

Forgiveness, with music and dancing: Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:11b-32

by [David P. Gushee](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

In my (southern) Baptist tradition, preachers don't generally use the lectionary. If we come up with a decent reflection that's somewhat related to one recognizable biblical passage, it's been a good week. But these three passages together pack a powerful punch. They offer insights into the entire sin-alienation-forgiveness process, which is so central to human life and to Christian existence.

The psalmist doesn't tell us what his "sin" or "transgression" was, just that he literally "wasted away" from its effects in his life. It ate him up. It sapped his strength. As long as he carried this unconfessed sin on his shoulders, he "groan[ed]" under its weight.

Now it may be that we have a classic sin-punishment theme going here. The psalmist may be attributing his illness to his sin. This is a theological move often made in scripture but often challenged in scripture as well (see Job). It is a move we still see today, as when Pat Robertson attributes a country's troubles to its 200-year-old pact with the devil.

Or it may be that this psalm is not about a sin-punishment dyad but instead a sin-alienation-grief triad. It may be that we have here a very realistic depiction of an experience that probably all of us have had. We have done something constituting "a breach of friendship with God and others," in Gustavo Gutierrez's deceptively simple definition of sin. The result of our sin is estrangement and alienation from God and others.

That might not be such a problem except that in our pride and hurt we do not want to do the one and only thing that will repair the breach. We do not want to confess. We would rather remain silent and alienated than speak at the cost of self-abnegation.

We do not know how long it took for the estranged son of a loving father to reach the point at which his grief over his alienation exceeded his fear of the self-humbling involved in confessing his wrongs.

It doesn't look as if it was a quick process. There was the long journey to the distant country, the dissolute lifestyle that squandered all the inheritance he had snatched prematurely, the long period of need during the famine, the unhappy days of pig farming. But finally he was ready to take the long walk back home, ready to trade penury and pride for a chance at reconciliation with his father.

The process calls to mind some difficult days about a decade ago in my marriage. My wife and I—now happily marking 25 years, having come through the period I speak of and out the other side—could not resolve the differences that arose from the challenge of integrating an adopted child into our family.

I developed a pattern during those dark days of withdrawing after each unresolved conflict and each regretted word into silence and alienation. My friendship with my wife was breached, as Gutierrez would say, and I simply could not and would not take the steps required to heal the breach.

It wasn't always breached. We didn't live in that place every day. But in the periods of alienation I did indeed "waste away" and "groan" under its burdens. I suppose we encounter people every day who find ways to live in fellowship with many while living in alienation from the one at home. I was never very good at that. Actually, I was a wreck.

I was going to call this reflection something clever like "Forgiveness, with Music and Dancing," until I realized that there are no titles on these meditations [in the print edition]. But that's where all three of these passages eventually go. They go to forgiveness, with music and dancing.

It's there in Psalm 32:11, the happy conclusion to the psalmist's journey from sin through confession and into forgiveness: "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous; and shout for joy, all you upright in heart." The NRSV commentator suggests that those addressed here are the psalmist's family and friends—they've been worrying over their loved one, wasted away to mournful gristle and bone—so now they are shouting for joy, because he's come clean with God and learned how to smile again.

The theme is obviously there in the story of the prodigal son (and prodigal God, as Tim Keller reminds us). The return of the straying son and his reconciliation with his father has brought the son a robe, ring and sandals and brought the household a fatted calf, music and dancing. "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this

brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found!"

The theme of "forgiveness, with music and dancing" is present as well in our last text, which contains Paul's famous musing on Christians as ambassadors of reconciliation. Paul is speaking about the amazing news that "[Christ] died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." Christ's death and resurrection have inaugurated a world so different that anyone who enters it can be described as a new creature, and the world itself as a "new creation." "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." There need never be a "breach of friendship with God" again because in Christ God has taken the first step to end alienation and bring reconciliation.

Cue the forgiveness and the celebration, the music and the dancing.