

Experiencing Psalm 32 in its Liturgical Context

(Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson, 7 June 2017)

I was asked to write a meditation relating to prayer. It seemed to me a good idea to take a prayer-psalm as a model for teaching us (you and me) about prayer. I've chosen Psalm 32. It's an interesting one, particularly in terms of liturgy. Various different people are addressed at different moments, and various different people are brought on stage – as it were – to speak. Although such a psalm may have arisen as a private prayer of David, we need to realise that the psalms which we have in the Bible have been collected together in 5 books for the use of God's congregation, in the first place, in the temple. As such, they have generally been purged of anything too specific to the original author and they often have a distinct liturgical context. That is certainly the case with Psalm 32. Our psalm begins with a *blessing* (verses 1-2) spoken in general to God's people and is followed up by the prayer to God of an individual (verses 3-7), God's voice speaking to that person (verses 8-9), and closing with words from others directed to the assembled worshippers (verses 10-11). Let's begin with the blessing. In the context of a temple service we can imagine the Levitical choir singing to the gathered worshippers:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

It is never easy to pinpoint the exact moment in the liturgy when such a psalm would have been sung, but it seems clear that a sacrifice has taken place and that the priestly blessing showing reconciliation to the worshippers has been given (see Lev. 9:22-23; Num. 6:22-27). At this point a particular worshipper steps forward. We see him standing with his hands raised to God. He prays:

When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long.

When day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.

I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden.

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.

For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters, they shall not come near him.

You are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance.

In this prayer the worshipper reflects to God his experience in withholding confession of sin and the difficulty which that brought upon him. He also praises God for the forgiveness received when he finally made confession (presumably by means of the sacrifice of an animal upon whose head he had leaned his hands while making confession to the priest). It is possible that the following words, concerning the prayer of the godly to God, were also meant to be heard by the worshippers participating in the ceremony. But the words themselves are still directed to God as he praises Him not only for forgiveness, but also for His divine protection and deliverance.

We may ask what can be learned from this prayer, apart from the rather obvious encouragement to confess our sins faithfully to God and the consequences for our relationship with him if we don't! We see here also the freedom with which the worshipper speaks to God of his past experience, explaining to God what he felt and what happened. All too often we just presume that God already knows what we've done and experienced and therefore it is nonsensical to tell Him that. Time and again Scripture belies that thought. God desires a relationship with us and therefore encourages us to inform Him in our own words of what has been going on in our lives. Another aspect comes to the fore here, when we remember that this is a liturgical prayer. In other words, it is prayed out loud before the witness of God's people. There is nothing wrong – and everything good – with a personal prayer of praise and encouragement which is heard by God's people. Too often our prayers are kept private, and when we pray in public they remain incredibly general. Let us be encouraged to reveal something more of our personal relationship with God when praying in public!

The psalm continues with a word spoken by God himself. In the liturgical context, we might think of the

priest speaking / singing on behalf of God here:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.
Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed
with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you.

It is, perhaps, possible that verse 9 be read together with verses 10-11 as the concluding words of exhortation to the worshippers. In any case, these words are no longer placed in the mouth of God, but in the mouth of others. We might think of the Levitical choir, who began the psalm, ending it as well:

Many sorrows shall be to the wicked; but he who trusts in the LORD, mercy shall surround him.
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

The worshippers may now indeed be glad in the LORD, given that the final part of any temple worship (after the conclusion of the sacrifices, prayers and singing etc.) was to partake of a holy meal within the temple courts. The meat of the peace offerings would be boiled and shared. God – as it were – hosted the worshippers for a meal in His house celebrating the renewed reconciliation and covenant relationship.¹

As a final thought, it is perhaps good to ask ourselves how such a psalm might best be used in the context of New Testament worship. What place should / could it have in the liturgy? How might it best be sung? I leave that for the reader to mull over. Perhaps another time, I'll tell you how we used to approach it in the church at Katwijk.

¹ For the basic form of liturgy in the Old Testament temple see my article 'Liturgical Principles' to be found at:
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles-and-sermons/>