

When Leadership Fails

Psalm 32

Introduction

This morning we are going on a bit of an excursion. Nearly everyone enjoys a trip or to travel. In spite of the inconveniences of car rides, airports, hotel lobbies, and parking garages, we love to experience the newness of adventure, and the familiarity of renewed memories and acquaintances. This sermon finds its structure in a travel motif. As we embark on our journey this morning, even though we have a destination or purpose, enjoy the trip, because the “getting there” is often as much a part of the joy of the trip as final arrival.

This is the fourth week of the Family Enrichment Conference. We have been challenged to think of family life in the light of our position in Christ and the power of the gospel. This affects our approach and response to leadership in all its facets. This morning our challenge is to provide Biblical instruction regarding the inevitable circumstances when leadership fails. In particular we are not referring to the ebb and flow of learning and development, but the more obvious and potentially injurious collapse of Scriptural principles in the structure and order of living.

Our goal is to provide a framework for viewing sin and failure both for the leader and those in the wake of its consequences. With that as our destination, we will begin our travel this morning by going to what might appear an unlikely stop-off point for our excursion. First off, we are going to Rome.

To Rome

Rome. The ancient city. Two thousand years ago it was the capital of the world.

Yet in that great city of art and architecture, of power and politics, of beauty and debasement, the gospel of Jesus Christ inserted itself into its life and legacy. Scattered throughout the neighborhoods and district there could be found several churches, groups of Christians gathering together for worship, instruction and support. Recently converted Jewish travelers who had returned from their Passover pilgrimage in Jerusalem likely started most of these churches. These new believers had been confronted with the gospel, many even witnessing the death of Christ first hand. No doubt, their energy and enthusiasm was fueled by the knowledge that they were involved in carrying out God’s program for this newly inaugurated time in God’s redemptive history.

The apostle Paul did not have a face-to-face experience with many of these people, and so, in advance of his intended arrival in this great city, a letter was written to these Christians, likely to demonstrate that his “gospel” was commissioned by, and is in essence the same as, established by Jesus himself.

A quick run through the book will bring us to the section of interest for our journey. We will have to have to do some “site-seeing” in order to appreciate the impact of our eventual stop.

This formal treatise, in the structure of a letter, was likely intended to be delivered aloud as though Paul himself was speaking these words in person. From its opening statement it demonstrates the power and scope of this new era. Let's turn in the letter to what we have listed as chapter one. Even in the simple presentation of the greeting, Paul establishes a summary for what exactly is “the gospel.” <Read Romans 1:1-7>

Notice that he does not address this group as “the church in Rome” but “all those in Rome.” Many see the various groups found listed or alluded to in chapter 16 as fragments of this larger “Church of Rome” rather than independent congregations within this large cosmopolitan region. I think this is reading an organizational hierarchy that develops later and imposing it on the text. In the “individuality” of these churches he is going to show their unity in the power and intention of the gospel.

We arrive at his thematic statement for this treatise when we get to chapter 1 verse 16. Here Paul says “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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘the righteous shall live by faith.’”

Paul demonstrates in the next several paragraphs that all men are under the condemnation of God because of their sin and their refusal to live under the truth. Even those who have God's law and have been the recipients of God's covenantal blessings are also found to be under condemnation. In chapter 3 and verse 19 Paul goes on to say, “now we know that what ever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”

So in verse 21 of chapter 3 the good news is now announced. The gospel can be again summarized in this sentence from Paul, “but now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” This gospel, the manifestation or revealing of the righteousness of God for us, is what all of human history that up to now has been picturing in God's glorious drama of redemption. Let's go on and read in chapter 3 where he says in verse 22, “for there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received

by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former state. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

So in order to elaborate and evidence that this is indeed God's plan for all time, in chapter 4 he begins to show that God's plan of redemption, his gospel, was demonstrated even in the life of Abraham. This revealing and appropriation of God's righteousness through faith in Jesus whom God put forward as the propitiation for our sins in his blood, has been how God has been working all along. In chapter 4 verse one Paul goes on and says, "what shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say?' Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'. After the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:' Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin'."

He is establishing the necessity of faith even before there was a "law" by using this illustration from Abraham. Before Moses and the covenantal organization of Israel with law and ceremony, Abraham was the prototype of God's people in his trust in God's promises and his faithful obedience to God's instruction. Then what was Paul doing when he went back to David and pulled this quote from the 32nd Psalm? In order to fully understand the impact of these lines from David we must resume our journey. This time our journey takes us to another time 1000 years earlier and the city of Jerusalem.

To Jerusalem

There are often multiple applications or horizons to the meaning of any particular Scriptural text and often for passages in the Old Testament we can view at least four of these and see how they impact our understanding and use of that text. The first is the direct and simple setting of the text itself. This may involve an historical event and the characters involved. The particular text may be a speech, prophetic vision, ceremonial procedure or wisdom saying. In this instance it is a poem, a lyric to a piece of music whose tune has been long abandoned that is before us. Turn in your copy of the Scriptures to the 32nd Psalm and we will read it from both the ESV and the NLT.

<Psalm 32>

This Psalm is probably related to and reflective upon the 51st Psalm. That well-known text is commonly thought to represent David's repentance in confession over the sin with Bathsheba presented in the 11th and 12th chapters of II Samuel. In verse 13 of that Psalm he vows to "teach transgressors your ways" and the 32nd Psalm's title is "a maskil of David." The difficult to understand term, "maskil" is related to words that refer to teaching, leading many to think that the "Maskil Psalms" are intended to be musical/poetic instructions.

The Psalm flows from doxology in the first 2 verses, which represent the first stanza of two couplets. "Blessed", David announces, is the label or title for this kind of person, that is one whose transgressions, sins, and iniquities are forgiven, covered, and "not counted." Three descriptions of failure to encompass and poetically sweep our thought to involve any and all sins are coupled with three actions of God that in the same majestic way allow us to see the completeness of God's work on our behalf. The blessed one's sins are 'forgiven', no longer used against him, 'covered', paid for and atoned, and 'not counted', not used in his ledger of demands and expectations. And yet there is a fourth component to this blessing, it involves this one as possessing a spirit that has no deceit.

David then elaborates on this point, the "no deceit", in the next several couplets. In the face of inward and outward deceit, the hand of God's discipline was heavy, but when sin is acknowledged and "uncovered" and confessed, God forgives. There is interplay between confession and forgiveness, between new life and faith for the psalmist. In fact, the next stanza tells us that the life of faith pursues this attitude of repentance, confession and faith routinely because God is our only hiding place in times of trial, and our failures express our lack of faith in the "rush of waters."

The next stanza with its analogy of the mule is a challenge to listen to this instruction and finishes with encouragement and praise. David has moved from "what God has done" to "what we should do" both in response to and because of his work, that is why we are glad and shout and rejoice "in the Lord" and not "in ourselves."

That is the psalm's first horizon. The second is found usually by asking, "why is this text in this place?" The Psalter (another term for the Book of the Psalms) is arranged into 5 distinct "books" each ending with a doxology. I will refer you to several writings by Gerald Wilson to elaborate and discuss the implications of this arrangement for our understanding. Book One stretches from the 1st to the 41st with the 1st and possibly the 2nd Psalm serving as introduction to the entire Psalter. Book Two is from 42 to 72, Book Three from 73 to 89. These books focus on David (in 1 and 2) and his descendents and their failure, leading to the appearance of the failure of God's kingdom in the exile. Beginning with Book Four, from 90 to 106 and finishing with Book Five from 91 to 150 including 146-150 serving as the conclusion for the Psalter as a whole, we have Yahweh as

king that takes the worshipper beyond the appearance of failure to see God alone as the true king and deliverer, themes alluded to throughout the Psalter.

The 31st, 32nd, and 33rd Psalms are grouped together in Book One as a unit connected by their themes of refuge and hiding place (31:4, 20), wasting bones (31:10) and God's steadfast love (31:16). The untitled 33rd Psalm (a feature that connects that following with what preceded it) continues the praise that ends with confidence in deliverance because of God's steadfast love (33:18-22). David is both the type for the king (although imperfect in failure) and the epitome of the royal subject. David's failure does not indicate that "all hope is lost" but rather that it is God who gives victory, it is God who delivers those whose faith is in him as evidenced by confession, repentance and faith. The Israelites should see David as encouragement and hope in their struggle with sin and testing.

The third horizon is seen in Paul's use of this text in Romans 4. We should see David's confession as finding its basis in the work of Christ in the gospel of the cross. Our identity in Christ (as the blessed one whose sins are forgiven and covered not because of any ability we think we might have) is evident in our faith as exemplified in our open and unfettered confession.

The fourth horizon takes us back on our journey, this time to Springboro, Ohio.

To Springboro

We stated at the beginning that our goal was to provide a framework for viewing sin and failure both for the leader and those in the wake of its consequences. This journey was created in the assignment of "When Leadership Fails" as part of our Family Enrichment Series. The text connected to this topic was Psalm 32. Our journey thus far has been to understand this text and its overt use in the New Testament by Paul in the epistle to the Romans so we can competently bring its meaning to bear on the task at hand. In order to do this I want to organize my thoughts into two major headings or concepts.

The first is that leadership *will* fail and there is an appropriate response to this failure in both the mind of the failing and those to whom this failure is seen and felt. The second is that this response is in itself a response to and a part of the work of the gospel, to be understood and modeled in many areas of our thinking.

Let us begin by asserting that leadership will have failings and faults. Failure occurs in even someone as prominent as David, who serves as a type for Christ and serves as a prototype for the believer. He fails to be the victorious "seed of the woman" and "the glorious king" but yet draws us into his life and allows us to see and experience insight into our own hearts' failings.

We often approach failure as something to cover up and avoid. Like a cat in the litter box...hoping that because no one can see it...praying that no one will smell

it! Indeed some failures do have far-reaching and painful consequences that we wish we could avoid; our Psalm suggests the pain of un-confessed sin is far more deep and debilitating.

“Confession, repentance and forgiveness” is the model to work from, even if one is involved in leadership, especially for one in leadership, especially for one whose leadership is intimately felt and needed, especially in the leadership of our families.

Let us now consider how this is integral to our understanding of the gospel where Paul incorporates this Psalm into Romans 4. Paul assumes that repentance and confession are the visible markers of faith. Failed or feigned confession indicates lack of faith. Paul uses this Psalm to begin to bolster his argument that God’s action on our behalf, not only secures our position as justified, but also ensures our response. It goes something like this, “we exercise faith because we have been changed, and those who have been changed will be known in their exercise of faith.” True faith trusts God, not to get us out of our predicament, but to care for us through it and will be evident in a complete confession.

Reflect and Respond

This is nowhere more necessary than in the context of our families. I need to be one of the first to assert that “cover-avoid-excuse” is a frequent mode of operation in my life. Each of us needs a renewed commitment to live in light of the gospel and its promise of the power of change. We need to be confessional in that we see our sins and failures *as God sees them* and seek forgiveness in faith.

A tool that is helpful to keep this in our thinking has been given memorable packaging in Ken Sande’s “The Peacemaker.” He presents this same material as the “7 A’s of a Confession.” These are: 1. Address everyone involved 2. Avoid “if, but and maybe” that make excuses 3. Admit specifically your sin 4. Acknowledge the hurt 5. Accept the consequences 6. Alter your behavior (confession and repentance are not only thoughts but involve a full heart response) 7. Ask for forgiveness.

Leadership will fail and fall, The Gospel of God’s forgiveness is there to provide grace to help at just the right time.