**It is deep happiness to be counted as innocent and righteous**

Text: Psalm 32:1-2

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**Scriptures:** Romans 4:1-25; Psalm 32

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 201, 130, 32, 445, 513

**Series:** Belgic Confession (Article 23)

**Theme:** Forgiveness of sin by the Lord who counts the guilty as innocent is the source of the deepest lasting inner happiness in life

**Proposition:** Blessed are those who are counted by God as innocent in Christ

**Introduction**

The phrase ‘drowning in debt’ is used to describe a situation where there is a real risk of not being able to pay what you owe. Financial debt, whether personal or national can easily get out of control and be overwhelmed by the burden of what is owed to a lender. When debt becomes too high for an individual today, they have the option of declaring, or being declared, bankrupt.

It was not so easy in Bible times. Jesus tells the parable of a servant who was ‘drowning’ in a staggering amount of debt (Matt 18:21-35). Ten thousand talents was a sum so large that it was practically uncountable. Jesus used this amount to illustrate the enormous debt of sin which all of us have incurred before God. In the parable of the unforgiving servant Jesus does not say that the forgiven servant was extraordinarily happy because he had been completely forgiven the debt. Instead he seized a fellow servant who owned him a relatively tiny amount (100 denarii) and put him in prison until he should pay his debt. He wasn’t happy, he was angry. This fool did not understand the blessedness of being forgiven.

In contrast, David knew the blessedness of being released from debt when he wrote Psalm 32; one of the seven penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). He knew that he owed an unpayable debt to God because he had sinned. He had experienced both the painful physical and debilitating spiritual effects of unconfessed sin: “*For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long… my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer*” (Ps 32:3-4). But when he confessed his sin to the Lord and was forgiven, he experienced great relief expressed in the word ‘blessed’.

To be blessed is to be happy, but not in the way we usually mean when we use that word to describe our momentary response to positive circumstances in our lives. For example, like enjoying a great time with family and friends, doing well in an exam or competition, doing something we really love to do. Blessedness describes an inner state of contentedness and joy which is not affected by our physical, temporary situation in life. It is impossible to be happy all the time in this fallen world, but the Lord provides the way for a person to be blessed throughout their lives, both now and forever. This is the blessedness which David writes about in Psalm 32.

Our focus this afternoon is on the first two verses that David wrote in this portion of God’s Word: “*Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit*’ (Ps 32:1-2).

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Romans 1000 years after David wrote about the deep happiness of forgiveness, understood that in Psalm 32 he spoke ‘*of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works*’ (Rom 4:6).

This is also the subject of the non-inspired words of the Belgic Confession Article 23 where author Guido de Brèswrote: “*We believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake and that therein our righteousness before God consists*”. We are going to look at the topic of this Article ‘our righteousness before God’ under three points:

1. Transgressions, sins, and iniquity
2. Forgiveness, covering and not counting
3. Christ, our righteousness credited
4. **Transgressions, sins, and iniquity**

Only a person who understands that debt is financial bondage to a lender can appreciate the freedom that living debt-free brings. By this I do not mean to imply that house mortgages, business loans and other forms of debt are wrong, just that they inevitably result in the loss of some liberty. The more debt, the greater the degree of constraint.

In the spiritual realm, David understood the oppression of the weight of sin and God’s pending judgement. He expressed the painful experience of this constraint on his soul in these terms: “*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me*” (Ps 32:4).

In the first two verses of this penitential psalm, David uses three different words for offences against God, translated in the ESV as ‘transgression’, ‘sin’ and ‘iniquity’.

* **Transgressions** – are acts of rebellion and disloyalty against God by someone who makes a willful choice to reject His authority and thereby stray from the pathway of godly living. This word describes the crossing of a limit or boundary by breaking the law. The sign on private property ‘trespasses will be prosecuted’ illustrates the idea of transgressions. If you go onto land where you are not lawfully entitled to be, then you have transgressed. When David went for a walk on the roof of his house late one afternoon (2 Sam 11:2), he was entitled to be there – it was his property! When he saw Bathsheba, the wife of another man, bathing, he should have turned his eyes away quickly. By looking at her with lust, he ‘crossed the line’; he transgressed in his thoughts. Then when he sent messengers and took her, and he lay with her (2 Sam 11:4) he ‘crossed the line’; he transgressed in his actions. ‘Transgressing’ is an older word that we don’t use much today, even as Christians, yet it is something that you and I do every time we make a willful decision to go against God’s Word and to step away from the pathway of obedience, blessing and lawfulness. We ‘cross the line’.
* **Sin** – conveys the idea of missing the mark of God’s revealed will. The result is that a person misses the goal of holy living. The Hebrew word for ‘sin’ here is used in the book of Judges within a description of the accuracy of 700 chosen men from Gibeah who were left-handed. ‘*Everyone could sling a stone at a hair and not* ***miss***’ (Jud 20:16). For any golfers here – not missing the mark is the idea of getting a hole in one every time, or for dart players a bullseye. Very occasionally in sporting competitions someone will get a perfect score, for example in gymnastics at the Olympic games. The first time this happened was at the 1976 Games in Montreal when Romanian Nadia Comăneci, aged 14 was awarded at 10.0. It is a very rare athlete who doesn’t miss the mark in any way at a sporting event.

However, there is no descendant of Adam who never misses the mark of God’s Law. As the Scripture says, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom 3:23). Gymnasts have won with scores of 9.9, but a ‘perfect score’ with no missing of the mark at all is necessary when it comes to God’s law. As James wisely puts it “*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it*” (James 2:10).

* **Iniquity** – is a deliberate distorting, bending, or twisting from the right way – a crooked act, word or thought. Iniquity points to our naturally perverse desire to twist God’s Word to suit our own desires. Satan demonstrated iniquity when he craftily distorted the truth saying, ‘*Did God actually say ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden*’ and then ‘*You will not surely die’* (Gen 3:1; 4). This Hebrew word translated ‘iniquity’ describes not only the sin but can also describe the guilt which results. After God judged Cain for the murder of his brother Abel, Cain said to the Lord ‘*my punishment is greater than I can bear*’ (Gen 4:13)

Brothers and sisters, friends, if you would know the deep happiness of forgiveness then you must know and admit your own transgressions, sins, iniquity. A ‘gospel’ which does not teach us what we need to be saved from is not good news, it is a twisting of the truth which misses the mark of proclaiming the person and work of Christ. The 19th century English preacher C.H. Spurgeon once said that ‘*transgression, sin and iniquity are the three-headed dog at the gates of hell, but our glorious Lord has silenced its barkings for ever against his own believing ones*’. Which brings us to our second point...

1. **Forgiveness, covering and not counting**

The deep happiness which David writes about in Psalm 32 flows out from God’s grace in dealing with ‘the three headed dog at the gates of hell’. The charges – ‘transgressor!’, ‘sinner!’, ‘worker of iniquity!’ against God’s elect have been silenced (Rom 8:33).

Jesus once told this parable to Simon the Pharisee: "*A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt*” (Luke 7:41-43). Having your debt cancelled by someone else should result in gratitude for the generosity of the giver and also happiness for the person who becomes debt-free as a result.

In Psalm 32, David does not write about the temporary happiness of being forgiven a financial debt, but of the lasting joy of becoming debt-free with God: “*Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit*’ (Ps 32:1-2). Notice that the ‘three-headed dog’ has been muzzled in three ways: transgression is forgiven, sin is covered, iniquity is not counted. The three different Hebrew words translated ‘forgiven’, ‘covered’ and ‘not counted’ have the following meanings:

1. **‘Forgiven’** means to ‘carry away’. This was visibly represented with the ‘scapegoat’ which was sent away from the camp of Israel on the Day of Atonement symbolically carrying the sins of the people. This ‘letting go’ of sin by God is revealed in these ways in Scripture: “*As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us*” (Ps 103:12); “*You have cast all my sins behind your back*” (Isa 38:17); “*You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea*” (Mic 7:19).
2. **‘Covered’** – means to conceal or hide. When God covers sin, it is no longer visible to Him because it has been dealt with justly and completely. Such covering enables the sinner to be received into God’s presence. The need for sin to be covered by God was represented in the Old Testament system of sacrifices. The Hebrew word ‘kippur’, which is translated ‘atonement’ in our English Bibles, literally means to ‘cover over’ so that the righteous anger of God against sin is satisfied and the relationship between God and man is restored.

Only God can cover sin, which cannot be removed by the sinner doing the covering him or herself. This is exactly what Adam and Eve attempted to do when they hid their nakedness by sewing fig leaves together (Gen 3:7). It is what King David did when he sought to cover the sin of his adultery with Bathsheba by having her husband placed in a battle where he would be killed. Covering our sin is what you and I do when we try to conceal our wrongdoing from God and from others.

People also try to cover their own sin from themselves by:

* Denying it exits. If there is no God, there is no sin, and therefore no rebellion, missing of the mark, or twisting of God’s law
* Redefining it. Drunkenness becomes ‘alcoholism’, adultery, merely ‘an affair’, sodomy is ‘gay’, pornography is ‘adult content’
* Rationalising it. ‘Everybody else is doing it. It’s harmless. I deserve it’. ‘I’m good most of the time. Everyone has their vices’.

The Proverbs wisely state that “*whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy*” (Prov 28.13). For the sinner, confession to the Lord – which is an uncovering, not the hiding of sin is essential. David expresses this timeless truth in Psalm 32: “*I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover my iniquity*” (v5).

1. **Does not count** – means does not credit, reckon, think. Positively, ‘count’, is the word used in the Hebrew Scripture to describe how the Lord thought about Abraham: “*And he (Abraham) believed the LORD, and He (God)* ***counted*** *it to him as righteousness*” (Gen 15:6). The Apostle Paul refers to this key verse in Romans 4:9 “*Faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness*”. What was **not** counted, reckoned, credited by the Lord to Abraham? It was his unrighteousness, his iniquity, his crooked thoughts, words, and acts. For example, when he fooled Pharaoh by telling him that his wife was his sister (Gen 12:10-20) repeating the lie to Abimelech because he feared for his own life (Gen 20).

The three-fold blessings of forgiveness, covering and not counting iniquity to the guilty sinner all point us to one Person, to Christ, our righteousness credited.

1. **Christ, our righteousness credited**

Guido de Brès, the author of the Belgic Confession, knew that sins could not be dealt with by the baptisms, masses, prayers to Mary or the saints or by paying indulgences to the Roman Catholic church. He knew from the Bible that mankind’s sin problem can only be solved in Christ alone.

How much of the mechanism by which God graciously counts faith as righteousness Abraham understood we do not know. Abraham believed in the promises of God ‘from afar’ (Heb 11:13). How much of the way by which God graciously forgives transgression, covers sin and does not count iniquity against the sinner David understood we do not know. He personally experienced the deep happiness of being counted as innocent even though he knew himself to have been ‘conceived in sin’ (Psalm 51:8) and to be a man who acknowledged his sin to the Lord (Psalm 32:5). He knew that the Lord had promised that a great King would descend from Him and reign forever (2 Sam 7:12-13).

We know that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham and David. We know that He is the way by which the perfect justice of God has been satisfied so that the abundant grace of God comes to people like you and me. We know this because the ‘Bible tells us so’! The Apostle Paul, writing ‘God-breathed’ Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit explains: “*It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification*” (Rom 4:24-25).

Jesus is like the ‘scapegoat’ in the Old Testament symbolically carrying the sins of God’s people away; except that He has actually taken them away. He has done this by receiving the full punishment of death for these transgressions. He is like both the scapegoat and the goat that was sacrificed as a sin offering on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). Like the blood of animals was symbolically sprinkled as a covering for the altar in the Temple, so the shed blood of Jesus actually covers sin because His willing sacrificial death has satisfied the righteous anger of God enabling people like you and me to be at peace with Him. The righteousness which the Lord credited to Abraham and later to David was the perfect obedience of Christ put to their account.

The glorious work of God in Christ can be thought of as being like **two** different financial transactions:

Firstly, the complete removal of a colossal, astronomically large debt by bringing the balance to zero;

Secondly, the depositing of a huge sum of money into a person’s bank account to give them an absolutely enormous credit.

If you experienced this kind of change to your bank account, it would likely put a smile on your face 😊. Your happiness would not last though. Here are some reasons: You may spend your credit balance and get in debt; You may experience difficulty managing and maintaining your assets; You will eventually die, and you can’t take your money with you when you do!

The financial picture of debt and credit helps us to understand what God in Christ has done, but like all analogies it does fall short. Brothers and sisters in our Lord, those who ‘*believe in the Son*’ (John 3:36), in Christ, the debt of our transgressions is fully forgiven forever. In Christ, our sins are fully covered never to severe our relationship with God again. In Christ, our iniquity has been counted against Christ, His righteousness has been credited to us so that we will never be in debt before God again, but will always be received as beloved children of God, and so we are! (1 John 3:1). In light of these truths, Guido de Brès wrote:

* Therefore, we always hold to this firm foundation’
* We give all the glory to God
* We humble ourselves before Him and
* We acknowledge ourselves to be what we are

In light of our text from Psalm 32:1-2 – it is blessed, deep happiness, to be counted as innocent before God with the righteousness of Christ credited to us. Do you know this deep happiness, this blessedness in Christ?

AMEN.