

Psalm Thirty-Two

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. *Selah*

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Like a lot of men in his time, my grandfather smoked. And like a lot of men in his time, he did his best to keep it a secret. Especially when it came to his grandchildren. I can't recall there being a particular point in my childhood when I discovered his habit, but there is one instance that does stand out in my memory.

I was at his house to help mow the lawn that day. I finished the work early and was getting ready to leave. I walked out to the driveway so that my grandfather could drive me home. When I got there, I saw him with a lit cigarette in hand. He clearly thought he had more time. It was obvious that I saw him, but for some reason, he still tried to hide it. I watched as he spun the cigarette around, and crushed it between his fingers and palm. In that state of illusion, he wanted to make sure I didn't even see the smoke. We got in the car, and he drove me home. Neither of us said anything about it, but I distinctly remember thinking, "that must have hurt."

Psalm 32 is about a pain that is experienced when one tries to keep things hidden. The writer describes a time when he attempted to cover up his actions, and the deep suffering that it caused him (vv. 3-4). We don't know what it was, but we can picture the glowing tobacco embers in the closed fist and imagine how it feels.

He knows that God knows about it. God saw it all as plainly as I saw my grandfather draw in a lung-full of smoke that afternoon. Yet he couldn't bear to admit it. He was willing to carry on the charade of hiding it, even if it meant hurting himself. He carries on like this for a little while, apparently, until he reaches a breaking point and decides he couldn't bear it any longer. "*My strength was dried up.*" (v.4). Out of that place of desperation, he does what neither I nor my grandfather could bring ourselves to do. He breaks the silence and speaks about it. "*Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"*" (v.5a).

What follows is the assurance of God's grace. "*You forgave the guilt of my sin*" (v.5b). We hesitate before rushing on, though, because while the writer's relief is palpable, we know that the act of admission does not come without its own pain. That, after all, is one of the reasons why people keep things covered up. In our minds, the pain of disclosure and of the consequences that might result from it is greater than the pain we bear alone, in keeping it under wraps. So it becomes a struggle to reveal what is in plain sight.

What did my grandfather think I would do, or say, if he acknowledged what we both knew? Did he think I would take up smoking myself? Was he worried that I would talk to my parents or grandmother about it? Did he think I'd think of him differently, given his choice and addiction? What held him back from talking about it? And what held the psalmist back from talking to God about his secret? Did he fear that he wouldn't be forgiven? Did he know that, in coming before God with his wrongdoing, he would also be faced with the responsibility of owning up to the impact his actions had on others?

Whatever it was that caused him reservation, the burden of his agony causes him to break free of it. And in the great reversal that is God's mercy, that which is uncovered in confession comes to be covered by God's love. That which was made to be unhidden becomes hidden again, beneath the veil of God's forgiveness. It is finally seen and said for what it is, but in mystery of that process, it comes to be concealed again, beneath the covering of God's compassion. (v.1) God "imputes no iniquity" (v.2a), and it is no longer counted against him.

This is by no means a pleasant thing. There is the pain of the closed hand, but also the pain of opening it, and holding the mess and the wound out for the Other to see. The writer knows this, and tells his readers as much, later in the psalm. He warns his readers to not make the same mistake he did, while also assuring them of what he has experienced, through it – "*the steadfast love [that] surrounds those who trust in the LORD*" (v. 10) – NS

** I was inspired by an article written by Matthew Froese called "A Church Now Safe is Suspect" (Canadian Mennonite) in which he shared a very similar story of his grandfather, which brought to mind my own memory.*