

Psalms: The Language of Prayer Part Three

Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, well, this is the third of a four-part series we're doing on the podcast. These were teachings that I did a number of years ago through the book of Psalms. It was a series that was: learning how to adopt the poems and prayers in the book of Psalms as, like, a "guidebook," teaching me the language of prayer—what it means to talk to God in the midst of any and every kind of situation that life might bring me.

And so this teaching was exploring what it means to talk to God when I have seriously screwed up and hurt other people, hurt myself, dishonored others and God. And how do you even talk to God in moments where you're feeling so ashamed and so guilty? And there you go—Psalm 32 gives us a gateway into the language of true confession.

As I both prepared for this teaching—I still remember that this poem so profoundly expresses what genuine confession is. I realize, both in thinking about this and prepping it, and afterward, that there's many different modes of confession, and some of them are actually not genuine at all. And how do I know if I'm voicing genuine confession towards God? And Psalm 32 gives us a real, powerful template for self-examination when I'm talking to God after I fail—which is really often. It happens a lot. [Tim laughs] So thank God for Psalm 32. So anyway, I hope this is helpful for you. Let's dive in and learn together.

[Musical Break (2:34—2:37)]

We've been in different messages, kind of, camping out and focusing on different life situations that we find ourselves in, and how do you pray through that kind of situation or life experience? And tonight we're talking about "confession"—praying when you fail. If you're trying to follow Jesus, and you're trying to figure this thing out, you're likely to fail and to blow it—anybody? Come on. Right?

So it comes with the territory because we're just not very good at being human beings, [Tim laughs] right? So even though we are human beings, we're not very good at it. And so you're going to fail. You're going to blow it. You're going to either, at the last minute, make a decision that you regret, and you didn't think about it beforehand. But you're also going to come across a moment that: you knew it was wrong beforehand, you knew it was wrong during it, and you knew it was wrong after—and you did it anyway.

How do you process and pray through experiences of real failure before God—you fail other people, you fail yourself—how do you work through that in a way that you don't constantly come out the other side of that just totally wounded, and just feeling crippled, and just waiting for it to happen again?

How could we experience confession in a way that ends the way David ends this prayer—which is people yelling and rejoicing because of love and faithfulness, and we're happy? What if confession and experiences of failure could actually result—and work themselves out—in you being stronger than you were before? Actually having *more* joy and *more* confidence in the one who's carrying you through? What if confession was like that?

My guess is when I say the word "confess"—it occurs here in the prayer—when I say the word "confession," you get a—smiley face or a sad face—like, word association? The general tone of that word in our language, "confession"? Yeah, we kind of think, whatever, like "guilt, remorse," something—"pathology," something, I don't know. I think, "negative" associations.

And in this prayer, confession is precisely the key to *life* and to joy and freedom and confidence. *What if* our failures in following Jesus could result in this kind of "ski jump," that you hit at the end of the prayer here—which is "rejoice and be glad"? What if that could happen? And that's precisely what the Psalm is here to do—is to help take us to learn the language of confession that leads to joy and to confidence and to life.

Look at the first word of the prayer here, of David's prayer. What's the first word? How do you say the first word? Okay, I'm hearing "bless-ed," but then I'm also hearing

“blessed.” Exactly right. Now, here’s the funny thing. This has nothing to do with Hebrew, or anything like that. This is just what I call “religious speak,” which is—for some reason, there are just some words that we only say in religious settings, even though we never say them like that in any other setting.

So I doubt, if it wasn’t related to anything else, you wouldn’t say, “I feel so *bless-ed* today.” But for some reason, when we read the Bible out loud, we feel like—anyway. That’s just a funny thing about religious communities that we have “special language.” So anyhow, so *“blessed.”*

And again, this is a really, a “religious word” that, kind of, almost becomes trite to us. You might recall—this is also the first word of the whole book of Psalms, yeah? Remember Psalm 1, that Josh opened up the whole series with: “Blessed is the man who doesn’t walk in the counsel of the wicked; stand in the way of sinners,” and so on. It talks about this person who’s “blessed” because of all these things that he doesn’t do.

And so this Psalm begins with exactly—there’s actually, probably, about a dozen prayers in the book of Psalms that begin just like this. And “blessed,” it becomes, kind of, benign in English. We don’t—again, or trite, or something like that. This is actually a very powerful concept that is in every single one of our heads. We just don’t use the word “blessed” to talk about it.

So what this is, what this word is, is it’s the billboards that are all up and down, like, the streets around the highway, that depict some sort of favorable, pleasant scene where life is “free of all problems,” because you have their product in your hand—[Tim laughs] you know what I’m saying?

So you have, whatever, you have the six-pack of Budweiser, and then the guy, also, holding it has a six-pack for sure—[Tim laughs] you know what I’m saying? [Tim refers to visual] And so, here, we’re at the, like, the “male fantasy” version, or whatever—scantly clad women around a beach, or something like that—and here we go, right? That’s the—it’s the ideal. It’s “the good life,” so to speak.

My idea of “the good life” is something different, and it might just have to do with [the fact] that I have two small kids now and absolutely no social life and no sleep. But my idea of “the good life” would be something like living down on Twelfth and Belmont, in the cool loft apartment, with exposed brick—you know what I’m saying? And whatever it is—you go to work three hours a day, maximum—right?—at the coffee shop. Work on your computer, because you have an internet site that’s just making lots of money for you. And then you go backpacking every weekend, and eat at the good restaurants every night. Or something like that. So that’s, there you go. That’s where I’m tempted to go in my mind, when I’m changing diapers—[Tim laughs] you know what I’m saying?

So, whatever it is—so, we all have our version of this. And this is what this is talking about. This is, “Oh, the good fortune of the person who has *this* setup”—that’s how this prayer is opening here. This is about living in an envious or a desirable state of being—a state of well-being, and fulfillment, and so on.

And so notice how this prayer begins. It says, “Oh, oh, the life-setup of this kind of person.” What kind of person is it who has the most desirable, enviable life status? “It’s the person who knows that they are deeply flawed, and that they have failed ‘big time,’ and they know that they need forgiveness, and they know that they have it. They know that they have it.”

Because the confidence—the tone of confidence in this poem—it’s amazing as a prayer of confession. This is quite astounding here: “how enviable is the person who has a real, deep understanding of their character flaws and their failures, and they know that they’re not okay, that they need forgiveness and that they *have* it. Imagine that kind of life.”

And so what this kind of prayer does in creating this: “the good life is the forgiven life,” is, it erases off the board all sorts of visions of superficial kinds of “religiosity” that say, somehow: the good life, if you’re religious, is to be perfect. Or the good life—maybe some of us, we might—we would never say it this way, but if your friends were honest with you, they would tell you that you have just simply “too high a view of yourself,” right?

And you don’t think there’s anything particularly wrong with you—you’re not perfect, of course. You try and follow the golden rule: do to others what you would have them do to you. And so of course, you know, “We all fail, but on the whole, you know, I’m a pretty decent person, but I’m *really* glad Tim’s giving this message for some of the other people in the room.” [Tim laughs] Right? So some of us, we would never say it, but if your friends are honest with you, that’s who you are.

And you’re not going to be able to hear Psalm 32 because you’re not actually able to take a deep dive into how screwed up you actually are. But on the flip side, there’s a whole other bunch of us who won’t be able to hear because you have too low a view of yourself, not too high.

And so in your mind—in your, kind of, your darker moments—you actually think you’re beyond forgiveness, real restoration, or change. And “You don’t know what I’ve done. You don’t know my past. You don’t know what kind of person I am.” And so that person also will be unable to hear the *confident* pronouncement of forgiveness that’s available to those who confess.

And so what Psalm 32 is: it’s “the good life” for those who—not who think they’re too good, or not, who think they’re too bad—but for those who somehow merge both by

saying, “I have a realistic view of my flaws and my failures. I know I *need* forgiveness, *and* I know I have it.”

And living from that kind of mindset, as we’re going to see in the poem here, is an empowering experience that can result in confession—not being the kind of, like, “whip yourself on the back,” or the merry-go-round of “confession, but then I’m just back at it again two days later.” How do you get *past* that? Because that’s what confession is for many of us. And that’s the path that Psalm 32 takes us on.

And so just—I want you to imagine with me a life lived where you actually have a *real* handle on what’s wrong with you. And you know that there is someone in your life who has the power and will to heal you and transform you, and has already made their statement: that they’re committed to you, no matter what kind of person you are. Just imagine if you were to *live* from that kind of mindset. That’s what Psalm 32 invites us to do.

Look at verse 1, and I’ll point out a stumbling block that I think some of us are going to have in reading this prayer before we move on. So the language used in this ideal life here is “how blessed” or “how fortunate” is the one whose transgressions are forgiven. The language of “guilt” and of “shame” and the idea that “I have wronged God, or offended God,” and that I am living against the grain of the universe and that I need forgiveness—this is not a popular idea in our culture.

This is not a popular idea for lots of different reasons. The most primary one, I hardly have to explain to you. The basic way—and again, I am a child of our culture as much as you are—the basic way you make moral decisions and you evaluate people’s behavior—first of all, the greatest sin in our culture is not offending God. It’s disagreeing with someone else about their behavior, and saying that it’s “right” or “wrong,” you know what I’m saying? That’s actually the greatest sin in our culture.

And it comes out of, you know, in just exactly what we grew up in, is: that moral decisions are a “choose your own adventure”—you know? *Don’t tell me what to do*, and, kind of, “shoot from the hip.” And if it “feels right,” and as long as they’re “consenting adults,” and nobody’s physically injured, then it must be *morally* acceptable—anybody, right? This is how we grew up here. This is our culture.

And so to come into that kind of setting and to say, “Well, actually there’s quite a bit more clarity about what’s right and wrong than you’d like to admit here.” And what that then means is that I’m actually ending up on the wrong side of the line a lot more than I’d like to admit. And actually, the one that I’ve wronged is, like, my creator. That’s just not popular, just not popular at all in our culture.

And because once you lose any kind of basis or, like, a “razor edge,” for “no matter what your friend thinks,” or “no matter what your conscience tells you,” you can know whether

this behavior is right or wrong—once you lose that in your decision-making, you’re just—you’re adrift. You’re adrift.

And so the reality is: the announcement that “forgiveness is available for those who are guilty,” there are many people in a city like Portland that just doesn’t resonate with—because there’s a lot of people who just aren’t feeling very guilty here in our culture and in our city.

And so it’s like, “Forgiveness is available.” *Rad, that’s great for you. I’m not really feeling very guilty.* [With a grin in voice] How many of you had that conversation before? And so this language can be difficult, I think, for many of us to process. Lucky for us, the Bible uses *many* different images to talk about “sin” and “forgiveness.” One of them is in this poem, right here.

So look at the poem. He says, “Blessed—the ideal life—is of one whose sins, or transgressions, are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.” Now this is brilliant. This is a completely different image, isn’t it? “Forgiveness” is language about *relationship*. You’ve wronged someone; it needs to be forgiven.

But to have your sins *covered*? That’s a very different idea of this whole conversation here. And as we’re going to see here, in verse 5, the word “sin” in the Bible just means “failure.” Failure. “How fortunate is the person whose *failures* are *covered*.” That speaks a whole different language to us.

So think to the very first pages of the Bible, one of the very familiar stories in the book of Genesis: the story of the first human characters in the story, Adam and Eve. And so there’s this whole thing with a “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” that they’re not supposed to eat from.

So what this whole part of the story is about is: are humans going to humbly, kind of, put themselves under God’s wisdom of defining good and evil—God’s knowledge of good and evil? Or are the humans going to *seize* autonomy and *seize* the authority to know and define good and evil for themselves, and to draw the lines where they see fit? That’s what’s happening there in that story.

And so when the humans seize autonomy—they decide to define “good and evil” for themselves, according to their own knowledge—in the story, what’s the very first thing that happens when they take, when they seize the opportunity? What happens? A little detail in the story that speaks volumes about the human condition. The first thing: it says “their eyes were opened and they realized . . . they’re naked.”

And so they’re ashamed, and then they’re like [Tim gasps], and so they get some leaves from a tree, and they make clothes for themselves. And we’re like, “What?” So—it’s just strange, right? So what is going on there? This is a *profound* story about the human

condition. And so it's about clothing, but "clothing," here, becomes a symbol of something that's deeply wrong with all of us.

So why is it—except for Pedalpalooza and the Naked Bike Ride—[with a grin in voice] and that's a whole other, different thing that just tells volumes about our culture—but most people actually think clothing is a good idea? And I tend to think that's a good idea, for a number of different reasons. So clothing is a *physical* way that we cover ourselves, because there are things about me that I don't want you to see. There are things about *you* that you don't want other people to have totally unfiltered access to, you know—to viewing, or whatever.

And that's a part—there's something deep within us that's universal about human beings. To be the object of someone's gaze—and I have *no* ability to control what they see or don't see about me—that's a dehumanizing experience. It's humiliating for us. Why? Because physically, there are things that we might be ashamed of. But of course, in the story of Adam and Eve, this is an image that's not just about clothing. This is about who we are.

And the fact that, if I'm—not just physically—but if my life, if my thought life was available to all of you, totally unfiltered, twenty-four-seven, that would be horrifying to me. And it would be horrifying to you too, I think, right? [Tim laughs] Because you'd be like, "That's my pastor, really? He's thinking, you know—he really thought that about that person who just cut him off, you know—really?" [Tim laughs] But whatever, whatever—you screwed up too, you know? So right back at you.

I mean, just the thought—I mean, really think about this. Some of our worst nightmares are made up of moments where we're uncovered. You know what I'm saying? So—and whatever it is—it's, you know, for some of us, the worst possible nightmare would be in a room like this, and through some "glitch," or whatever, you're working the soundboard and your internet browsing history appears on the screen in front of everybody, or something like that—it's like, "Oh my gosh, no way."

Or if you leave your phone somewhere and someone starts rifling through all your pictures, and they see what your life is really—you know?—things that are really taking place in your life. Even just, it's the moments where you're with a friend, and you're talking about a roommate or a friend, and you're not speaking super highly of them, and then you realize, "Oh my gosh, they're sitting two tables away, and could they hear me"—right? That's what's going on there.

We do, and say, and think things that we are ashamed of. And a great deal of our effort in our waking hours goes into "covering ourselves." That's why we dress the way we do. That's why we present ourselves the way we do—this "front" that we put on to control

your perception of me. Because if you really knew what was going on in these “covered areas,” well . . . I’d be ashamed.

And so this is a very different image here: “How blessed is the one who’s lived against the grain of the universe, has wronged God and other people, and is forgiven. How blessed, also, is the person who knows their secrets—who knows what they are. They know these ‘covered areas’ that they won’t let anyone see. Imagine the freedom and the good life that could come from not living in secret anymore, from not having to cover, from knowing there’s at least *one* being in the universe, my maker, who knows me, who knows me fully—that I don’t have to hide from anymore.” *That* would be something. That would be something. That’s what this prayer is about.

And so whether you’re aware that you’ve wronged God and feel guilty, or whether you’re just simply aware that you have stuff in your life that you would in no way want anyone to know about, the Psalm speaks to both of you and says: “the way forward is the language of confession,” learning how to confess.

Look at what happens to a human being when we stuff it in. Look at verses 3 and 4—we’re made to confess. We’re made to “clean out the cupboards,” because—look at verses 3 and 4. He describes what happens when we don’t confess. He says, “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.”

And some of you have been here before. It’s either a decision that you made; something that you did—whether it’s in your past, or in your present, or whatever—and you knew it was wrong, or you feel ashamed of it, and you just—you’re bottling it up, and it’s “eating your lunch”—[Tim laughs] right? It’s just ruining you.

And actually, what came—the first image that came into my mind. We’ve had—with little kids, the house is a total pigsty—and, you know—there’s those Tupperwares, that find their way into the back corner of the fridge for two months? You know—that action? [With a grin] Okay, it’s bad. It’s bad, so . . . But that’s the image that actually came to my mind. It’s like human beings—we need to get cleaned out. We need to be, like, “flushed through,” every now and then, for the stuff that we hide and that we conceal because it, like, rots inside of us.

And so some of you, you’ve lived verses 3 and 4 before. When you’re living with regret, or with guilt, or with something you’re ashamed of—you can’t tell anyone. You’re hiding it, and you know exactly what it’s like for your “bones to waste away,” and your “strength to be sapped,” because you *know* you need forgiveness. You *know* you need some kind of resolution, and you need to be *covered*, but not in the way you’re used to covering yourself—in some kind of different way. We *need* forgiveness.

And therefore, we need to confess, which is what happens here in verse 5. Verse 5 is, kind of, the center of this prayer—and this is one of the most clear and, I think, beautiful acts of confession in the whole Bible. David says, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you. I didn’t cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

Now I want to both camp out and geek out here—because, you know me. Because this is a really compact, but brilliant exploration of the nature of confession. Do you see there’s three steps here? There’s, kind of, three steps that he goes through—do you see it here? What are they?

He says, “I acknowledged my sin to you.” So: I named it, I said it out loud. I say it, speak it, “Here’s what I’m covering; here’s what I’ve done.” It says, “I don’t cover.” I stop covering. I own up to the fact that here’s something I’m trying to hide because I’m ashamed or because I feel guilty—I can’t. I’m rotting inside. I stop covering.

So I name it. I stop covering. And then he says, “I will confess.” And to “confess”—again, as a “religious word” to most of us, it just means to “tell the truth.” In the Bible, you can “confess” as an act of praise, which just means to tell the truth about who Jesus is, speak the truth about who God is.

But you can confess, also, as an act of getting your sin on the table, as a way of telling the truth about who *you* are and what you’ve done. That’s what it means: *tell the truth*. And so you can see the flow of the experience here. I acknowledge it, I name it. I *stop* covering it up, and I tell the truth about it. Truth has a way of illuminating and flushing us out—cleaning out the Tupper—the Tupperware. The Tupper? [With a grin] The Tupperware, so to speak.

Now, this is even more brilliant here, because in verse 5, there are three phases to confession. There are also three words for sin here—do you see that here? And actually—this is interesting—in the whole vocabulary of ancient biblical Hebrew, there are three words for sin. And David uses all three of them here. And they’re all a little different in meaning, and they illuminate what this confession is about here. And this is where I’m geeking out, as I normally do. So let me show you the words of this, and the way this holds, fits together—it’s really cool.

So he says, “I acknowledge, I name my sin.” “Sin” is from a Hebrew word named *khata’ah*—it’s a “clear your throat word.” Why don’t you say it with me? *Khata’ah*. It’s most basic—it just means “to fail,” like I said earlier—*failure*. And specifically, “moral failure.” But this word is also used in settings where it has nothing to do with morality at all. So there’s a tribe of Israel, called the Benjamites—Benjaminites. And they were famous for training good slingshot throwers—it’s a random little story in the book of

Judges. And it says, “You know, the warriors of Benjamin, they could throw a stone with their sling and never *khata’ah*.” They would never *sin*, i.e., *fail—fail*.

And so what’s behind this is an idea about what human beings are here for—we’re here for a purpose. We actually have a purpose. And you can fail to live up to that purpose. And one of the main ways that we fail is through making moral decisions where I define “good” according to “what’s good for me and my tribe,” my self-advantage, at the expense of others. Elevating myself above others, meeting my needs before others, or just that self-orientation.

That’s “a failed human being,” according to the Scriptures. One that lives only inwardly and for self-advantage. That’s *khata’ah*—you’re failing to be what God made us to be. And so I name it. [Tim laughs] I say it out loud, “I’m a failure.” [With a grin] Everybody, come on—no, I don’t want to make you do that, right? But there you go.

I mean, that’s—and for some of us, that might be the hugest hurdle to actually, for the first time, own up to the fact that you’re wrong. That you’re wrong. And it’s *really* hard for some of us—and for lots of different reasons. But you can’t make a step forward towards Jesus without admitting that you’re wrong about some really fundamental things in life.

And so you name that, and you take the next step, which he says, “I name it”—*my failures*—“and I stop covering over my iniquity.” Now there’s a word you used this last week, right? *Iniquity*. So it’s a good “Bible word,” and it’s the word *‘avon*. [Referring to US company name] You wanted to say “‘avon,” didn’t you? And you’re like, “Whoa, ‘avon’s in the Bible”—but it’s not. [Tim laughs] No, it’s not in the Bible.

So *‘avon*: the image is that “life is a journey.” This word comes from the metaphor that “life is a journey,” and there’s the path you need to go on to get to where you’re going. And then there’s the other path—and *‘avon* is choosing the other path. It’s going astray. It’s waywardness—and it might be unintentional, or intentional.

There’s, in the book of Leviticus—which I’m sure you’re prone to read—there are different kinds of sacrifices for intentional sin or unintentional sin. But the Bible makes this distinction—actually, this is actually quite important—that we don’t cover up the fact that there are ways that I know I’m screwed up, and no one has to tell me. But we should never *limit* our idea of how screwed up we are just to what I’m aware of—[Tim laughs] you know what I’m saying? Like that’s a fatal, fatal step right there.

So you may not think you have a problem, just, with “selfishness,” or whatever—I *guarantee* your roommates know all about it, [Tim laughs] you know what I’m saying? And if you don’t, apparently they don’t love you, or are not honest with you enough, to tell you about it. And some of you may have a problem with anger. And you know that’s not the path you want to go down, but you end up choosing it anyway. And you may

have no idea that you have a problem with anger. I guarantee your spouse does. I *guarantee* your best friends do. And if you remain ignorant about it, it's because they're choosing not to tell you.

And we choose not to tell each other or point out each other's flaws for all kinds of different reasons. Usually they're selfish ones, because I want you to like me. I want you to think highly of me. I don't want to cause conflict with you. I don't want to risk what you might think about me, so I'd rather "save face" and not bring up your issues. And vice versa—I mean, come on. This is how we do it.

And so the language of confession just cuts right through it. It says, "Stop the cover-up game, with each other and with God." It's the language of confession. So I name my failures. I stop covering up the fact that I keep choosing the path I know I'm not supposed to be on. And then I speak the truth. I confess about my transgressions. And the word here is *pesha*“. And *pesha*“ is not you just "happen to fail," or you just "happen to choose the wrong path." It's "here's a line, it's a moral line. I know it's wrong—*cross it anyway*." That's *pesha*“.

And so he's using the *whole* biblical vocabulary of all the ways that we make horrible decisions—intentionally or unintentionally. And he just says, "Get it out there. It's the best thing for you. It's the way to the good life—is to get that stuff out on the table—first and foremost, before God. It's the way to life."

And notice, then, he just ends it right here with this quick statement. And what is God's response in all of this? Look at verse 5—this is unbelievable. Does he say, "And you *considered* forgiving, you *thought* about forgiving"? He just says, right here, "I did all of the heart searching I knew how to do, get it all on the table, and here's God's response: you forgave. You forgave." It's part of God being faithful to his own character, as we'll see in a second here.

I just want you to imagine, if you've ever had this kind of experience, think back to it. If you've never really gotten this raw and honest with God, or another person before, I just want you to imagine: what if you were really to get all of your mess "on the table" in an act of confession like this? Can you imagine the freedom?

Can you imagine the confidence you would have—not in yourself, once you know that "the worst of me is out there now," and here's God's response to me? That's an empowering experience—to know that grace is stronger than anything of my mess that I can throw on the table in an act of confession. That'll start to change you, if you learn the language and the habit of confession.

And so look what he describes here, as a result of it. In verse 6, he says, "Therefore let all who are faithful pray to you while you may be found. Surely the rising of mighty waters won't reach them. You are my hiding place. You will protect me from trouble. You

will surround me with songs of deliverance.” It’s this confident language here—and he’s not confident in himself. He’s confident in the one in whom he’s hiding.

Now God, as his forgiver, is the one that his confidence rests in. He’s not confident in himself. He knows what kind of person he is—he’s a person who does *khata’ah*, *‘avon*, and *peshah*—that’s what he is. He’s not confident in himself. He’s confident in this one who’s moved toward him in an act to forgive.

And if you don’t know that experience of grace that, when you experience it, it feels so extravagant and ridiculous—that God would move towards you—that’s it, man. That’s the real thing, right there. And most of us miss out on that. And for us, confession—it doesn’t result in this kind of confidence or empowerment, or joy that’s out the other side. And this is what the last part of the poem is about: why is that? Why is it, for many of us, confession doesn’t result in lasting change, or some kind of transformation?

Look at where he goes here. This is so interesting. Verse 8, he says, “I’ll instruct you. I’ll teach you in the way you should go. I’ll counsel you with my eye on you. Don’t be like the horse or the mule. It doesn’t have any understanding. It has to be controlled by bit and bridle, or else it won’t come to you. Don’t be like that. Don’t be like that. Many are the woes of the wicked because they’re like stupid mules. But the Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the Lord. Be glad, you righteous. Sing you who are upright in heart.”

What he’s getting at here is: there’s two roads of confession. There can be a form of confession—or refusing to confess—that’ll land you with “the woes of the wicked.” But there’s a way through confession to joy and confidence. And he says, “It’s not being like a stupid mule”—do you see that there? “Not being like a dumb donkey.”

Now, leave it to the Bible to be strange. We’re just all, “Amazing”—about *confession* and *covering*, and then we’re talking about horses and donkeys. You’re like, *what is this?* It’s so strange. So—it’s the Bible. It’s wonderful, is what it is. So it’s a little parable, isn’t it? It’s a little parable about donkeys and horses. Now, I don’t have any expertise in either horses or donkeys—terribly allergic to horses, and I found this out when I was about thirteen. Broke out in hives. Haven’t touched one since. So I don’t know a whole lot about horses. I know, at least from movies growing up, that not all horses are dumb—*Black Stallion*, this kind of thing, [Tim laughs] right?

But I’m guessing maybe some horses are very stubborn and stupid, yeah? And I think a higher percentage of donkeys are dumb—you with me, right? And so here’s the idea here, is: don’t be like a dumb horse or a dumb donkey. So just imagine the little scene—that it can only ever do the right thing when it hurts.

So here’s the scene, is that it’s like a rider and a donkey going up, like, a steep switchback path, right? Sinks, hiking up in the gorge or something. Steep switchback in

the section there. You're riding a donkey. The path is very narrow. And it keeps wanting to pull left, and to the left is steep, like, rocks, and you're going to get hurt or injured—die, or something like that.

And so what's the rider going to do? It's going to keep pulling the reins to the right, get it to go right. Now, what's the donkey going to do when the rider just—[makes straining sound] on the reins, like that? What's going to happen? Is it going to go right? If you pull hard enough, it's absolutely going to go right. Why? Because it's going to yank on the bridle. It's connected to that piece of metal right there, in its mouth, and it's going to grind on its teeth and jerk into its gums.

It's going to hurt. That's what it's going to do. It's going to hurt. And the donkey's going to go, "Oh, I don't like that." And—negative consequences. Avoid pain, increase pleasure—get over to the right, you know? And that's—there you go. That's how you get a donkey to do the right thing. *Don't be like that. Don't be like that.*

So apparently there is a way to do the right thing. To even enter into a form of confession that does not result in lasting change, and doesn't result in any kind of transformation, because it's like you're, like, being like a dumb donkey.

Because a donkey—does a donkey, in that moment, think, like, "Oh yes, my rider, of course, he has three small children, and it would be a tragedy for him to be injured. Or he gives me yummy apples," or something? [Tim laughs] You know—like, *no*. The donkey doesn't think that at all. The donkey's focused on itself, its own desire for pleasure and negative consequences—"I don't want pain." That's all it is. What the donkey's sorry about is the negative consequences of its behavior.

And I think it's precisely, precisely why confession, for many of us, doesn't result in lasting change. It's because we don't do the real, deep work—the reason we make the decisions that we make is because we think that they're going to get us towards what's good. That's why we make the decisions—because we're in pursuit of "the good life," the *blessed* life.

And we have deep, deep issues about affections and values and what I'm after in life. And if your confession doesn't dig down there to address those issues—why do I think that kind of life outcome is desirable? Why do I constantly go back to these, kind of, superficial relationships that are purely physical or whatever? Why do I think that's a way to the good life—you need to *get* there, and do that *deep* work dealing with your *khata'ah*, your sin and your iniquity and your transgression.

And when you get there, you begin to discover the motivations for your behavior—and that's—that's where God's grace has to get to. Otherwise, all confession is us "kicking back" and feeling sorry for the mess that we've made. And "I don't like the fact that I made this decision," and here I am again. And what we're actually sorry for is not what

we've done, or that we've wronged our maker. What we're sorry for is ourselves, and that we've landed in a bad spot again. And there you go.

Because the moment that the rider lets up on that bridle, five minutes later, what's that donkey doing again—once it's forgotten about the pain? It's just pulling left again. And then you'll find yourself, "Well, I tried the 'Christianity thing,' I tried the 'religion thing,' and it's"—*no*, dude, *no*. You tried a superficial religion. You never engaged in a *real* relationship with Jesus, where you got your serious issues on the table. Where you confessed, you sought help, and allowed Jesus to get in there and do *real* transformational work with his unconditional love and grace. Until you've tried *that*, I mean, you're not in touch with the real thing. It's just "religion."

And that's a very hard merry-go-round to get off of. And all of a sudden, then your confession then becomes all about some other thing too, because your confession—you begin to believe that your confession is what it is that warrants God's forgiveness of you. And so you feel like, "Man, I really was sorry. I thought I was sorry. I thought I asked for forgiveness, and I don't feel very forgiven," or whatever. And it just becomes this subjective "mess." And you're like, "Did I really confess? I'm not sure if—was I really sorry enough? How sorry do I have to be?" And it's just, the Gospel just cuts right through that. And it cuts through it because of the basis of confession.

Let me close with this. Look at that statement of verse 5. Notice he says, "I confess"—I do the deep work, get it all on the table. And he's just, "You forgave." There's no hesitancy at all—"You forgave." Look at verse 2, right at the beginning. It says, "How blessed"—how fortunate—"is the one whose sin the Lord doesn't count against him."

That's an astounding statement, that apparently the God that we confess and believe in here is a God who's in the business of *not* counting people's wrongs against them. That's crazy, that's what that is—[Tim laughs] that's crazy. Like, how can David so confidently just say stuff like that? And this is as crazy as—so I-84 was closed this weekend, yeah? How's that going for you? [Tim laughs] So a whole bunch of us didn't pay attention. We weren't looking at the news or whatever. And so you were trying to get somewhere on time, or whatever—do something. Or Thirty-ninth, yeah, that section was closed here, and you didn't know, or whatever. And so you ended up in the mess, and on the detour.

And I read an *Oregonian* article: they placed cops all over the side streets around the closures. Thirty-ninth racked up eighty tickets in one weekend—so there you go—from all the cops they put on there. So whatever—so you're that person, and you get nailed because you were frustrated. You missed, on the detour, and you're racing through some side streets or whatever; little kids are playing. You're like, "I don't care, I need to get where I'm going." And so, whatever.

So you get the ticket. And you go down to the courthouse, and sometimes showing up in person will lessen the fine, just a little bit. Or not, if you're a skateboarder. [Tim laughs] I know from experience. And all of a sudden the judge just says to you, "That was probably a rough day, a rough day that you were having. Let's just forget this whole thing. Allow me to, personally, call your insurance agent, strike it from the record. Here's a Tootsie Roll as you go out the door." [Tim laughs] You know?

And so—that's ridiculous. That's utterly ridiculous. And that's as ridiculous as what David is saying here. It should make our jaws drop. Apparently, this God is in the business of, just, straight up: *I confess, you forgive*. And God finds particular pleasure in giving people the good life, where he doesn't count their wrongs against them.

Where does David get this confidence? And so all of these prayers and psalms we've been exploring, week after week, they're putting down signposts in the story of the Old Testament that are all pointing *forward* to the great act of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, where God deals with the sin and the iniquity and the transgression of humanity in our world. That's what this is pointing to.

And Paul picks up on the language—Paul the Apostle—picks up on the language of verse 2 in numerous places in his writings. And one of them is this, right here: Second Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 21. He says, "God made the one who knew no sin to become sin for us so that in him," that is, Jesus, "we might become the righteousness of God."

The basis of Christian confession is not "how sorry I feel." And it's certainly not, like, feeling a "pity party" for this mess I've made for myself. And the confidence that I have to come and confess all of this mess that's inside of me is not, somehow, that I can think I can do something about this. Christian confession, the basis of it, is purely what Jesus has done for me that I *cannot* do for myself.

And Christian confession is this raw honesty about who I am—but it's this trusting-by-faith acknowledgment that there is a forgiveness and a covering available to me—long before I ever knew it existed—and that is perpetually available to me in the future. That's Christian confession.

And that gets you off the merry-go-round of: "was I sorry enough?" To be honest, it doesn't matter how—you know what I mean? What matters is that the cross happened. And if you could just wake up to the fact that the cross was for *you*, and that it has transformative power to heal and change you, now we're talking. Then confession becomes a pathway to joy and to change and to confidence.

And so this big room—there's so many stories represented, and all of us have our own version of what we would be horrified to have put on the screen—you know—from when you were by yourself and no one saw, and there it is. We all have our version of that

nightmare. And the question is: what do you do with that? How do you pray through that? And David paints a way for us as he points to the cross—the place where Jesus was given a status and treatment that he did not deserve, so that you and I are treated and receive a status that we do not deserve. And there you go.

This is Good News of God's grace to people who consistently hide—people like us. So I don't know where you need to go in the time that we have left. You know, the way we do our services is always to have a time for prayer, for reflection and meditation, and to come to the bread and the cup, which I would just encourage you to use as a space for confession.

Maybe some of you need to sit with verse 5 in front of you, and let verse 5 guide you in a confession before God tonight. And then let the bread and the cup—where Jesus's blood was shed for us, or his body was broken for us—become something different than what it normally is to you, or perhaps, for some of you, do that for the first time as an act of confession. I don't know what you need to do, but as I close us in prayer, I'm just going to pray for us, and that God's Spirit will be at work, softening our hearts, and telling us where we need to go in our confession. Let me close us in a word of prayer.

[EMSB theme fades in]

Well, I hope that was thought-provoking and stimulating for you. I hope that as we go on in our days and fail—[with a grin in voice] which the odds are very high that that's going to happen not long after we stop listening to this podcast—at least we have a way forward to help guide us in how to talk to God and others about our failures. Thanks for listening to the “Strange Bible” podcast. We'll see you next time. Thanks.

[EMSB theme fades out]