

July 6, 2025

“Joy in Confession”

Psalm 32:1-11

Intro:

In the classic comic strip “The Wizard of Id” (it began in 1964), one of the main characters is an Attorney at Law by the name of Larsen E. Pettifogger. He is an entirely unscrupulous and inept lawyer who rarely manages to win cases for his clients. His primary driving force is a love for money and the desire to get more of it. As such, his business motto is that people are “Innocent until proven broke”. Meaning that as long as they can pay the legal fees, he will argue their innocence.

Of course this is a spoof on the more familiar phrase: “Innocent until proven guilty.”

This is a foundational part of our justice system and under this philosophy, the burden is to prove that someone is guilty, not to prove that they are innocent. On one hand, this helps to create balance and fairness in the face of a possibly corrupt system or government, by giving a little power back to those who have not done anything wrong other than somehow getting on the wrong side of the people in power.

However, the need to prove guilt and not innocence has created space for a whole business of defense lawyers who work not to prove innocence, but just to stop guilt from being proven. And of course, the wealthier and more influential the individual being charged is, the better the lawyers they are able to employ. With the better legal team in hand, it doesn’t matter if the person is guilty or not. If the prosecution can’t prove their guilt, then they are declared innocent. So, by default they enter a plea of “not guilty”, whether that is true or not. In the world of power and prestige, winning is all that matters.

This is not, however, the message that we receive from Psalm 32.

The Testimony of the Psalmist:

This is the last penitential psalm that we are going to look at. We didn't quite cover all of them, but we did cover enough, I think, to open our eyes to the value of adopting an attitude of confession and penitence, especially as it comes to matters of faith.

Unlike in a worldly justice system where confession is to be avoided at all costs, the psalmist in Psalm 32 turns things completely around and reveals how good confession can be. This is not, strictly speaking, a psalm that focuses on being penitent. Instead, he speaks from the perspective of already having confessed his sin. It is a psalm of testimony that contrasts confession with being in denial.

In the opening two verses of the psalm, the psalmist says that in contrast to living in fear that our sins will be found out, there is great joy in admitting them ourselves. He says the same thing at the conclusion of the psalm. It is of such importance that he doesn't try to set up an illustration or guide the reader on a carefully laid out path towards the answer. He puts it right out at the front.

There is joy in confession! What more does a person need to know? As it turns out, there is more to know: how can the psalmist make such a bold claim? Confession will most often lead to punishment and consequences. Who wants that? That doesn't sound very joyful to me. Not being punished, by hiding my sins, seems like a much greater benefit, even if it doesn't bring me joy.

To explain what he means, the psalmist shares his own experience of what life was like when he was trying to avoid confession with everything he had. Look at verses 3-4: Refusal to engage in proper confession with God resulted in a severe deterioration of his physical health. It messed with his sleep – keeping him up all night, any strength that he had to “live life” was being drained away from him. Why? Because he was carrying a burden of deceit and guilt that was more than he could bear.

Maybe some of you have experienced this before. We fear the consequences of what others might think or say or do if they knew the truth about what we had done or thought, and so we bury it down deep and hide those sins behind a façade of innocence. The smile on our face hides the agony and torture that is going on within us. We try everything we can to deal with the guilt ourselves – often through means of escapism such as drugs, alcohol, over-work, or losing ourselves in the fake worlds of TV, movies, or video games. We know the truth as much as the psalmist did; we just might not be ready to admit it.

The psalmist then continues his story to show where it ends. Verse 5 says, “Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, ‘I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.’”

This was his last resort. It shouldn’t be, but it often is. We fear being open and honest with God because we fear the consequences. The problem is that the consequences we fear are ones that we, or humanity, have imagined and created, not God. We want justice against the guilty. We want punishment to be served out. We assume that the same attitude we have against others would also apply to ourselves. No one wants to be punished and so we bury our guilt and our confessions deep inside, and they begin to destroy us from the inside out.

The miracle, the short and immediate discovery the psalmist makes, is that as soon as he gave in and humbled himself to confess, he was forgiven. No punishment. No jail sentence. No humiliation. None of the things that he had feared. It was instead an immediate and all-encompassing forgiveness of sin. What a joy that is!

After Confession:

There is more to the story though. There is a response. There is something that happens after confession and after forgiveness. It is what the psalmist is doing with this Psalm, and it is what we are challenged to do when we have confessed our own guilt and received the joy of forgiveness. This is to teach others about this joy.

Verse 8 in the New Revised Standard Version reads this way: “I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”

This is not the instructive lecture of a person who says “Do as I say and not as I do.” This is instruction that comes from a lived experience – an experience so great and overwhelming (with joy!) that the only response is to want to share it with others so that they would have no excuse not to experience it for themselves. The Psalmist sees this as teaching and instructing, but given the way he has provided the information of the “lesson” through the means of personal story, it is really a testimony rather than a formatted lecture.

Conclusion:

The most powerful way to show someone the way they should go, to open up better options for them to choose from, is to share our own story and testimony with them. It isn’t about the facts of the message, it is about how what happened has personally impacted and changed our lives. The psalmist went from physically wasting away in guilt to experiencing the fullness of joy in being forgiven. This is a powerful story. It is the story that is in each of us as well. Confession of sin is not just a formality; it is the door to freedom. When we confess, we aren’t placed in a long waiting line or put on hold to hear a verdict... we are forgiven immediately and completely. That is the message that others who are still suffering in their hidden guilt need to hear. Your testimony is the message of joy.

“So rejoice in the Lord and be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!” and may I add: Share with joy the story of God’s goodness in your life.

Let’s pray.