

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF PSALM 32

Psalm 32 has a special significance in the life of the church and the Christian. It is one of the seven penitential psalms (6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), and its association with David encourages the Christian to use the psalm as an assurance of God's forgiveness.

Yet, this psalm is more than a penitential psalm. It includes elements of thanksgiving (vv. 3-8) and wisdom (vv. 1-2, 9-11). The thanksgiving is structured within the context of wisdom (cf. Prov. 28:13). The psalm shares the wisdom language and forms of expression ("blessed", vv. 1-2); "instruct", "teach", "way", "counsel", v. 8; contrast between righteous and wicked, v. 10; and advantages of godliness).

The teaching element also projects the confession of sin into the context of wisdom. Contrition is viewed here in its truly biblical context for sin coupled with and followed by confession, forgiveness, and openness to the wisdom of God.

The psalm shows a clear structure. The blessing (vv. 1-2) presupposes the experience of confession (vv. 3-4) and forgiveness (v. 5). The experience of forgiveness leads into an encouragement of the godly to find refuge in the LORD (vv. 6-7) and to be instructed by Him (vv. 8). The psalmist in turn gives advice to those who find themselves in the same situation of being under the disciplinary hand of the LORD (v. 9). Such stubborn resistance brings only grief, whereas the one whose trusts in the LORD lead to confession of sin may know God's lovingkindness (v. 10). The last verse is a fitting closure, as the psalmist calls on the righteous to rejoice in the LORD (v. 11).

The literary structure may be outlined as follows:

- A Blessing of forgiveness (1-2)
 - B The LORD's discipline (3-4)
 - C The psalmist's confession (5)
 - X THE LORD'S PROTECTION (6-7)**
 - C' The LORD's instruction (8)
 - B' The psalmist's advice (9-10)
 - A' Rejoicing in forgiveness (11)

The advantage of seeing the structure is that it sets apart the LORD's protection (vv. 6-7) as the climax of the psalm.

By a twofold repetition of “blessed” in verses 1-2, three synonyms for sin, and a threefold expression of forgiveness, the assurance of forgiveness is promised to the person “in whose spirit there is no deceit!” Forgiveness is freely and graciously given, regardless of whether it be of a “transgression”, “sin”, or “iniquity”. The three words for sin may in certain contexts connote different reactions to God and His commandments: (1) “transgression” is an act of rebellion and disloyalty; (2) “sin” is an act that misses, often intentionally, God’s expressed and revealed will; and (3) “sin” is a crooked or wrong act, often associated with a conscious and intentional intent to do wrong. The three words here do not signify three distinct kinds of sin, because the synonyms overlap. The psalmist declares that the forgiveness of sin, of whatever kind, whether against God or man, whether great or small, whether conscientious or inadvertent, or whether by omission or commission, is to be found in God.

The nature of the sin is not as important here as is the blessedness of forgiveness. The three verbs express the absoluteness of divine forgiveness: (1) “are forgiven” is the act of removal of sin, guilt, and the remembrance of sin; (2) “are covered” is the gracious act of atonement by which the sinner is reconciled and the sin is a matter of the past, so that the LORD does not bring it up anymore as a ground for His displeasure; (3) “does not count” expresses God’s attitude toward those forgiven as “justified”

There is an expression of joyous excitement in these verses. The voice of wisdom is heard in the last colon where the blessedness of forgiveness is contingent on integrity. The LORD hates those who purposely sin against Him. God knows the “spirit” of man, whether the request of forgiveness is expressive of true repentance for sin or of regrets for the consequences. To teach the godly both the blessedness of forgiveness and the way of integrity, David has given us a psalm to lead the godly into the path of wisdom. The joy of forgiveness was a reality among the OT saints (cf. Rom. 4:6-8). How great is the blessedness of all who have tasted of God’s forgiveness in Christ (cf. John 1:9!).

To encourage the pursuit of godliness, the psalmist draws from his own personal experience in verses 3-4. The description of the anguish of suffering is compared to the wasting away of “bones” (cf. Ps. 6:2) and the sapping of strength (Ps. 22:15). In Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of the bones (chapter 37), the bones signify the hopelessness and meaninglessness of life apart from the grace of God. The language may be metaphorical; hence, the psalmist need not have been physically sick to experience the LORD’s heavy hand on him.

In a truly repentant spirit, the psalmist confessed his sin in verse 5. The three words for sin (vv. 1-2) are used again in verse 5 but in a different order. The three synonyms for sin associated with three synonyms for forgiveness (two

positive and one negative) are now associated with three verbs for confession (two positive and one negative): (1) he “acknowledged” (“to make known”); (2) he “did not cover up” from the same root as “atone” or “cover” (cf. V. 1); and (3) he did “confess”. The exact nature of his sin is here not important because he intends to teach the joy of the LORD’s forgiveness.

Suffering needs not be a form of discipline for sins (Job’s life). However, adversity is always an occasion for the wise in heart to draw near to the LORD in prayer (v. 6) and to find solace in Him (vv. 6-7). The psalmist encourages the “godly” to draw near to God in his affirmation of God’s ability to protect and to deliver from adversity. Their joy in deliverance expresses itself in joyful shouts as a tribute to God’s fidelity.

The sudden shift from the encouragement of God’s protection to the exhortation to wise living is due to a word from the LORD (v. 8). The personal pronoun “I” does not come originally from the mouth of the psalmist. He quotes the LORD, who has promised to instruct his children, give them wisdom, and watch over them. Notice the pattern of “three” verbs is resumed in the promise of God in verse 8. The LORD promises to (1) “instruct” (“give insight”); (2) “teach”; and (3) “counsel” (to give advice).

In verse 9, the psalmist expands on the Word from the LORD by alluding to the world of nature. Animals such as horses or mules must be bridled to be useful. God gives the godly freedom the highway of godliness. Anything other than the road of wisdom is folly and shows lack of understanding. The psalmist reflects gratefully on his response to the grace of God in his life when God’s hand pressed hard on him (vv. 3-4). He drew near to the LORD and confessed his sin. The godly draw near to Him out of a personal desire for holiness. Those who do not draw near to Him to find refuge (v. 6) are like animals that have to be held in check.

In verse 10, the psalmist contrasts the LORD’s dealings with the righteous and the wicked (cf. Ps 1). The wicked may experience endless adversities, whereas the wise will experience the constancy of God’s love and protection.

The assurances of God’s love, protection, guidance, and forgiveness mark the way of wisdom. Therefore, the godly are “blessed” (vv. 1-2). Even when they sin, they do not continue in adversity like the wicked. The LORD protects them and changes their “groaning” (v. 3) into loud, joyful “songs of deliverance” (v. 7). The encouragement to wise living concludes with an exhortation to rejoice.

The exhortation to “rejoice” (cf. Pss. 5:11; 33:1; Phil. 3:1; 4:1; 1 Thess. 5:16) does not call for making a vain effort to be happy when one does not feel like it. The godly who are mindful of all the benefits (forgiveness, protection, guidance) of the LORD will rejoice! The benefits are not indiscriminate gifts but are limited to the “righteous”, who are “upright in heart”. These descriptions parallel the blessing in verse 2 on those “in whose spirit is no deceit”.