

DISCIPLESHIP PLAN: **LEVELS OF BIBLICAL LEARNING**

How This Study Supports the Levels of Biblical Learning® (see page 161):

CONCEPT CATEGORY: View of Self—SALVATION

CONCEPT STATEMENT: Salvation includes the forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus, releasing the individual from the guilt and penalty of sin, and enabling them to extend genuine forgiveness to others.

UNIT 2: THE BEAUTY OF FORGIVENESS

- Session 1** The Cry for Forgiveness • Psalm 51:1-13
- Session 2** The Source of Forgiveness • Psalm 103:1-13
- Session 3** The Picture of Forgiveness • Leviticus 16:6-10,15-19,20-22
- Session 4** The Reason for Forgiveness • Isaiah 43:1-7,21-25
- Session 5** The Path to Forgiveness • Ephesians 2:1-10
- Session 6** The Declaration of Forgiveness • Acts 10:44-48; 16:30-34; 19:1-5
- Session 7** The Evidence of Forgiveness • Matthew 18:21-35

The Beauty of Forgiveness

Have you ever noticed that forgiveness feels optional when we have wronged others but necessary when someone hurts us? While people may feel it is optional, from a biblical perspective, it is not. God's forgiveness changes our:

- Identity from dead in our trespasses and sins to alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:1-10).
- Eternal destiny from hell to heaven. Without forgiveness, not even the richest, most moral person in the world would experience eternal life (Matt. 19:16-24), but through Jesus Christ salvation is possible (19:25-26).
- Capacity to forgive others. Because we are forgiven, we can forgive, even when someone has hurt us deeply. God empowers us to do what is not humanly possible—He empowers us to forgive.

- Responsibility to forgive others. Because we are forgiven, we must forgive others. Our status as a forgiven person and a forgiving person are forever linked together by Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:14-15).

An unforgiving spirit is an ugly thing. It destroys families, friendships, and even fellowship among believers.

Forgiveness is a beautiful thing. It is beautiful when we receive it. It is beautiful when God empowers us to give it.

Author

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SESSION 1

▶ The Cry for Forgiveness

In Focus:

When we sin, we sin against God—so only He can forgive us.



LOOK AT OUR WORLD

The surveillance video of Sean “Diddy” Combs beating Casandra Ventura on March 5, 2016, was not only incriminating but a clear display of evil. Helpless, Ventura lay still on the ground as Combs, wearing a white towel, kicked her, and then dragged her by the arm down the hotel hallway.

During the trial, Security Officer Eddy Garcia testified that Combs paid him, a coworker, and his supervisor \$100,000 for the footage, the assurance that there were no other copies, and that Garcia and his coworkers would not disclose what happened. Garcia, who testified under an immunity agreement, indicated that Combs attempted to hide evidence of his wrongdoing.¹

Cover-ups are nothing new. This kind of cover-up echoes the actions of King David after his affair with Bathsheba. David didn’t try to erase video evidence, but he did attempt to hide the truth. He summoned Uriah, her husband, from the front lines of battle so he could sleep with his wife, and everyone would think the coming child was Uriah’s. When his plan failed, David arranged for Uriah’s death.

Done—right? Not exactly. The cover-up did not work for Combs or for King David. How should we respond when we sin against God? We’ll find out in this session.



► ***What have been some interesting excuses you’ve heard people use when caught doing something wrong?***

Our sin is ultimately sin against God.

Psalm 51:1-4

¹ Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion. ² Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me. ⁴ Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge.

Nathan the prophet came seeking advice from the king, telling him a story about a wealthy man who served a neighbor's pet lamb to a traveler for dinner, even though he had plenty of other livestock. The story incensed David, and he told Nathan that the man must make a fourfold restitution and that he deserved to die (2 Sam. 12:1-6).

Nathan was not really talking about a neighbor's lamb; he was talking about a neighbor's wife—something David came to realize when Nathan said, "You are the man" (v. 7).

David responded by admitting his guilt, saying, "I have sinned against the LORD" (v. 13). In Psalm 51, David elaborated on that straightforward confession, but before he did, he appealed to God's faithful, steadfast, merciful love and great compassion.

The circumstances surrounding David's sin were unique, and this lament has historical moorings; however, Psalm 51 is included in the ancient hymnbook because of the universal destructiveness of sin and to highlight God's character.

David approached God boldly, asking for a merciful response from Him—not because of David's personal stature or past performance. He did not say, "please forgive me because I've never done anything like this before, and I promise never to do anything like this again." Instead, David asked for mercy from God, knowing that He is merciful.

What you think about God changes how you approach Him when you sin. If you feel He is a disapproving supervisor surveilling you, hoping to catch you in a mistake so He can rub your face in your failure, then you will approach Him differently than if you really know Him. If you really know God, then you know that a faithful, steadfast, merciful love characterizes Him.

David knew that God is not only merciful but also powerful. He knew that God had the capacity to take away his iniquity and

cleanse him of his sin. As he confessed his sin, David asked God to forgive him.

Unlike Adam, David did not blame others for his sin (Gen. 3:12), nor did he try to justify his disobedience, like his predecessor King Saul did (1 Sam. 15:20-21). David took full responsibility, confessed his sin, and asked God to cleanse him from it (Ps. 51:2).

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Like he did when Nathan confronted him in this psalm, David emphasized that his sin was against the Lord: “Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight” (Ps. 51:4).

Was his sin only against God? There is a sense in which David let his family and all Israel down with his sin. He definitely harmed Uriah. David took Uriah’s wife and slept with her as if she were his wife. Then he had this loyal warrior killed in an attempt to hide his initial sin. No man deserved this kind of treatment from the king. Certainly, not Uriah.

Uriah was not a random neighbor. David knew him well. Uriah was one of David’s mighty men, one the of thirty-seven elite officers in David’s army known as “the Thirty” (2 Sam. 23:9-39). When David sinned with Bathsheba, real harm was inflicted upon Uriah, a man who was loyal to David and regularly risked his life to protect David. It was a very personal betrayal. Yet, David said that his sin was against God and God alone.

Our sin, which is against God, often affects other people. While David’s sin caused harm to Uriah, Bathsheba, his family, his army, and his nation, David’s sin was really against God. God alone is holy and can demand our obedience. He set the standard that sin cannot reach. David’s sin—all sin—is primarily against God Himself.

David understood this and asked God to respond to him according to His character—and to be merciful.

► ***Why is all sin ultimately against God?***

► ***How does sin affect our relationship with God?***

In Focus: When we sin, we sin against God—so only He can forgive us.

The way out of our sin begins with turning to God in repentance.

Psalm 51:5-9

⁵ Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.

⁶ Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within.

⁷ Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt.

David did not appeal to God's mercy so he could get away with this sin and sin again. He did not ask for God's mercy so he could continue to live out of God's will. David asked for mercy so he could turn away from past behavior to walk in a new direction.

Yes, God is merciful, which means He will forgive sin. And He is powerful—so He can forgive all sin. But God is also holy, and so He requires sinners to repent—to turn from their sin toward Him.

The prophet Isaiah encouraged sinners to abandon their wicked thoughts and return to the Lord so that He would freely forgive them (Isa. 55:6-7). Returning to

the Lord includes walking away from sin and moving in a new direction. Repentance involves changing the direction of your life.

There is a difference between being sorry and having repentance. People who are slow to admit their wrongdoing may say they are sorry, but that does not necessarily mean they are willing to change. This is not repentance. They are presuming upon God's mercy and asking for forgiveness with no intention of stopping their wrongdoing.

David admitted that he was completely sinful; he did not claim to be a good person that did a bad thing. He was born into a sinful environment with the propensity to sin (51:5). This is not to say that his physical conception was a sin. Instead, the emphasis is on the completeness of his sin nature. David was not shifting the blame to others; the opposite was the case. He was acknowledging that he was completely sinful, without counterbalancing good qualities.

In Psalm 51, David used three different Hebrew words for sin. He used one word that emphasizes sin as rebellion, another word that underscores its perversity, and various forms of the most common Hebrew word for sin, which literally means “missing of the mark.”²



The variations of meaning combine to deliver a comprehensive understanding of what David did. David missed the mark of God's ideal for him, rebelled against God, and acted perversely. David was completely sinful and did something that was sin by any definition.

David's sin was repugnant to him. He did not want anything to do with that behavior in the future. Like he had done previously (v. 2), David again asked for God to wash and cleanse him, but this time he used vivid imagery, building on the previous request (v. 7).

When he asked God to purify him with hyssop, he was alluding to branches from a bush used ceremonially to cleanse people with leprosy (Lev. 14) or someone who had touched a corpse (Num. 19:18). By doing so, he was admitting the state of his own sinful condition and his total dependence on God for his cleansing. David was speaking

in ritual imagery: he felt ceremonially unclean, not literally cast out, and he needed purification.

When they were slaves in Egypt, the children of Israel also used hyssop to sprinkle blood on the doorposts so that death would pass over their homes during the tenth plague (Ex. 12:22).

David wanted to be as pure as the snow was white. He was asking for God to forgive him; he was asking for complete restoration.

David ended this portion of the psalm the same way he began the previous section (Ps. 51:1), by asking God to blot out his sin—for God to remove his sin from him. While David was responsible for turning away from his sin, he knew that he could not remove the sin. Only God could do that.

The way out of our sin begins with turning to God in repentance. David turned to God for cleansing and asked God to turn His face away from his sins.

► ***Why does humanity's inherited sin not excuse us from our personal sin?***

► ***How does faith in the possibility of God's complete cleansing motivate us to seek His forgiveness?***

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ENGAGE

My Sin

Use the following acrostic to write a prayer of confession to God:

M -

Y -

S -

I -

N -

God restores us to a place of fruitfulness.

Psalm 51:10-13

¹⁰ God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you.

God removed David's sin, but David still experienced some painful consequences. Among the lingering results of his sin was the public shame that hovered over David for the rest of his life (1 Kings 15:5). This was the very thing David had attempted to avoid after he discovered Bathsheba was pregnant. Remember, David was willing to guard his reputation at all costs, even if it meant taking the life of one of his most loyal subjects.

At this point in the psalm, David's reputation was no longer his primary concern. The most pressing thing on his heart was his fellowship with God. David asked for God to restore their broken relationship.

This shows the genuineness of his repentance. As he turned away from

sin, he was fully turning toward God and wanted nothing other than God's approval. Before, it was man's approval he wanted; now it was God's favor. A complete turnaround.

Following your heart can be a good thing. In 2005, Steve Jobs encouraged graduates of Stanford University to "have the courage to follow your heart and intuition."³

Of course, following your heart is only good if your heart is right with God. David, a man after God's own heart, had gotten off track. David followed his passions when he consummated his



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lust for another man's wife. He followed his passions when he had Uriah killed. Sinful actions emerge from following a heart that is no longer aligned with God. David was now asking God to create in him "a clean heart" (Ps. 51:10).

David asked God for a clean heart, using the same word Moses used in Genesis 1:1 to refer to the creation of the world. David wanted God to create a clean heart in him. Building on the forgiveness he requested, he wanted nothing short of complete renewal.

Following your heart is only good if your heart is right with God.

David no longer trusted his fickle heart and wanted a dependable compass to follow. He needed a steadfast spirit.

David asked God not to banish him from His presence (v. 11). While David knew that God was everywhere and there is no place he could go where God is not (139:8), he also knew that God is even with His people in the valley of the shadow of death (23:4). As he confessed to God with this prayer of lament, he was experiencing God's convicting presence.

He was not experiencing God's favor. David longed to be in the favorable presence of the Lord again.

Sin separates us from God's favor. We no longer feel His delight. Our sin is ever before us (51:3) and keeps us from basking in our heavenly Father's delight and the comfort that comes from the Holy Spirit. David was praying for a complete restoration of his right standing before God, including the joy of God's salvation (v. 12).

David asked for all of these things for his sake and the sake of others. With a clean heart and steadfast spirit within him, the favor of God over him, and the joy of the Lord within him, he would be able to teach others who had strayed and show them how they could return to God.

David desired restoration and to be useful again. He wanted to help others who had rebelled against the Lord to return to Him. God will restore us to a place of fruitfulness as well—if we will turn to Him.

► ***How would you describe a steadfast spirit?***

► ***What happens when we experience the joy of our salvation?***

LIVE IT OUT

Like David, when we sin, we need to repent and ask God to forgive us. Choose one or more of the following applications:

VIEW OF GOD

Take a moment and reflect on your own walk with God. Are you close to Him, or have you drifted away? If you are out of fellowship with God, confess your sin to Him. Be specific. Ask God to forgive you.

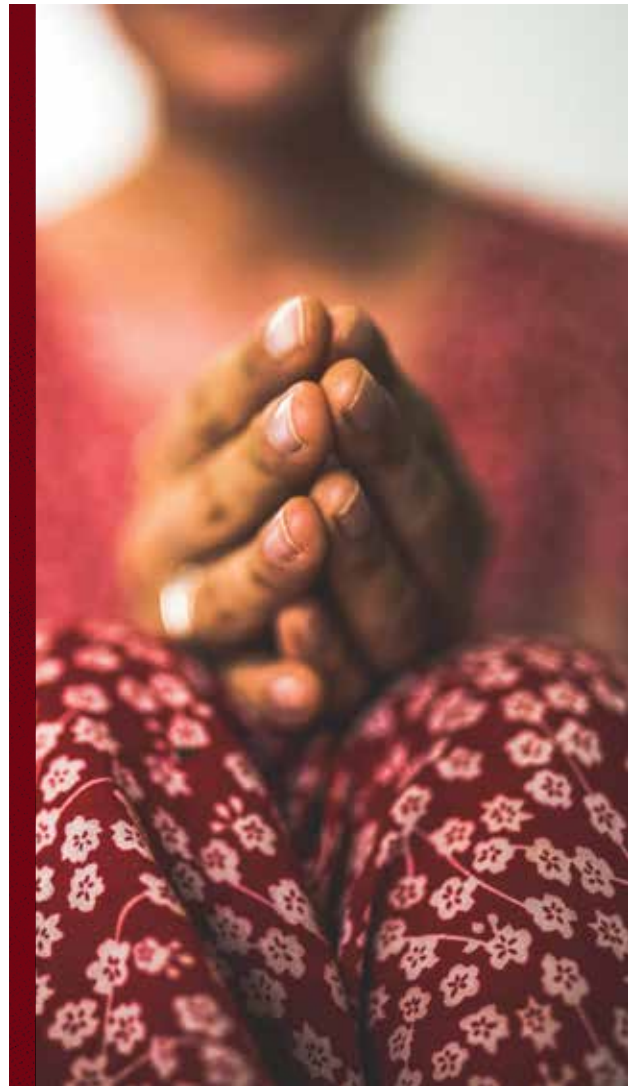
VIEW OF SELF

Has your personal sin affected your view of yourself? After repenting of your sin and being restored, remind yourself of who God says you are. Live in that truth going forward.

VIEW OF OTHERS

Are you willing to share your journey with others with similar struggles to help them return to the Lord? If so, talk to your pastor about your willingness to serve.

1. Julia Jacobs, "Hotel Security Officer Says Sean Combs Paid Him \$100,000 for Assault Footage," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/03/arts/music/sean-combs-diddy-trial-cassie-hotel.html>.
2. Mark D. Futato, "The Book of Psalms," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, Vol 7: *The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 183.
3. Steve Jobs, "2005 Stanford Commencement Address," June 12, 2005, <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2005/06/youve-got-find-love-jobs-says>.



REMEMBER

"God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me." Psalm 51:10

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