeopardize our adoption as His child.

I believe Psalm 32 relates to family forgiveness.

2. This idea is reflected in the New Testament in ► 1 John 1:9. This verse is speaking to believers in the family of God when it says,

^{NAU} 1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This kind of forgiveness must be the same kind of forgiveness asked for in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus prays the model prayer in ► Luke 11:4:

^{NAU} Luke 11:4 "And forgive us our sins"

The message is clear: Don't conceal sin; confess it.

IV. Let's proceed to ► Verses 6 and 7.

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

- 6 Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found;
Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him.
7 You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble;
You surround me with songs of deliverance.
Selah

- A. These beautiful verses speak of the protection afforded the believing person who prays to God in confession. Notice David says, "let everyone who is godly pray to You." I

think the subject, ► “everyone who is godly” refers to believers in God’s family. Otherwise, he would have called on the ungodly to pray.

- B. ► David says when all seems hopeless, when a flood of great waters approaches, the waters will not reach the one who prays. This brings to mind Noah escaping from the flood in the ark. God is the hiding place of all believers who seek Him with a contrite heart. We’re preserved. We’re surrounded by God’s songs of deliverance.
 - C. We can put this information into our diagram ► like this, indicating that protection is a byproduct of a restored relationship with God. By the way, ► I have not yet put a closing parenthesis on the Scripture references in this part of the diagram because I’m going to be adding another verse to the list in a moment.
- V. Now let’s consider ► Verse 8. Here, the point of view changes. God is speaking now, not David. God says,

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go;
I will counsel you with My eye upon you.

- A. Just as we have three words for sin, three words for forgiveness, and three words for confession, now we have three words to communicate the idea that God will guide the contrite and repentant believer. God ► will instruct. God ► will teach. And, God ► will counsel.
 - B. And God says He will do all this ► “with My eye upon you.” This is not a description of God just waiting for you to screw up again so He can punish you. It’s a poetic description of God’s loving attentiveness to His child’s needs. I like that.
 - C. We can fill in another blank in our ► diagram with this information. When we ► confess our sins, we are forgiven, blessed, protected, and guided by God.
- VI. Let’s move on to ► Verse 9. God says,

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

9 Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding,
Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check,
Otherwise they will not come near to you.

- A. This is a warning from God not to be stubborn as a mule in responding to our guilt. We should not obstinately obscure the truth about our own sinfulness before God.
- B. So, we can add the ► word, “stubborn” to our diagram under the list of wrong responses to guilt.

VII. Let's move on to ► Verse 10.

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

10 Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
But he who trusts in the LORD, lovingkindness shall surround him.

A. This is really a kind of summary of our ► diagram depicting the two responses to guilt and their consequences.

On the one hand, ► “many are the sorrows of the wicked.” The word, “wicked” literally means guilty. The ones who have not confessed and whose guilt has not been cleansed, they have many sorrows. In fact, we can add, ► “many sorrows” to our list of the results of concealing sin.

B. On the other hand, Verse 10 says, ► “he who trusts in the LORD [as evidenced by confessing his sin], lovingkindness shall surround him.” This is another way of saying that God will protect him. So, we could ► add Verse 10b to our list of those verses indicating that God's protection will come from confession.

VIII. Psalm 32 concludes with ► Verse 11. It encourages us to respond to the teaching of this psalm. In light of the fact that forgiveness and blessing and protection and guidance are available to those who confess, then ► Verse 11 tell us . . .

^{NAU} Psalm 32:

11 Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones;
And shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart.

We can now ► complete our diagram with the threefold command. ► Be glad! ► Rejoice!
And, ► shout for joy!

So now we have completed a very enlightening and useful diagram depicting the alternatives for processing guilt. It shows, first of all, that ► we all sin; therefore, we are all guilty. We are distinguished not by the presence or absence of guilt, but by our response to guilt.

On the one hand, we can ► stubbornly deceive ourselves and keep silent about our sin, hiding it, denying it, pretending it's not there. And, as a result, ► we will suffer.

On the other hand, we can, as an act of integrity, ► confess our sin, acknowledge it, be honest about it, reveal the ugliness of it. And when we do, we will experience ► God's forgiveness, God's blessing, God's protection, and God's guidance. And in this, ► we will rejoice.

Application: How can we apply this to our lives?

A. Sometimes, the application is pretty clear. Let me give you an example. Perhaps I've been nurturing some hidden, unconfessed sin in my life, and I've deceived myself into

thinking it's no big deal, and I stubbornly refuse to deal with it before God. And I've been suffering for it. My vitality is drained. A dark cloud seems to follow me around. There's a heaviness I can't shake.

I need to come clean about it. To confess it. To be absolutely honest before God about it. To lay all my ugliness before Him and seek His forgiveness.

Perhaps that's where you're at this morning. The way is clear. You just need to take it.

- B. But sometimes, the application is not so obvious. Because not all guilt is legitimate and healthy. Let me give you an example. Maybe I've been deeply wounded in my life through no fault of my own. Maybe I've been abused growing up—sexually assaulted, or physically abused, or verbally degraded, or emotionally deprived, or abandoned. And I deceive myself into thinking that I'm past it, and it's no big deal. But the wound has never healed, and I carry around this toxic blend of guilt and shame and anger. Strange that I would be the one to feel guilty and ashamed about being abused, but I do. In the back of my mind I have this nagging notion that maybe I deserved it.

And the truth is, I've tried to cover the wound, or sooth it, or deaden it, or protect it from further injury by doing compulsive things that I know are wrong. And I feel guilty about it. I'd like to deal with my guilt, but I'm afraid that if I uncover the wound, people will be horrified, and I'll be devastated.

Perhaps that's where you're at this morning. The way is not so clear. If so, I'd like to encourage you to consider a ministry at Moon Valley called *Mending the Soul*. Three *Mending the Soul* groups are going to be starting in the fall, one for men and two for women. I'd like to ask Christine Stephenson, the coordinator of *Mending the Soul* at Moon Valley, to say a few words about it.

(Christine speaks here.)

- C. God has given us a built-in reminder of how to deal with guilt. It's called communion or the Lord's Supper. It's a time when we remember the price the Lord paid for our forgiveness—how He took all our guilt upon Himself on the cross so that we might experience His forgiveness, His blessing, His protection, and His guidance.

In a moment, I'm going to pray, giving thanks to God. After the prayer, some music will be played. As the music is played, I invite you to examine yourselves before God. This is a time of confession. A time for integrity. A time for dealing with guilt.

If and when you're ready, you can come up to any of the tables around the room and take the bread and the juice symbolizing the forgiveness that is yours in Christ. This is a time for family forgiveness. A time of restoration. That we might be glad and rejoice and shout for joy.

