

# Session 2

## LETTING GO OF THE PAST

*Psalm 51:1-19*

### Memory Verse

*<sup>16</sup> You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you are not pleased with a burnt offering.*

*<sup>17</sup> The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit.*

*You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.*

– PSALM 51:16-17, CSB

## Letting Go of the Past

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** God's forgiveness is available for the repentant person.

In his classic work, *Changes that Heal*, Dr. Henry Cloud discusses how difficult it can be for believers to overcome hurt from their past. Cloud notes that, to a large degree, this is because of a poor handling of their situations at the hands of their local church. Desiring to offer God-honoring counsel and help, local churches frequently fumble the opportunity by erring too far on the side of either grace or truth.

*Grace and truth are a healing combination because they deal with one of the main barriers to all growth: guilt. We have emotional difficulties because we have been injured (someone has sinned against us) or we have rebelled (we have sinned) or some combination of the two. As a result of this lack of love or lack of obedience, we are hidden in a world of guilt. ... Guilt and shame too often send us into hiding. If we have to hide, we cannot get help for our needs and brokenness; we can't become "poor in Spirit" and therefore be blessed. When grace comes along and says that we are not condemned for who we truly are, then guilt can begin to be resolved, and we can begin to heal.<sup>1</sup>*

Letting go of one's past can be a daunting pursuit. This is particularly true in an age where the number of technology platforms built upon chronicling people doing embarrassing things increases frequently. Short videos of mistakes made, unwitting confessions, and simple moments of poor judgment last much longer than the actual experience. However, even a casual reading of the Bible highlights a great number of those who were restored from past failures. Restoration is never easy, but it is gloriously possible to be free of one's past.

**?** What do you think is the most important characteristic to demonstrate to help someone trying to overcome something in their past? Grace? Understanding? Patience? Truth-telling? Why do you think so?

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**?** How has the number of apps that chronicle everyday life changed the way you evaluate decisions? Can you give an example?

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**?** How do you know when you've been forgiven for something? What signs or feelings do you look for to validate that forgiveness? What does Scripture indicate about that?

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## Session Summary

In this week's session, David wrote one of his most well-known and well-beloved psalms dealing with his heartbrokenness over his sin. In this psalm, David mourned his sinfulness, pled for God's forgiveness, and pined for days of future restoration. David's penitent psalm gives voice to the heartbreak many believers experience over their past. It also points believers toward the goodness of God and His willingness to forgive.

### 1. Confronting Sin Squarely (Psalm 51:1-5)

Psalm 51 expressed David's brokenness over his multiple sins concerning Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11 and 12). David committed adultery with Bathsheba and, upon discovering her consequential pregnancy, had her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. James Boice comments, "David had committed two sins for which the Mosaic law provided no forgiveness. For deliberate murder and adultery, death was the inevitable penalty."<sup>2</sup>

The severity of his transgression was reflected in the desperation of the psalm. In the face of his atrocities, the prophet Nathan had confronted King David with his wickedness. To his credit, David responded with deep contrition. That would not likely have been the response from any other king in David's position. It would have been too easy to kill the prophet and bury the secret.

Instead, David experienced soul-crushing guilt. Psalm 51, then, opened with a plea for God's grace. That plea, however, was couched in David's knowledge of God's character. Allen Ross notes, "The psalmist knew that he had no right on which to base his appeal for he was guilty and under a penalty of death. But he knew the LORD, and so he based his appeal on the nature of God he knew so well."<sup>3</sup> Specifically, David wrote of God's faithful love and abundant compassion. These words communicated God's faithfulness, even in the face of David's unfaithful treachery. His abundant compassion spoke of God's holy sympathy for His people's frailties.

David pled to have his guilt and sin completely cleansed, so that no remnant of his wickedness remained. The two verbs he used, however, communicated different contexts for application. To wash his guilt away was a figure of speech referring to laundry. Since laundry was done by beating the dirt out of it by the water source, David's request was not without its painful aspects. The matter of cleansing him from his sin, though, had a worship context in mind. David desired to be made right with God once more.



How difficult is it for you to remember God's grace and compassion when you are struggling with sin? How do you maintain a biblical view of God, even when you are mired in guilt or brokenness over your past?

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When asking for forgiveness, why do you think it is important to be specific about that for which you are asking for forgiveness? What impact does that sort of specificity have on you spiritually?

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David described his spiritual condition as being conscious of his rebellion. David was not hiding or qualifying his wrong doing in any way. He acknowledged the depth of his wickedness. His description of his sin always being before him meant that it was always on his mind. His guilt robbed him of peace or the ability to focus on anything other than his need for reconciliation with God. David was honest about the severity of his sin. He did not just make a mistake; he sinned against God. He did evil in God's sight.

Incredibly, David followed the confession of his sin with agreement that God was right to judge him. David acknowledged that his sin was not just an act, but evidence of his sin nature since conception. According to Ross, "He was affirming that from the very beginning of his existence there had never been a time that he had not been in a sinful state – he was human after all."<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Prayer for Renewal (Psalm 51:6-13)

Picking up where verse 5 left off, verse 6 contrasted the inward reality of David—a sinner from conception—with the desire of God—inward integrity and honor. Learning wisdom had to do with the application of God's truth to life in such a way that faithful living was possible. Ross notes, "God prepared the human spirit (also in the womb) with the capacity for truth and wisdom, which is what makes sin so painful to God."<sup>5</sup> David, understanding the degree to which he had fallen short of God's desires, launched into a formal petition for cleansing. In doing so, he would borrow several terms from the psalm's opening verses.

In verses 7-9, David hopefully desired the return of days in which he was clean, long before the wretched thought leading to his sin ever entered his mind. The petition had such a force. David longed to be made new, completely cleansed, with not even a hint of stain of his failure. He knew not only that God could perform such a cleansing, but also that God was the only one who could. The language David used was cultic in nature, referring to the various cleansing practices of the priests in the sanctuary. According to Ross, using hyssop "simply signifies that he wants to be cleansed so that he can be accepted in the sanctuary.... The psalmist is asking God for forgiveness and uses cultic terminology."<sup>6</sup>

Verse 8 painted the picture of healing in David's life. In the context of verse 7 that referred to spiritual renewal that David might once again participate in corporate worship, verse 8's "joy and gladness" likely referred to the joy of worship. The idea is the return of joy through the healing of cleansing and forgiveness. David needed to know that he was forgiven. In light of that petition, David pled that God would turn His face away or disregard and consider no more his sins.

**?** What biblical passages do you turn to when you want to know that you are forgiven by God?

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**?** Why is it important that the heart of a person be changed in addition to being forgiven? If the heart remains unchanged, what do you think would be the likely result?

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Verse 10 begins the most well known section of the psalm. David moved beyond a petition for forgiveness toward the total cleansing mentioned earlier. In order for him to be completely cleansed, a heart change was needed. Ross comments, "It is not enough to ask for forgiveness; there must be a change of heart, a revitalized spirit, or the sinner will do it again. This penitent sinner knew that there was something wrong in his heart, for he was making terrible judgments and choices. So he prayed for God to change that and prevent him from doing such things again."<sup>7</sup> The steadfast spirit that accompanied such a renewed heart was one that was reliable and stood firm faithfully in the face of future decisions.


When David requested that he not be banished and that God not remove His Holy Spirit from him, he must have been considering the plight of King Saul. Saul ambitiously and irreverently violated the offering of sacrifices for his own benefit and renown. As a result, God removed His Spirit from him. David could not bear the thought of such a consequence befalling him.

Instead of experiencing the removal of God's Spirit, David petitioned for a renewal of joy based on God's salvation. That joy would be sustained by the steadfast spirit in David which would willingly follow God. The willing spirit that David referred to carried the connotation of freewill offerings that a person could offer at any time at the sanctuary as an act of worship. David wanted a spirit that was so full of desire for God that he would relish to the opportunity to worship sacrificially.

### 3. Purify Worship (Psalm 51:14-19)


In the last section of the psalm, David mentioned all of the things he desired to do, reflecting his changed heart. However, because the list of things all pertained to worship, they were things that he could not participate in until he was forgiven. David had already mentioned some of the acts of his reform in verse 13, pledging to teach the rebellious the ways of God so that sinners would return to God. Verse 14 struck with the greatest degree of clarity as to the sin to be forgiven—"the guilt of bloodshed." Only the God of his salvation could declare David clean. The result of such a holy declaration would be the proclamation of God's righteousness in praise.

Verses 16-17 returned to the matter of David's severity exceeding the sins that were covered by sacrifices. In his continued promise to worship God correctly, David acknowledged the insufficiency of sacrifices to ultimately please God.

 How would you explain the difference in your worship of God during seasons of faithfulness versus seasons of temptation or sinfulness? How does your desire for worship change?

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 What sacrifice is God prompting you to make at this season in your life? What new faith steps is he asking you to make to follow Him more closely?

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David proclaimed that the sacrifice God really desired was the penitent heart of His people. The good news of the proclamation was that God did not desire a perfect heart, but one that demonstrated a proper posture of humility and contrition with regard to sin.

## Conclusion

Psalm 51 has found deep resonance with believers for over 3,000 years. The experiences of David have aptly described similar experiences for those who follow Christ in a world that does everything possible to lure them from it. There are numerous helpful points of application.

First, true forgiveness is only ever found in the character of God. While the temptation may persist to do enough good deeds, read enough of the right things, or other extreme acts of piety, the reality is freedom from one's past mistakes and brokenness is only available through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. All other methods of seeking to ease a burdened spirit are tantamount to putting fuel on an already rampant conflagration.

Second, letting go of one's past demands facing one's sin squarely. This may be the most counter-cultural idea behind the entire psalm because of the cultural methods of shifting blame, comparing oneself to peers, justifying oneself with "my truth" or some other destructive pattern. David's sin was unspeakably egregious. His shame was all-consuming. Still, to be restored, he had to deal squarely with his sin, acknowledge his fault and the depths of his wrongdoing, and then, ultimately, place himself at God's mercy. Dealing squarely with sin is painful; it's also necessary for healing.

Third, unconfessed sin and being bound to one's past affects worship. A person's intimacy with God can be hindered when the person clutches and latches oneself to secret sin. Doing so demonstrates a greater allegiance to the secret than to God. Peace will not return until the misalignment of allegiance is corrected through repentance.

Fourth, a heart change is necessary to let go of one's past. If no heart change is involved, any change that occurs is simply temporary behavior modification. Every person that has drawn breath after Adam and Eve has been born in sin. Without a heart change through faith in Christ, a person will repeatedly find his or her way back to sin.



**?** What is your story of heart change? How did God lead you to a place of brokenness at which point you knew you had to be changed?

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**?** What is the hardest part of dealing squarely with your own sin? Who supports you and prays for you to be bold enough to do that? How does that accountability and love benefit you?

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**?** How would you like for your relationship with your past to be different a year from now? What conversations or action steps can you begin taking this week to move in that direction? Which of the steps is primarily spiritual? Which are mostly physical?

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**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Christ's atoning work on the cross ensured forgiveness for all who accept Him as Savior.

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** The burden of past sin can be forever removed through trusting in Christ. This is a powerful message for believers to proclaim in a world where one's past can be relived perpetually through various forms of media.



# FOR NEXT WEEK

## Seasons of the Soul: Dealing With Loss - Letting Go of Grief

### Main Passages

- Genesis 23:1-20

### Session Outline

1. Sarah's Death at Hebron (Genesis 23:1-2)
2. Purchasing the Burial Site (Genesis 23:3-18)
3. Sarah's Burial at Hebron (Genesis 23:19-20)

### Memorize

<sup>16</sup> *You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering.*

<sup>17</sup> *The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.*

- Psalm 51:16-17, CSB

### Daily Readings

- Monday - Matthew 5:4
- Tuesday - Psalm 147:3
- Wednesday - Psalm 56:8
- Thursday - Matthew 11:28-30
- Friday - 1 Peter 5:7
- Saturday - Revelation 21:4

### References

<sup>1</sup>Cloud, Henry. *Changes That Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992.

<sup>2</sup>Boice, James Montgomery. *Psalms, vol. 2: Psalms 42-106*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996.

<sup>3</sup>Ross, Allen P. *A Commentary on the Psalms, vol. 2 (42-89)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2013.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.