



# Letting Go of the Past

## Summary and Goal

In David's plea for forgiveness, we learn some important lessons in dealing with our past mistakes and finding forgiveness and restoration.

### **Main Passages**

Psalm 51:1-19

### **Session Outline**

1. Confronting Sin Squarely (Psalm 51:1-5)
2. Prayer for Renewal (Psalm 51:6-13)
3. Purify Worship (Psalm 51:14-19)

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### **Theological Theme**

God's forgiveness is available for the repentant person.

### **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.

# Historical Context of the Psalms

## Purpose

There are myriad messages scattered through the 150 psalms, but overall, this record of the responses of God's people in worship and prayer serves the purpose of teaching us how to relate to God in various circumstances of life. The psalms also demonstrate God's sovereignty and goodness for his people in order to instill confidence in those who trust in him.

## Author

Since the book is a collection of many different psalms written over a long time, there is not just one author for this collection. By far the most common designation in the titles is "Of David," which may refer to David as the author of those psalms. David's role as a musician in Saul's court (1Sm 16:14-23) as well as his many experiences as a shepherd, a soldier, and a king make him a likely candidate for writing many of these psalms.

## Setting

The book of Psalms consists of many different hymns and prayers composed by individuals but used by the community. If one were to take the names in the titles as authors, the date of composition ranges from the time of Moses (fifteenth century BC) to a time following the exile (sixth century BC or later). Some of the titles do contain historical information that might indicate the setting of the composition, although even this (like the authorship) is ambiguous. They might not refer to the date of composition but to the setting of its contents, being composed some time after the events had taken place. This is a more likely scenario since some of these psalms describe life-threatening situations, where composing a psalm in the heat of the moment would not have been a top priority. In many cases, these psalms include thanksgiving sections as well, showing that they were written after God had answered the prayers.

## Special Features

The word for psalms in Hebrew is Tehilim, which means "praise." The English title is derived from the Greek translation (LXX) Psalmoi, which means "Songs of Praise." Praise directed to the Lord, the God of Israel, is certainly the primary emphasis in the Psalms. Some have referred to the Psalms as Israel's hymnbook, which is partially true but overall is insufficient to account for all that is in the Psalms. More than one-third of the collection is made up of prayers to God. Therefore, it contains both hymns and prayers that were used in the context of Israel's worship.

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## Session Plan

# Letting Go of the Past

### ? For Further Discussion

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

## Introduction

- ? 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?
- ? 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?

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)

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?
- ? 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?

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

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.

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

## 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 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.

- ❓ 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?
- ❓ 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?

## Conclusion

- ❓ 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?
- ❓ 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?

### ❓ For Further Discussion

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?



## Expanded Session Content

# Letting Go of the Past

### Introduction

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



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?

## 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>4</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.

### Blotted Out

David requested to have his rebellion blotted out. According to Ross, the idea of blotting out in modern culture refers only to removing "excess ink. The verb means 'to scrape off, remove.' The word is a figure of speech comparing divine forgiveness to God's scraping a slate clean."<sup>3</sup>

- ❓ 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?
- ❓ 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?

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>5</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>6</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

### Cleanse

According to Boice, the original word for "cleanse" (chattath) had in mind a complete purging. It "literally means 'de-sin' me."<sup>7</sup>



cleansed so that he can be accepted in the sanctuary. . . . The psalmist is asking God for forgiveness and uses cultic terminology.”<sup>8</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?
- ❓ 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?

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>10</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.

### Hyssop



Boice notes, “Hyssop was a small plant frequently found growing in the crevices of stone walls.... Because of its shape and structure, it was used as a small brush. In the ceremonies of the temple it was used to sprinkle blood. The first time it is mentioned in the Bible is at the Passover when the Jews were leaving Egypt.”<sup>9</sup>



### 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?
-  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?

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?
- ❓ 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?
- ❓ How would you like for you 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?

## Prayer of Response

*Close in prayer, thanking God for the forgiveness of sins that has been made available through Jesus. Pray for a desire to face your sin directly and seek true repentance before God.*

## Additional Resources

- *Out of the Depths* by D. Martin Lloyd-Jones
- *Spurgeon on the Psalms, Book Three: Psalm 51 Through Psalm 79* by Charles H. Spurgeon
- *Be Worshipful* by Warren Wiersbe

## For Next Week

### Session Title

- 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

### 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

## Extended Commentary

### Psalm 51

51:1a-b. David understood that forgiveness with God was based solely on divine mercy, unfailing love, and compassion (Heb. *rehem*, “the bowels,” i.e., sympathy), not human merit. The opening appeal, Have mercy on me, O God, was a request not for what he deserved—painful discipline—but for what he desperately needed—divine grace. David was aware of his need to have God’s mercy according to his unfailing love and great compassion. He appealed to God to act in accordance with his loving nature.

51:1b-2. This appeal for forgiveness is pictured in three ways. First, the phrase Blot out my transgressions means to wipe away David’s sinful acts of rebellion and willful deviation. As if David’s sins were accurately written by God in a book, he pleaded that his acts of sinful rebellion would be removed from record (cp. Exod. 32:32; Num. 5:23). Second, comparing himself to a foul garment stained with filth, David prayed, Wash away all my iniquity, as a person would wash dirty clothes. Third, he pleaded, cleanse me from my sin. This pictured the purification necessary for temple worship under the ceremonial law. This threefold request expressed David’s desire for complete forgiveness by the Lord.

51:3. Painfully aware of his sin, David acknowledged, I know my transgressions. His conscience pressed guilt from his sin to his mind, so much so that his sin was always before him, haunting his mind.

51:4. David recognized that his sin was against God, not just against others, including Bathsheba, Uriah, and the nation. He confessed, Against you, you only, have I sinned. David’s sin was treason against God, since David had done what was evil in God’s sight. Fully acknowledging his sin, David called it what it was—not weakness but wickedness, not an accident but an atrocity. He accepted God’s verdict, admitting that God was proved right when he spoke against David’s sin and justified when he judged him. No alibis or shifting of blame here. David offered no lame excuses to God, only a full confession of his own guilt that deserved divine justice.

51:5. Delving deeper into the source of this matter, David stated that his problem was a corrupt heart, saying, Surely I was sinful at birth. He entered this world a sinner in nature long before he became a sinner in actions. In fact, this internal corruption predated his birth, actually beginning nine months earlier when he was conceived in the womb. It was at conception that the Adamic sin nature was transmitted to him. The problem of what he did—sin—arose from what he was—a sinner.

51:6. David knew that he fell short of God's desire for his life. His words Surely you desire truth in the inner parts indicate that David had been living a lie before God by attempting to cover up his sin. But he went on to say, You teach me wisdom. Wisdom should lead us to act honestly and openly with our sin against God. Only a fool would try to hide his sin before the Lord. This was a tragic role David had been playing.

51:7. This verse expresses another plea for pardon. Cleanse me with hyssop alludes to the image of a leper seeking cleansing. In such a case, hyssop would be dipped in blood and sprinkled seven times on the leper at the altar (cp. Lev. 14:6). Accordingly, David saw himself as a spiritual leper in need of divine cleansing. The removal of his sin would occur through the shed blood of the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ (cp. Heb. 9:22). Only then would he be whiter than snow (cp. Isa. 1:18).

51:8. David's words Let me hear joy and gladness would be the result of the forgiveness he sought (cp. Ps. 32:1-2). Let the bones you have crushed rejoice indicates how crushed he was by Nathan's indictment (cp. 2 Sam. 12:1-14). His whole body ached under the heavy burden of sin.

51:9. David asked God to hide his face from his sins, which were ever before him. In other words, "Forgive me so you will not look upon my sins any longer." Returning to the accounting imagery, he prayed, Blot out all my iniquity. Only then could David be right with God.

51:10. Having confessed his sin and received God's forgiveness, David prayed for a pure heart so he would not fall back into sin. Create in me a pure heart is something that only God could do. Only God could renew his heart with a steadfast spirit of purity.

51:11. David's words Do not cast me from your presence do not indicate that he feared he would lose his salvation. Rather, it was a plea that God would not remove his divine power from David's life. Thus, he asked God not to take his Holy Spirit from him. He feared being set aside in serving God, a severe discipline he deserved and would suffer if God did not accept his confession.

51:12. David pleaded with God to restore to him the joy of his salvation. Sin and joy cannot exist in the same heart at the same time. The two are mutually exclusive. Note that David did not request that his salvation be restored but the joy of his salvation. He wanted a willing spirit so he could obey God's Word and persevere in holiness.

51:13. Once forgiven, David promised God that he would teach transgressors your ways. He would communicate the truth that God would afflict them for their sin. This would also include the pardon they

would receive when they confessed their sin. Psalm 32 is the fulfillment of this vow. As a result of such teaching, sinners would turn back to God by acknowledging and forsaking their sin.

51:14-15. David prayed, Save me from bloodguilt, O God. The enormity of his sin continued to burden David. He knew that he deserved the death penalty for his sins. This sobering reality caused him to seek forgiveness. Once pardoned, David declared, My tongue will sing of your righteousness to others who needed to seek the same forgiveness.

51:16-17. David knew that God did not desire only an animal sacrifice or burnt offerings from him for his sin. The sacrifices that God required were a broken spirit and a contrite heart. Humility before God and brokenness over sin are expressions of genuine confession, and David knew it.

51:18. David was aware of the close connection between his personal holiness as the king of Israel and the national blessings from God which the people would enjoy. Character does count. The sins of leaders affect other people as well as themselves. Thus, he prayed, Make Zion prosper by strengthening and protecting the walls of Jerusalem from foreign attack. Now that David had been renewed, he prayed that the nation would be renewed. First personal renewal, then corporate renewal.

51:19. Only then, once forgiven, would David present righteous sacrifices to God with a right heart. Only then would whole burnt offerings and bulls be offered in order to delight God. The heart must be right before sacrifices can be right.<sup>11</sup>

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