

# “O Happy Day!”

Psalm 32 <sup>1</sup>

“O Happy Day” is a 1967 gospel music arrangement of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century hymn. Recorded by the Edwin Hawkins Singers, it became an international hit in 1969, and has become a gospel music standard. And as we’ve just experienced, it’s pretty hard to hear this song without getting happy in our hearts!

The most overt scriptural source for the song is Acts 22:16, where Ananias told Paul after the vision on the Damascus Road, *“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on [Jesus’] name.”* Psalm 32 provides an expanded treatment of the idea of “washing our sins away,” and that’s where we’re going to focus our thoughts this morning.

Psalm 32 was Augustine’s favorite Scripture, and he had a copy of it mounted on the wall beside his bed. It is the second of the seven “Penitential Psalms,”<sup>2</sup> and is the first of the thirteen psalms whose superscriptions identify them as “Maskils.” We don’t really know what “Maskil” means, but one of the more likely meanings is something like “an insightful poem.” Overall, the psalm is about the importance and the gladness of honesty with God. I invite you to open your Bibles to Psalm 32 and let’s look at these verses for a bit.

*“Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose Sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit”* (Psalm 32:1-2).

The poem begins with a beatitude about the experience of God’s forgiveness. Some translations use the word “joyful” instead of “blessed,” and we are close to the mark to just say “happy is the one whose transgression is forgiven”!

Notice the three different phrases here: *“whose transgressions are forgiven”*; *“whose sins are covered”*; *“whose Sin the LORD does not count against them.”* “Transgression” has to do with deliberate disobedience to what we know to be God’s will. “Sins,” lower-case, plural, have to do with various moral failures, and the root word literally means “to miss the target.” And “Sin,” upper-case, singular, has to do with our very nature. The deepest problem you and I face is not our overt behavior, but our unredeemed, hard-hearted, self-centered and rebellious nature.

To these three varieties of offenses, the poet, whom the superscription identifies as David, applies three slightly different remedies. To “forgive” is literally “to carry away” the offense. The Bible says that God removes our sin from us *“as far as the east is from the west”* (Psalm 103:12).

To “cover” is God’s extravagant kindness in applying Jesus’ sacrifice to our account, such that when God looks at you or at me, God sees, not our sinfulness but Jesus’ blood that covers our sin, just as the Death Angel saw the lamb’s blood on the door posts and passed over the houses of Israel when the tenth and final plague was visited upon Egypt.<sup>3</sup> And to “not count against them” has to do with God’s declaring us “not guilty” and “righteous” by virtue of our faith in Jesus, even though we are literally “as guilty as Sin” before God’s holiness.

To experience these things is to experience joy, gladness, and happiness indeed! O Happy Day! O Happy Day! When Jesus washed my sins away!!!!

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on February 8, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The Penitential Psalms are 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:20; Hebrews 9:14, 22, 13:12; 1 Peter 4:8; 1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5, 5:9, 7:14

But notice what the poet writes next. He's gotten ahead of himself in the first two verses, announcing the end from the beginning; but here's how he really began this story:

*"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer"* (Psalm 32:3-4).

The poet's journey didn't begin with forgiveness. The journey began with guilt. The journey began with denial of responsibility and with repeated attempts to escape from God. As David wrote elsewhere:

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you* (Psalm 139:7-12).

Or as the writer of Hebrews would later write, *"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account"* (Hebrews 4:13).

It's only when you and I have the experience of seeing ourselves as God sees us that we end our rebellion and come to a place of true repentance. When he came to that place, Isaiah exclaimed, *"Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty"* (Isaiah 6:5). *"How then can we be saved?"* Isaiah exclaimed. *"All our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away"* (Isaiah 64:6).

It was after an experience such as this that David wrote in our text, *"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). **It is only when we understand our true situation as sinners before a holy God that we begin to understand how wonderful God's remedy truly is.**

Ash Wednesday is just a week away, beginning the season in which each of us is invited to consider our own sin and prepare our hearts for Holy Week. Pastor Kevin Kim has the custom of doing on Ash Wednesday what we sometimes do during our meditative services—he invites people to write their sins on a piece of paper, fold the paper, and then nail it to a wooden cross as a reminder of God's forgiveness.

One year a family came to the Ash Wednesday service and went through the worship experience as a family. When they came to the confession station, they explained to their six-year-old son the practice of confessing their sin and writing it on the paper.

So when they all grabbed a sheet of paper and started writing their confessions, the six year-old began writing with large, clear block letters. The rest of his family wrote their confessions and then carefully folded the sheets so no one could see the sins they had written down. They left their names off of their papers as well, and then they walked to the cross and nailed their "sins" to the cross.

This six-year-old boy wrote, "God, I'm sorry because I lie," and then he signed his name, and he refused to fold the paper. He walked to the front of the room and nailed his note to the cross so that everyone could see it. When his parents asked him why he had done this, the little boy said,

“I wrote my name on it because I want everyone to see it. Because if they know it was me, maybe they can help me stop.”<sup>4</sup> That, my friends, is repentance.

Patricia Raybon, the poet whose work accompanies the art in *Bound for Glory*, the book that inspired this series of sermons,<sup>5</sup> has offered another powerful example of repentance in her book, *I Told the Mountain to Move*. This is a letter she wrote to her two aborted children:

“Dear Babies:

“This is Mama. You will know my voice, I think, even though we were together for such a short time. I did a bad thing. I didn’t trust God. I didn’t understand that God would have made everything okay. I was like Peter, [who] . . . looked at the waves, not at Jesus. And when he looked at the waves, he started to sink—down, down, down.

“That’s how I felt, like I was sinking down. When the doctors said you were growing inside of me, that’s how I felt, so I didn’t . . . know how to love you. I was afraid. Oh, babies, I had made so many, many mistakes. And I was afraid. So I let fear convince me that more babies would just make things worse.

“Instead, look what I did. I robbed us. First, I robbed you—taking your own lives . . . I didn’t think I was strong enough. So I robbed myself of all the joy you would’ve brought me too. Brought all of us, your sisters, your family, and for each of you, your daddy. I thought we’d have more problems. That we didn’t have enough money. That we didn’t have enough time. That we didn’t have enough love. But I just didn’t know then that God is bigger. And God would make everything all right. I didn’t know . . . .

“I know you are in heaven, waiting for us—waiting for me. I know you’ve been waiting, looking every day, wondering when I would get there. Oh, babies, I’m trying to get there . . . to learn what God wants me to learn, so I can make it to you.”<sup>6</sup>

Here’s one more story of repentance. Lee Strobel wrote that an acquaintance called him with what he said was an embarrassing request. Here’s how Lee told the story:

“My friend’s little girl had been caught shoplifting from our church bookstore, and he wanted to know if I would represent the church so she could come and apologize. He said he wanted to use this incident as a teaching moment. I agreed—but I had a much bigger lesson in mind.

“The next day, the parents and their eight-year-old daughter trooped into my office and sat down. ‘Tell me what happened,’ I said to the little girl as gently as I could.

“ ‘Well,’ she said as she started to sniffle, ‘I saw a book that I really wanted, but I didn’t have any money . . . .’ Tears formed in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. ‘So I put the book under my coat and took it. I knew it was wrong. I knew I shouldn’t do it, but I did. And I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again. Honest!’

“I’m so glad you’re willing to admit what you did and say you’re sorry,” I told her. “That’s very brave, and it’s the right thing to do. But what do you think an appropriate punishment would be?”

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Kim in the sermon, “Total Nakedness.”

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Botts, *Bound for Glory: Celebrating the Gift of African American Spirituals through Expressive Calligraphy*, with reflections by Patricia Raybon (Tyndale, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Raybon, *I Told the Mountain to Move* (Salt River, 2006), pp. 153-158.

“She shrugged. I thought for a moment before saying, ‘I understand the book cost five dollars. I think it would be fair if you paid the bookstore five dollars, plus three times that amount, which would make the total twenty dollars. Do you think that would be fair?’

“She nodded sadly. ‘Yes,’ she murmured. She could see the fairness in that. But now there was fear in her eyes. Twenty dollars is a mountain of money for a little kid. Where would she ever come up with that amount of cash?

“I wanted to use this moment to teach her something about Jesus. So I opened my desk drawer, removed my checkbook, and wrote out a check on my personal account for the full amount. I tore off the check and held it out to her. Her mouth dropped open. ‘I’m going to pay your penalty so you don’t have to. Do you know why I’d do that?’ Bewildered, she shook her head. “Because I love you. Because I care about you. Because you are valuable to me. And please remember this: That’s how Jesus feels about you too . . . except even more.”

“At that moment, she reached out and accepted my gift. I wish I could find the words to describe the look of absolute relief and joy and wonder that blossomed on her face. She was almost giddy with gratitude.”<sup>7</sup>

*“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).

### **O Happy Day! O Happy Day! When Jesus washed my sins away!**

We’re almost out of time, but we can’t stop yet. Look for a moment at verses 9-10:

*Don’t be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’s unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him* (Psalm 32:9-10).

These verses remind me of a conversation that Max, a first grader in Lee Eclov’s congregation, had with his dad, Todd:

**Todd:** “Max! Why didn’t you answer me when I called you?”

**Max:** “I didn’t hear you, Dad.”

**Todd:** “What do you mean you didn’t hear me?”

Max doesn’t say anything.

**Todd:** “How many times didn’t you hear me?”

**Max:** “I don’t know, *maybe three or four times.*”<sup>8</sup>

Does that sound at all familiar?

In late May, 2010, after Tropical Storm Agatha had swept across Central America, my friend, Mark Wakefield, whom you’ve met, posted a picture on *Facebook* of a 330-foot-deep sinkhole that had opened up in downtown Guatemala City. Like all sinkholes, this one caused the ground to

<sup>7</sup> Lee Strobel and Gary Poole, *Experiencing the Passion of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Lee Eclov, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)

collapse suddenly; but in this case it also sucked land, electricity poles, a three-story factory building, and even a security guard into its deadly pit.

As you probably know, sinkholes develop in areas where the subsurface rock is of an easily-dissolved type. When enough water seeps through these formations, they collapse, creating the large crater known as a sinkhole. Land that looked stable and strong on the surface suddenly collapses, often catastrophically.

Our interior lives can sometimes resemble developing sinkholes. When we're too busy to spend time with God, when we refuse to deal with past hurts, habitual sins, and secret addictions, we're setting ourselves up for collapse. The surface of our lives may look stable and secure, but the truth is that we have very little foundation. The storms of life—or even just the normal processes of living—can suddenly expose our hidden vulnerabilities, causing a spiritual sinkhole to open up.<sup>9</sup>

Here's another way to think about this. Suppose I hold a glass of water and I shake it so that some of the water spills out. There are two reasons for this spill, the most obvious of which is the fact that I shook the glass. But the most important reason why water spilled out of the glass is that there was water inside the glass. If water hadn't been in the glass in the first place, no water could have spilled out.<sup>10</sup>

My friends, the most important question here is not “What's in your wallet?” or even “What's in your glass?” but “What's in your heart as you sit here this morning?” Jesus told us that “*out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks*” (Matthew 12:34).

And every one of us has a Sin problem. John told us that “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:8-9). And our Heavenly Father has told us that “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*” (Jeremiah 29:13).

My friend, are you ready for an “O Happy Day!”? If you acknowledge your Sin to God, stop trying to cover up your iniquity, and confess your transgressions to the LORD, then you, too, will be able to join in the last verse of Psalm 32: “**Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!**”

**“Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.  
Blessed is the one whose Sin the LORD does not count against them  
and in whose spirit is no deceit”** (Psalm 32:1-2).

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Pappas, “What Exactly Is a Sinkhole Anyway?” *The Christian Science Monitor* (6-1-10); Gordon McDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nelson: 1985), pp. 11-15.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Ash, *Discovering the Joy of a Clear Conscience* (P&R Publishing, 2014), p. 86.