The Righteous Shall Live By Faith:
A Hermeneutical Study of Psalm 32 and its Use in the Book of Romans

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“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity”.¹ These two verses capture the essence of the joy believers have experienced for centuries after their experience with Jesus who had no sin, yet became sin for man so that those who believe in him might become the righteousness of Christ. This introduction to David’s instructional Psalm to the Israelites aids Paul as he explains a belief that sits at the very core of God’s covenantal relationship with mankind throughout the old and the current dispensation distinguishing it from every other religion in existence: salvation by grace through faith, not by works. Salvation, as it is understood today, has always been obtained by grace through faith in the LORD, regardless of the time period. Man has never been able to obtain his own salvation, yet the LORD still graciously saved those who trusted in him before the monumental event when God took on flesh and dwelt among us. This message has inspired Christian worship throughout the church’s existence, inspiring hymns like Rock of Ages and the contemporary worship group Bethel’s song No Longer Slaves. Both the magnificent King David and the zealous Apostle Paul understood this truth and clearly communicated this to the people of Israel in two very different periods of history. In the reign of King David, he reminds them of the blessed state of covenant blessing and the penitential, faithful relationship with the Lord. And during the Roman oppression in

the 1st Century, Paul corrects a bad hermeneutic of the Old Testament held by Jews perpetuated by the rabbinical teachings in his day, using both the patriarch Abraham and King David’s words from Psalm 32 to accomplish his purpose.

**Historical and Literary Background of Psalm 32**

Psalm 32 is a part of the book of Psalms, a collection of poems that were sung by people of Israel as a part of their liturgy during the time of the David onward throughout the exile and the reestablishment of the temple. Since it is a lyric poem, a theme of joy and forgiveness is introduced early in the song that directs the development of the rest of the poem. It is a personal and reflective poem David writes expressing the deep emotions he felt during this time of his life, which leads to a resolution he comes to in verses 10 and 11. Psalm 32, specifically, is one of the seven Penitential or repentance psalms. It is probable that this Psalm was written just after the height of David’s reign, after he confessed and repented of the sin Nathan the prophet confronted David about, which was his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. Warren Wiersbe in his commentary on Psalm 32, sees this Psalm as a fulfillment to David’s promise in Psalm 51:13 to teach transgressors after him. Historically this is significant because this is after the LORD made his covenant with David in 2nd Samuel 7, promising a king that

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would establish the throne of David forever. In a grander sense, the people are living under the Mosaic Covenant Law as the expression of the blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant, which means the Israelites are living under the sacrificial system where on The Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter into the Holy of Holies and make atonement by sacrifice for the sins of the people. The collision of the joyous theme of Psalm 32 and the supposed burdensome theme of the Mosaic Covenant, gives significant insight to the true religious expectation of the people of the economy of the law.

**Exegetical Analysis of Psalm 32**

The Psalm begins with attributing the Psalm as a Maskil of David, showing that David is intending the Psalm to be a means of instructing or imparting wisdom. And as Matthew Henry points out in his commentary on the Psalm, “the nature of true blessedness” is most of all something people need good instruction concerning. David begins the Psalm with two exclamations highlighting the blessed state of the one who has obtained forgiveness from the LORD. The word blessed, esher in Hebrew, communicates a sense of true happiness and bliss, and David’s repeated use of the term draws attention to just how truly happy those are who has experienced this forgiveness. This happiness and joy results from Yahweh’s mercy in not imputing or counting the sin and the guilt that comes with it.

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To highlight the darkness of his sin, David chooses to use the same three terms he used in Psalm 51 to describe this darkness: transgression, sin, and iniquity, each drawing attention to the aspects of the depravity of the sinner. The word translated as transgression paints a picture of rebellion. David revolted against God when he sinned, as he points out in Psalm 51 when he admits, “against you only, have I sinned”.

However, David is not claiming that he alone has rebelled against God, but is using himself as an example so that others may recognize that they, too, have rebelled against their covenant God. The word translated as sin is word that describes a great offense, as in when the Israelites fashioned a golden calf at the bottom of Sinai or when King Jeroboam drove Israel away from the LORD. David here is highlighting the immensity of the sin problem mankind is dealing with. Mankind has committed a great offense against the Lord and man’s “sin is ever before” him. That last term, iniquity, emphasizes the perversity of sin in the Hebrew. The sinful state of mankind is a perversion of God’s original design in the Garden. The joy David hopes the listener experiences is possible because upon repentance, the rebellious transgression is forgiven, the shameful offence is covered, “as nakedness is covered”, and the punishment associated with perversion is by the grace of God legally not accounted to the penitent based on The Lord’s faithfulness.

9 *ESV Study Bible*, 976.
11 *ESV Study Bible*, 1000.
13 *ESV Study Bible*, 999.
David hopes that the listener will understand the true blessedness that comes with humble confession of sin to the Lord, in contrast to the wicked for whom “many are the sorrows.” The structure of Psalm 32 helps David communicate the instructions that lead to the results mentioned in the beginning and end of the Psalm. He highlights his own experience in verse 3 through verse 5, giving testimony to pain that came with remaining in sin and the peace that came with true repentance and confession. David, using himself as an example, speaks to the one who chooses to remain in their sin rather than to seek God through the means he has set in place for those desiring peace, an acknowledgement and confession of sin through prayer. He hopes that they will wisely heed his instruction before they learn by experience through feeling the weight the heavy hand of the Lord on their soul. David then transitions to admonishing the listener to seek the Lord, who secures, preserves, and surrounds with deliverance, those who seek Him while he may be found. David truly understands the weight of sin and its consequences both on this earth and eternally. His desire is for those listening to choose life and joy and to confess the sins they are hiding in to the Lord. He understands the need for the Lord to graciously intervene, because if it were works God desired David would give them but it is the broken and humble heart of faith that He desires from His covenant people. In verse 8 and 9, God himself interjects himself into the text promising to instruct and counsel those who repent, while graciously inviting them to not be resistant and hard-hearted. Henry points out God’s deep love for his people by claiming that He is “more ready to pardon our sin, than we are to repent.” David reaches his resolution in verses

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16 *ESV Study Bible*, 976.
10 and 11 with a warning to the wicked and a promise and a call to worship to those who are righteous in the Lord.

David understood the dangers of sin and the need of faithful repentance and trust in the Lord. He understood that true blessedness was a gift from the Lord and not from man’s working. He understood the importance of seeking the Lord through humble prayer. David as a leader of God’s people wanted each of his subjects to understand that as well. He wanted each Israelite to put their trust in Him and no their own righteousness. He wanted the faithful Israelites to continue to confess their sins and repent as he had done. David had experienced the grace of the Lord and wanted others to experience the blessed life of those whose transgressions have been forgiven, and to encourage the faithful remnant to worship.

**Historical and Literary Background on Romans**

The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans is the longest letter in the canon of Scripture he penned, and it is one of the most popular in western Christianity. Most likely he wrote to the Romans during his third missionary journey while he was staying in Corinth.\(^\text{19}\) Paul addresses both Jews and Gentiles in the letter, but gives a significant amount of attention to the Jews in the Roman church, which according to MacArthur was founded by Jewish believers following Pentecost.\(^\text{20}\) Paul, being a former Pharisee and self-proclaimed, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Hebrew of Hebrews, would have been

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\(^{20}\) Ibid, xviii.
“absolutely saturated” in the Old testament teaching. Paul hated the false teaching that was being perpetuated by the Jews of his day, yet as seen at the beginning of Romans 9, Paul loved his fellow Jews deeply. He desired for himself to be accursed and cut off from the love of Christ if it meant his fellow Jews understanding the gospel. Paul finds himself writing to both Jews and Gentiles at the beginning of a new dispensation in God’s salvation history. The New Covenant had been enacted and sealed by the giving of the Holy Spirit and the gospel had been proclaimed in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and now was moving to the ends of the earth. This same gospel Paul presents in a well-organized treatise written specifically to the church at Rome, whom he desired to meet in person and one day would, to introduce himself as the Apostle Paul and to establish this church in truth.

**Exegetical Analysis on Psalm 32 as Quoted in Romans 4**

In the passage in Romans 4, Paul quotes poetry written by the great King David to support his thesis that salvation is obtained by grace through faith in Jesus, not by works. Paul is using the Psalm 32 passage to help correct a bad hermeneutic of the story of Abraham that had been adopted by the Jewish Rabbis. For many years, Jews saw Abraham as the champion of a works-righteousness religion, which MacArthur argues is the premise of “every false religion of the world”. By chapter Paul has clearly established the depraved state of sinful man. Using a compilation of excerpts from

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21 Ibid, xix.
22 Ibid, xix.
23 Ibid, 232.
25 MacArthur, 231.
canonical Hebrew poetry, he established that both Jew and Gentile had desperately fallen short of God’s glorious standard and were in need of grace. Man, regardless of nationality, could not obtain the righteousness God demands, the works of man will never make an man worthy to be accepted by God. As Paul closes chapter 3 he excludes Man’s boasting, states that justification is by faith, not works, claims that God justifies all mankind by faith, and that faith establishes the law. Each of these principles he provides a concrete illustration of in the person of Abraham in chapter 4, using David’s Psalm 32 as supporting evidence.

In what is now known as the fourth chapter of the epistle to the Roman Church, Paul moves his attention to Abraham, the father of the Jews. The majority of Jews at that time had interpreted the Genesis scripture Paul references as Abraham being made right with God on account of his own efforts to be faithful not simply his faith in God, leading to many believing that justification was obtained through works of the law. However, Paul shows that man’s right standing before God is imputed to him by God himself, not as a result of his works. His choice of Abraham as the example justification by faith, not by works, intentionally attacks the cracked foundation 1st century Judaism had found itself resting upon.

Paul in verse 6 adds his Spirit inspired commentary to Psalm 32. David in writing Psalm 32 was speaking of “the blessing of the one whom God counts righteousness apart

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26 Luther, 82.
27 Vanlaningham, 1750.
28 MacArthur, 233.
29 Luther, 83.
30 MacArthur, 233.
from works”. Since Jews use Psalm 32 on their annual Day of Atonement, and since King David is another major character in Jewish tradition, Paul continues his attack on traditional Judaism, by showing that even King David taught justification by faith and not by works. David’s words though having a great impact on Jewish readers throughout the centuries, now carry a newfound weight since the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Many Believers, from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, are at this point feeling the joy of having their sins forgiven and covered by the blood of Christ and in place of the deserved punishment they receive imputed righteousness. While as David saw in part, as a shadow of things to come, these believers were now experiencing the fullness of the words he wrote. “The blessing is salvation” and the blessing is to be proclaimed to both the circumcised and, thanks to the Apostle Paul and others’ work during the Jerusalem Council the uncircumcised Gentiles.

Paul continues his argument in chapter 4, showing Abraham as the father of faith, both of Jewish and Gentile heritage. He establishes the importance of faith in accordance with God’s grace, for even faith is worthless without God’s grace. The paragraph of study ends with Paul cementing the theme of imputed righteousness for those who believe in him who raised Jesus from the dead, who died for man’s sins and raised for man’s justification, echoing David’s pronouncement of the blessed state of “the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

31 ESV Study Bible, 2165.  
32 Wiersbe, 119-120.  
33 MacArthur, 242.  
34 MacArthur, 242.  
36 ESV Study Bible, 2164-2165.
Theological Application

The words of Psalm 32 carried great power when David wrote them for the first time after he experienced God’s forgiveness after his great sin against Uriah. Many years later when Paul referenced them, the Spirit drew attention to a power within those words that was lost to his generation, as he helps establish the Christian faith apart from all others as a religion not based upon man’s righteousness but the grace of God.

For the one handling the text of Psalm 32, he needs to be aware of his audience, for there is theologically a two-fold application. The first applies to the Christian who is living in hidden sin. That individual needs to confess his sin to the Lord and honestly and humbly repent of his sin. It is always good for a believer to examine his heart and confess his sins to God and experience the joyful bliss found in repentance. But the second application applies to both the believer and the non-believer. Since Paul used Psalm 32 when walking through the truths of gospel, preachers after him can easily follow suit. Whether it is someone who has never heard the gospel before or someone who has been a Christian for ages and is now dealing with spiritual pride, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in what God has done needs to be proclaimed with clarity and strength. It is the message of salvation to the lost and the humbling reminder for the spiritually prideful, so that everyone may come to understand that “blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity.”

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37*ESV Study Bible, 976.*
Bibliography


Berean Study Bible For the gospel reveals the righteousness of God that comes by faith from start to finish, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." Berean Literal Bible For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it has been written: "And the righteous will live by faith." New American Standard Bible For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." Romans 3:21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets. The just shall live by faith.--The words are part of the consolatory answer which the prophet Habakkuk receives in the stress of the Chaldean invasion. The righteous will be guided by his faith. Habakkuk wanted an answer on how God would use a more wicked people to judge His own people. He stood waiting upon God for an answer (2:1). Part of God's answer is seen in the contrast between the wicked and the righteous. The haughty would be judged for his wicked deeds (his unright soul). But God would protect and keep the righteous by his faith. The ring is like the book of Romans, the diamond this truth. The 'from faith' refers to the perceiving of God's revelation of salvation through Christ (chapters 1-4) and the 'to faith' refers to the resulting righteous life obtained by Christ's righteousness (rest of book). Faith's fruit is righteousness. Paul bridges the gospels with the NT epistles with this verse as he shows their inter-relationship. The Righteous Shall Live by Faith. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." 6. God's Wrath on Unrighteousness. Â Cross References Romans 15:32 So that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. 1 Thessalonians 3:10 As we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? Â Cross References Psalms 40:9 - 10 I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.