

You are Psalms

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PSALMS *(SONGS OF PRAISE)*

TRUST
IN THE
LORD *and do good;*
dwell in the land and
enjoy safe pasture.
PSALM 36: 3

PSALM NUMBER: 31

The second Penitential Psalm

1. Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.
2. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin, and in whose spirit there is no guile.
3. Because I was silent, my bones grew old; whilst I cried out all the day long.
4. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: I am turned in my anguish, whilst the thorn is fastened.
5. I have acknowledged my sin to thee, and my injustice I have not concealed. I said I will confess against myself my injustice to the Lord; and thou hast forgiven the wickedness of my sin.
6. For this shall every one that is holy pray to thee, in a seasonable time. And yet in a flood of many waters, they shall not come nigh unto him.
7. Thou art my refuge from the trouble which hath encompassed me: my joy, deliver me from them that surround me.
8. I will give thee understanding, and I will instruct thee in this way, in which thou shalt go: I will fix my eyes upon thee.
9. Do not become like the horse and the mule, who have no understanding. With bit and bridle bind fast their jaws, who come not near unto thee.
10. Many are the scourges of the sinner, but mercy shall encompass him that hopeth in the Lord.
11. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice ye just, and glory all ye right of heart.

The Psalms are songs of praise and cover a period of about 1000 years, from the time of Moses (ca. 1400 B.C.) to the Israelites' return from exile (ca. 450 B.C.). They deal with selected events of that period and provide us with the thoughts and feelings of those who went through the experiences recorded. After being made a Cardinal by Pope Clement VIII, Saint Robert Bellarmine, prepared for posterity his very own commentary on each of the Psalms. Enclosed are his interpretations on each of the Psalms.

PSALM NUMBER: 31

Explanation of the Psalm

1. "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered."
2. "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin, and in whose spirit there is no guile." No one can fairly appreciate the value of health until they have had to deplore the loss of it. It was only when David tasted of the bitterness of sin that he first began to feel the sweetness of innocence. Hence, this Penitential Psalm starts in the praise of pardon and innocence; for they heal the soul, and are opposed to that sickness that is brought on by sin. He begins with pardon, as well for the sake of advancing from the inferior to the superior, as also, because it was only very lately his health had been restored. "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven." How happy are they, who, notwithstanding their fall, are, still, not despised by God; but, roused by his grace, are converted to penance, and thus obtain pardon. "And whose sins are covered;" the same idea in different language; for sins, when forgiven, are covered and hidden, so as to appear no more; on which we shall presently have more to say. "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin." A transition from pardon, which applies to the many, to innocence, which belongs to the few, exclaiming, O truly happy and lucky he; who had done nothing that can be counted sin; and to whom, therefore, the Lord, who is most just in his judgments, "hath not imputed sin." And not only has been free from actual sin, but even "in whose spirit there is no guile;" never committed sin in thought or word; for the word "Spirit" embraces both; that is, thought and words, in the former sense, being called the heart or the mind; and, in the latter sense, the spirit of the mouth or lips. Of the former, the apostle speaks, 1 Cor. 2, "For what man knoweth the things of a man, but the spirit of a man, that is in him?" Of the latter, 1 Cor. 14, "I will pray in the spirit, I will pray also with the understanding: I will sing with the spirit, I will also sing with the understanding." By innocence, we are to understand here, not the natural innocence, without the intervention of divine grace, which is of no effect; but, that innocence which God, by a gift of singular grace, has given to a few; through which the sin committed by others, namely original sin, is so condoned, as not to suffer them, voluntarily, to commit any mortal sin; and this is the highest order of forgiveness. All manner of innocence, then, has a certain amount of remission of sin in connection with it; and of all, with the exception of Christ, it may be said, "They all sinned, and need the grace of God." Saint Paul, therefore, quotes this passage to prove that nobody could be justified by any works, but those springing from grace; and says, Rom. 4, "But to him that worketh not, yet believeth in him who

11. "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice ye just, and glory all ye right of heart." Having pronounced the just to be happy, in the beginning of the Psalm, he now in the end of it exhorts them to be glad, being a sort of indirect exhortation to persevere in justice, that their joy may be continuous also. "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, ye just, and glory all ye right of heart." You just have great reason for rejoicing and gladness; but let it be "in the Lord," who is the source of all blessings you enjoy. Be not dejected by the losses or the rubs of this world, because in the world to come you will be amply repaid for them, in "a good measure, and pressed down, and shaken together, and running over;" while, in the meantime, you will not be left without spiritual consolation here below. "And glory all ye right of heart," is a repetition of the same, for "glory" does not mean to be proud or puffed up, but to celebrate and sing God's glory with joy; and the word is very generally used in the Scripture in such sense, as when the apostle says, "We glory in tribulations." The word glory, meaning pride and vanity, is to be found in Psalm 51, where he says, "Why do you glory in wickedness?" Here it has quite a different meaning, that of joy and gladness. By the "right of heart," we understand the just; because, from righteousness of heart comes righteousness in word and in deed; and they are the just, whose hearts, words, and actions are conformable to that most righteous rule, the law of God, from which righteousness it comes that God becomes pleasing to man, and man to God; and whatever happens, man, through God's will or permission, is cheerfully received; and thus the heart becomes filled, not only with justice, but even "with peace and joy in the Holy Ghost," which means the kingdom of God, as Saint Paul, Rom. 14, explains it. With the greatest justice, then, David, having commenced with the expression, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven," now concludes with, "be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, ye just," for the just alone are happy, and are in possession of true and solid joy.

End of Psalm 31

10. "Many are the scourges of the sinner, but mercy shall encompass him that hopeth in the Lord." An explanation of the bit and bridle. The impenitent sinner, still attached to sin, will be flayed with many a lash, both in this world and in the next. For, though sinners sometimes prosper, their sinful state is, in reality, a most grievous punishment, bringing with it punishments innumerable, solitudes, anxieties, fears, dangers, remorse of conscience, and the like; nay, more; God, being a just judge, adds many other scourges; and, unless the sinner repent, and pray to God in the fitting season, he will undoubtedly come under the lash of the scourge that is everlasting. On the other hand the just man, who confides in the Lord, and not in human vanity, is so surrounded on all sides by the divine mercy, that the scourge cannot touch him on any side. Now, the divine mercy is the fountain of all good, and, therefore, when he says, "mercy shall encompass him that hopeth in the Lord," he means to give us some idea of the immense amount of blessings that those who attached themselves to God alone shall abundantly enjoy.

justifieth the impious, his faith is reputed to justice, according to the purpose of the grace of God." As David also termeth the blessedness of a man, to whom God reputeth justice without works; "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin." From which it would appear that the apostle understands the Prophet to say, that they are not blessed who, by their strength, work out justice; but they, who, through God's grace, have been pardoned; and thus acquired justice. The Prophet seems to have particular individuals in view here. Job, for instance, who says, in chapter 27, "Till I die I will not depart from my innocence. My justification which I have begun to hold, I will not forsake: for my heart doth not reprehend me in all my life." Abel, Henoah, Noe, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are said in the Scriptures to have been free from sin, come under this head; and, perhaps, in spirit, he foresaw Jeremias. Both John the Baptist, sanctified in the womb, and the Virgin Mother, by a higher privilege, preserved not only from actual, but even from original sin. Heretics of the present day seek to prove three false dogmas from these verses. The Psalm has the title of understanding: The Holy Ghost, perhaps, having foreseen it would be so misunderstood. They assert that justification consists solely in the remission of sin, and not in the infusion of justice; from David having absolutely said, "Blessed are they whose sins are forgiven." They say also, that this remission of sins is not a real, but an apparent remission, which does not actually remove the sins, but covers them, hides them, and renders them not imputable. They furthermore assert, from this passage, that once the sin is forgiven, no satisfaction need follow; for, if God exact even temporal punishment of the person justified, how can he be said not to impute sin? How can he be said not to impute while he punishes?

The holy Prophet, however, who chose for a title to the Psalm that of understanding, clearly understood that God remitted no sin whatever without an infusion of his justice, and understood that thereby men from being wicked became, not only not wicked, but truly just; for, as the sun cannot expel the darkness without pouring in his light, so the sun of justice, and the Father of men does not forgive sin but through the grace or justice which he pours into them; and therefore Saint Paul, quoting this very passage, says, "As David also termeth the blessedness of a man to whom God reputeth justice without works," from which words of the apostle may be clearly inferred, that justice is really and truly included in the remission or non-imputation of sin. Both errors are easily refuted by an explanation of the words, "covered," and "not imputed." Sins are said here to be "covered," not that they exist though covered and hidden from us, but because they are entirely destroyed, and grace has taken their place, and thus they are truly covered, so that even God, from whom nothing can be hidden, cannot see them; and thus the Prophet uses various metaphors, to signify the remission of sins, so that the deficiency of explanation in one, may be supplied by another. The most remarkable occurs in Psalms 50, where he says, "Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow." Here the forgiveness of sins is said not merely to cover the stain and to hide it, but really to wash it, and to wash it in

such a way as even to make it white – even whiter than snow. What means, then, the removal of a stain, and the increasing its whiteness, but the removal of sin, and the infusion of grace? What means the substitution of light for darkness, but the removal of sin, and substitution of justice? We have the same in Isaias 1, “If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow; and if they be as red as crimson, they shall be white as wool.” All the holy fathers so understand this passage, for they say the sins are covered, not that they remain, though they do not appear; but that they are entirely removed, and do not appear, because they are not there; just as a plaster not only hides the wound but even removes it. As to the word “imputed,” our adversaries are quite mistaken. In the Scripture, it means that we will not be held accountable, as we read in Wisd. 12, “Or who shall accuse thee (impute to thee.) if the nations perish which thou hast made;” that is, who can bring you to an account, if all mankind be lost? Who will bring you in guilty? In Ezech. 33, God says of the penitent sinner, “None of his sins which he had committed, shall be imputed to him,” that he shall not be brought to an account for them; and in 2 Par. 30, “The Lord, who is good, will show mercy to all them who with their whole heart seek the Lord God of their fathers, and will not impute it to them that they are not sanctified;” meaning that he will easily pardon, will not be over strict in settling with them, by reason of their being more or less unprepared. Job 42 has “That folly may not be imputed to you;” and in 2 Tim. 4, “But all forsook me; may it not be laid to their charge;” that is, imputed to them; and in the Epistle to Philemon, “And if he hath wronged thee in anything or is in thy debt, put it to my account, (impute it to me,) I will repay it;” that is, charge me with it, I wish to be your debtor thereon. Now, sin can be said to be not imputed in two ways. First, when one has committed no sin, in reality owes nothing, and in such sense we understand that passage of the Book of Wisdom, already quoted, “Who shall impute it to thee if the nations perish which thou hast made.” For though all mankind were to perish, God would not have been the cause, and therefore it could not be imputed to him. In a similar sense we have explained this expression of David, “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin;” that is, who has willfully done no evil to make him a debtor and a culprit before God. Secondly, if the sins have been condoned and forgiven, so that there now remains nothing to be imputed, in which sense many interpret this passage, as if the Prophet were to say, Blessed is the man whom God will not call to account for his sins, because they have been already condoned and forgiven; which exposition we do not reject, though we prefer the first, because it agrees better with the following words, “And in whose spirit there is no guile.” The third mode of imputation devised by the heretics is, that though the sin remains in the soul of the sinner, still it is not considered or looked upon as sin by God, a notion having nothing in Scripture to support it, but even totally disproved by the Scripture; for when it says in various places, especially in Psalm 5, “Thou hatest all the workers of iniquity, thou wilt destroy all that speak a lie;” and if he hears and wishes to destroy all the wicked, he certainly must impute sin to them, so long as they remain in that state. Who can imagine that God, the just judge, who has no regard of persons, will not impute sin but justice, at the very time the unfortunate is wallowing in the mire of sin; so that whatever he may do, according to the Lutherans, is a sin. Saint Justin, Martyr, in his dialogue with Tripto, in refuting an error, similar to that of the Lutherans says, “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin;” that is, to the penitent, whose sins God

9. “Do not become like the horse and the mule, who have no understanding. With bit and bridle bind fast their jaws, who come not near unto thee.” The Prophet now exhorts all, both good and bad, to learn from his example the evil consequent of sin, and the blessings to be derived from penance and virtue, he having tasted of both. Turning to the wicked first, he says, “Do not become like the horse and the mule, who have no understanding.” Endowed with reason, but not guided by your animal propensities; be not like the horse and the mule in your licentious desires, as I was; be not like the horse and the mule, in tearing and lashing at your fellow creatures, as I have been in regard of Urias. “With bit and bridle bind fast their jaws, who come not near unto thee.” He foretells the calamities in store for those who will act the part of the horse and the mule towards their neighbor. They will be forced by tribulation either to return to God, or will be prevented from injuring their neighbors to the extent they intended; but, as usual, this prophetic warning is expressed as if it were an imprecation. You will force those wicked men to obey you, as you would subdue a horse or a mule, with a bit and bridle, and make them obedient to you. The words bit and bridle are used in a metaphorical sense to signify the crosses and trials that God has sometimes recourse to, as he explains in the following verse.

7. "Thou art my refuge from the trouble which hath encompassed me: my joy, deliver me from them that surround me." Having obtained remission of the sin, he now asks for remission of the punishment due to it; namely, his deliverance from the tribulation brought on him by the sin. He seems to allude to the persecution he was suffering from his son Absalom, of which he had said so much in the previous Psalm. Alludes also, perhaps, to the temptations of the evil spirits, that perpetually surround and harass us. "Thou art my refuge from the trouble which hath encompassed me." My friends have deserted me, my enemies hem me in and surround me on all sides, and I, therefore, have no certain refuge but in thy mercy, O God; you alone, then, are "my joy," the cause of it, and deliver me, therefore, from them.

8. "I will give thee understanding and I will instruct thee in this way, in which thou shalt go: I will fix my eyes upon thee." The Lord answers his prayer, and promises him the help he sought. He promises him three things. First, interior prudence, to enable him to guard against the snares of his enemies, and to distinguish them from his friends; that is conveyed in the words, "I will give thee understanding;" I will make thee intelligent and prudent. Secondly, the outward assistance of the singular providence of God, without which even the most prudent get into the greatest difficulties, and that is conveyed in the words, "I will instruct thee in this way in which thou shalt go." Thirdly, perseverance in grace, which is the greatest favor of all, and peculiarly belongs to the elect. "I will fix my eyes upon thee;" I will not take them off you, but I will steadily and constantly look upon you with an eye of benignity, so that you shall never need the internal aid of prudence, or the external protection of providence.

hath forgiven; and not in the sense that you erroneously preach up, that is, that the mere knowledge of God will get forgiveness for you, however numerous your sins may be. What we have stated of the non-imputation of sin, may be applied also to the imputation of justice. For, in the Scripture, the imputation of justice does not mean the reputed one to be just, when he really is not just, but it means the being reputed just by God, who is infallible. That expression in Genesis, "Abraham believed in God, and it was reputed to him unto justice," quoted by Saint Paul, Rom. 4, and by Saint James in Chapter 2, signifies nothing more than the act of faith by Abraham was a just work, and considered as such by God. That passage in Psalm 105, "Then Phinees stood up and pacified him, and the slaughter ceased. And it was reputed to him unto justice to generation and generation for evermore." What does it mean, but that the zeal of Phinees, in destroying certain sinners, was a most meritorious act, was considered as such by God, so much so, that the priesthood was secured to him, to his sons, and posterity for a number of years after in consequence. Of the same import is that expression in Rom. 4, "Now, to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned according to grace, but according to debt." What does that mean, but that the reward is justly due to him that does a work worthy of reward. And what the apostle frequently repeats in the same chapter, that "faith was reputed unto justice," does not mean that faith was not actually, but was merely reputed, justice; but it means that faith working by charity was the very purest justice; not acquired by works previous to grace, but the gift and the infusion of God, and therefore reputed and accepted by God as true justice. The non-imputation of sin, then, does not mean that sin remains though not punished, but it signifies that there is nothing in the justified that can be accounted sin. Hence it can be seen how easily solved are the objections of the Lutherans on satisfaction; for if sin be not imputed by reason of the innocence of one's life, no wonder that no satisfaction should be required of him that has done nothing to deserve it: but if the sin be not imputed by reason of pardon through grace, then the eternal punishment will not follow, but the temporal will, as we see happened to David, to whom the Prophet said, "The Lord also hath taken away thy sin; thou shalt not die: nevertheless, because thou hast given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, for this thing, the child that is born to thee shall surely die." Here we see that the sin was not imputed to his own death, but to the death of his son; that David was justified, and yet he had to suffer much in the death of his son, as a punishment for the sin he had committed.

3. "Because I was silent, my bones grew old; whilst I cried out all the day long."

Having thus put the happiness of the just before us, he deploras his own wretchedness thus: Happy they, but wretched me, who have not only lost my innocence, but put off, for an indefinite time, the asking pardon of my sins, and when I did at length avow them, began to cry out so constantly, that my bones were ground and weakened, my whole strength consumed and wasted. "Because I was silent;" and a long time he was silent; for he not only did not avow his crime of adultery, but he sought by all means to stifle all knowledge of it. He first used all endeavors to induce Urias to cohabit with his wife, that the child begot by himself may be looked upon as the child of Urias; failing in that, he committed murder, in the hope that by marrying Urias' widow at once, any issue there might be should be considered as begotten after, and not previous to, the death of Urias. And even after his marriage, he did not repent of his sins; he waited for the birth of the child; and even then showed no symptoms of repentance until the prophet Nathan aroused him. Thus, for nearly a year, or longer, did he wallow in the mire of sin, and put off his conversion. He, therefore, says, "Because I was silent." Did not confess my sin at once, sought to hide and conceal it; therefore, "My bones grew old whilst I cried out all the day long." When I did avow my sin, I cried out so long and so bitterly, that my very bones got weak and old.

4. "For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: I am turned in my anguish, whilst the thorn is fastened." David suffered many misfortunes in punishment of his sins. The child born in adultery died an infant: his daughter Tamar was deflowered by her own brother, Amon: the same Amon was slain by his brother Absalon; and Absalon himself, in rebellion against his father, was slain, all matters of deep sorrow and grief to David; and it is to those scourges he alludes, when he says, "For day and night thy hand was heavy on me:" constantly, without ceasing, you laid on me. "I am turned in my anguish, whilst the thorn is fastened." The scourge has been so severe, the thorn of tribulation has stuck so deep in me, that I have been brought to reflect on the enormity of my sins.

5. "I have acknowledged my sin to thee, and my injustice I have not concealed. I said I will confess against myself my injustice to the Lord; and thou hast forgiven the wickedness of my sin." His conversion brought him to a true knowledge of his sins, which he seeks no longer to conceal, but to proclaim before God and man. "I have acknowledged," does not imply that God did not know them previously. The judge, who has seen the accused committing the crime, knows he did the act, still he does not know it judicially until the culprit shall have pleaded guilty, or it shall have been proved by evidence. Thus, God saw David, saw him sinning, but wanting him to plead guilty, he applied the scourge, and then David did plead guilty, and said, not only, "I have sinned before the Lord," which, previous to those scourges, he said to Nathan in private, but now, in public, he makes it known to the whole world, through this Psalm; and, therefore, most justly adds, "And my injustice I have not concealed. I said I will confess against myself my injustice to the Lord, and thou hast forgiven the wickedness of my sin." To the comfort and consolation of all penitents, he enters into the unspeakable dealings of God in his mercy with himself. For, though God,

"Who is light, and in whom there is no darkness," has the most intense horror of the darkness of sinners, and is ready to cast the sinner into "eternal darkness" and everlasting punishment if he does not repent, is yet so ready to forgive when the penitent is sincere, that by his mercy and his clemency, he goes before or anticipates the confession or acknowledgment of our sins. He appears to refer to the time when Nathan, with God's authority, upbraided him with his sins, and he at once, in a spirit of compunction, replied, "I have sinned;" and Nathan said, "The Lord also hath taken away thy sin, thou shalt not die." Seeing the pardon so quickly granted, he considered, as was the fact, that the sin must have been forgiven before he confessed at all, but not before he had become internally contrite, which contrition embraced hatred of sin, love of God, and a desire of confessing, and making satisfaction. "I said I will confess." In the bitterness of my heart I said, I will at once confess "against myself my injustice;" declare myself a culprit and a criminal, which you hardly waited for, as at once, with the clemency and the kindness of a father, "Thou hast forgiven the wickedness of my sin;" as Nathan announced when he said, "The Lord also hath taken away thy sin."

6. "For this shall every one that is holy pray to thee, in a seasonable time. And yet in a flood of many waters, they shall not come nigh unto him." The Prophet now asserts that many will follow his example, and from it learn to have recourse to God, to ask pardon for their sins, and thus to be delivered from the great evils consequent on sin. The meaning is: As you so mercifully pardon those who do penance, "every one that is holy," every pious person that is truly holy, truly penitent, and, having begun to hate sin, seeks to enter into the love of you, "shall pray to thee," and will have confidence in their prayers, and that "in a seasonable time," before the time of mercy shall have passed away; while we are still here below, while God invites us to penance. "Seek the Lord while he can be found; invoke him while he is near," says Isaias. The second part of the verse has a double meaning— one is: Every one that is holy shall pray to thee in a seasonable time, that "in the flood of many waters, they shall not come nigh unto him;" that is, that on the day of judgment, when all manner of punishments shall pour down upon the wicked like a deluge, and the opportune season of prayer and penance shall have passed away, that then they may be saved from such punishments. This appears very clear in the Hebrew. The second meaning is: "Everyone that is holy shall pray to thee in a seasonable time," and will act well and wisely in doing so; because, "in the flood of many waters," when the wicked shall be inundated with calamities, as the earth was with water in the time of Noe, then the wicked "shall not come nigh unto him;" that is, to God, having let their opportunity pass.