

Leader's Guide

Creative
Communications
Sample

PRAYING

The Psalms of Lent

A Lent Bible Study in 6 Sessions

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Introduction

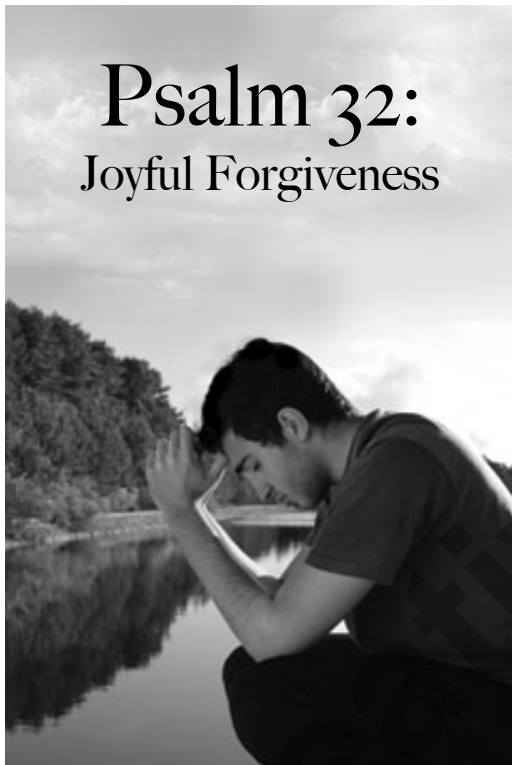
St. Paul writes, "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (Eph 5:18–20). With these words the apostle invites us to pray the Psalter's meditations, cries, shouts, and songs in light of the salvation accomplished by God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. This Lent we will do so using the Seven Penitential Psalms, so named by Cassiodorus (c. 485–c. 585 AD) in the 6th century AD. For centuries Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102 and 130 have served as a source of prayer and reflection during Lent. Their honest confessions invite us to turn to our Lord with the same candor and humility. These prayers are so fitting at expressing contrition that, as he lay dying in AD 430, St. Augustine asked that they be written in large letters near his bed. This study will write the Penitential Psalms large upon our hearts as they invite us to come as sinners before a holy God in order that we might receive his love and mercy anew.

Tips For Using This Study Guide

1. Always begin each session with a prayer. One is included for each session. You are encouraged to expand each of them with prayer concerns from the group.
2. Feel free to follow the format of each session as presented here or rearrange and adapt the material to meet the needs of your group.
3. You will need Bibles to look up the verses listed in each session. Bible verses are printed out in each Assignment For Next Session for convenience.
4. As you work through the material in this study guide, be sure to write down in the margins any questions that come to mind or any thoughts that arise in the course of the discussion and your contemplation of each session's Scripture verses.
5. If you are using this guide in a group setting, consider assigning printed Bible verses to various people in the class to read aloud at the appropriate time. This will move the session along more efficiently.

Note that some of the questions ask for facts. Typically, the answers to these questions will come from the Scripture verses just read. Other questions are more subjective, asking for your opinion or an example from your own experience. Since your life experiences are different from anyone else's, answers to these questions are neither right nor wrong. A Leader's Guide that accompanies this material is available from Creative Communications for the Parish (Code FLE).

SESSION TWO



Psalm 32: Joyful Forgiveness

Opening Prayer

Father of all mercy, we confess that though hatred, envy and a hunger that hunts after people's approval and applause have been crucified and drowned in the waters of baptism, they rise again and again in our sinful hearts. As we recall our great sins, many temptations and innumerable faults, bring to us anew your great grace that saves such wretches like us, for there is no joy so wonderful as knowing that we are fully forgiven through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader's Guide For Session 2

BEFORE CLASS: Read through this session yourself. Examine the Bible readings listed and become acquainted with them.

READ: Have someone read the Opening Prayer or read the prayer in unison.

READ: Read aloud or have someone read aloud the Synopsis of the Theme.

Synopsis of the Theme

You probably remember that one man who led a long procession. The police cars were not in the lead; rather he was leading with the police cars following. TV news cameras from different helicopters caught the scene and were broadcasting it live. They knew where this man lived, so some officers were quickly dispatched to his home to meet him there. He was allowed to enter his house, speak to his mother, and have a glass of orange juice, which brought laughter from the reporters covering the story. This was the famous ride of O.J. Simpson, on June 17, 1994. Accused of murdering his ex-wife and her friend, O.J. Simpson's life was shoved under the microscope. Prosecutors began looking for every shred of forensic evidence they could find in order to produce a verdict of "guilty." The trial produced such national and world-wide attention that the courtroom was literally "center stage" for weeks and weeks. The County of Los Angeles reportedly spent so much money prosecuting this one case that it ran out of money to prosecute other cases. After O.J. famously couldn't put the black leather gloves on his hands and was found "not guilty," many believed that the evidence had been tampered with, that there had been a huge cover up. David most certainly was involved in a cover up; though in Psalm 32 he admits it and finds forgiveness in spite of it.

Icebreaker

SHARE: Ask participants to share their reactions to the Icebreaker questions.

Do you think O.J. was guilty or innocent? Did his legal team cover up the evidence? When was a time you tried to cover up something? What happened?

READ: Read or have someone read the Outline of Psalm 32.

Outline of Psalm 32

- Ps 32:1–2: Instructions regarding sin and forgiveness
- Ps 32:3–5: David affirms truth for himself
- Ps 32:6–7: David reaffirms the power of forgiveness
- Ps 32:8: The Lord's word to David
- Ps 32:9–11: Instructions regarding wisdom and joy

The psalm begins and ends with instructions about joyful living; in between are David's confession of sin and the assurance of divine pardon. God only speaks directly in Ps 32:8 where he commands all to walk in the way that leads to honesty, joy and freedom.

Questions

1. Read Ps 32:1–2. How do you define *blessed*?
2. Read Gen 15:6 and Rom 4:6–8. How do these verses shed light on Ps 32:1–2?
3. Behind the English word *LORD* is the Hebrew term *Yahweh*. What does *Yahweh* mean?
4. Ps 32:1, 5 employ the term *transgression*. What do you think that means?
5. What is so deadly about silence when it comes to our transgressions?
6. Read Ps 32:4. What happens when God’s hand is heavy upon us?
7. Read Ps 32:5. The term *forgave* literally means lifted up. How is this an apt picture for forgiveness?
8. Read Ps 32:7. How is forgiveness like a shelter?
9. Ps 32:8 is the only place in the psalm where God speaks directly. Why are these comforting words?
10. Read Ps 32:10–11. Who are the wicked and the righteous?

Questions

1. The beatitude *blessed* means happy or living the full life and is frequent in the Psalter (e.g., Pss 1:1; 2:12; 106:3) and Proverbs (e.g., Prov 3:13; 8:34). In Isa 30:18 and 56:2 the blessed are those who wait for the LORD and those who do not defile the Sabbath. The word appears frequently in our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:2–12; Lk 6:20–22). Ps 32:1–2 announces that the key to a happy life is to be forgiven. Long before Sigmund Freud, David understood the power that comes from confession and absolution.
2. The word *count*, meaning reckon, appears in all three texts and forms the basis for Paul’s teaching about justification by grace, through faith, for Christ’s sake. The “narrow gate” (Mt 7:13–14) to new life is the path that comes to terms with God’s holy will, confesses sin, and receives his pardon.
3. In Ex 34:6 *Yahweh* is repeated; such an occurrence comes again in Ps 104:1. The relational Gospel/Law characteristics in the creed of Ex 34:6–7 are the best explication of *Yahweh*’s name in the OT. His grace-filled qualities are mentioned first because they are from eternity and last into eternity. God’s judgment upon sin follows. It appears in time and will end on the Last Day. As Judge, *Yahweh* may pardon or condemn. As Potter, he may work carefully or smash. And as Gardener he may cultivate or pluck up and destroy. *Yahweh* is both a devouring

fire (Deut 4:24) and a merciful God (Deut 4:31). There exists in him a tension between tender mercy and stern moral retribution. *Yahweh* is, however, inclined towards showing steadfast love. This creed comes at least twenty more times in the OT. In the Psalter it appears in Pss 78:38; 86:5, 15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8.

4. *Transgression* is the most severe term for sin in the OT. It is contrasted with love and patience in, for example, Prov 10:12; 17:19; 19:11. In Hos 8:1 *transgression* is parallel with “to transgress the covenant” and is used in this manner when the charge is made that after the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against its overlord, the king of Israel (2 Ki 1:2). Employed in this way, transgression denotes a treaty violation when a subject nation rebels against its overlord. Whether the rebellion is individual or corporate, it remains God’s authority to both punish and forgive. In the human realm, Joseph’s brothers begged him to forgive their transgression, and he does (Gen 50:17–21). Complete forgiveness for transgression comes through the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:5) who is Jesus Christ.

5. Answers may vary, but note that sin that is not confessed soon becomes a part of who we are; it harms, hardens and diminishes us. And secret remorse and self-counseling are not confession; neither is keeping quiet a mark of piety in the OT. In the OT the faithful make noise; they lament, pray, give thanks and praise. They will speak of God's excellences forever (Ps 89:1). We are likewise invited to keep speaking, praying and knocking until God answers (Mt 7:7); to remain persistent until he responds (cf. Lk 18:1-8). Silence is the seed of death while confession is good for the soul and the body.

6. God's hand was heavy upon Ashdod in Philistia (1 Samuel 5). Skim this narrative, paying close attention to 1 Sam 5:6, 9, 11. Note this promise, "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy" (Prov 28:13).

7. The nature of guilt means that sinners have "to carry their wrongdoing" (e.g., Lev 5:1; 7:18). Into this gap steps Jesus who took upon himself all of the ugliness of humanity; he carried it all. Luther writes, "And all the prophets saw this, that Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world. He is not acting in His own Person now. Now He is not the Son of God, born of the Virgin. But He is a sinner" (*Luther's Works*, 26:277). In Christ, God lifts up the sin of the whole world (1 Jn 2:2). Jesus carried sin in his body (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24) so that we might be declared righteous by grace through faith (Romans 3:22).

8. Behind this metaphor of shelter stand the OT cities of refuge, places for "the manslayer who kills any person without intent" (Num 35:11). There were six safe havens in Israel, three "beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan" (Num 35:14). They are named in Josh 20:7-8; Kedesh, Shechem, Hebron, Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan. This list runs from north to south in Canaan and then south to north in the Transjordan. Spread out over the Promised Land, cities of refuge were intended to be an ever-present help in trouble. Jesus Christ is God's final expression for a shelter, a safe-place, an asylum, a sanctuary, a haven, and a mighty fortress. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble" (Ps 46:1). So we do not run aimlessly, hopelessly, or desperately. We run, rather, to the Shelter. And we are safe in his forgiveness, forever!

9. Answers will vary, but note that it is God's summons and guide to how we are to confess, and not cover up, our sin.

Closing Prayer

(Psalm 32)

L Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,

C whose sin is covered.

L Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity,

C and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

L For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away

C through my groaning all day long.

L For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;

C my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

L I acknowledged my sin to you,

C and I did not cover my iniquity;

L I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"

C and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

L Therefore let everyone who is godly

C offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;

L surely in the rush of great waters,

C they shall not reach him.

L You are a hiding place for me;

C you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.

L I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;

C I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

L Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,

C which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.

L Many are the sorrows of the wicked,

C but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.

L Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous,

C and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

L Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,

C as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

Assignment For Next Session

- Read Psalm 38:

1 O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger,
nor discipline me in your wrath!
2 For your arrows have sunk into me,
and your hand has come down on me.

3 There is no soundness in my flesh
because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones
because of my sin.

4 For my iniquities have gone over my head;
like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.

5 My wounds stink and fester
because of my foolishness,
6 I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
all the day I go about mourning.
7 For my sides are filled with burning,
and there is no soundness in my flesh.
8 I am feeble and crushed;
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

9 O Lord, all my longing is before you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.
10 My heart throbs; my strength fails me,
and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.
11 My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague,
and my nearest kin stand far off.

12 Those who seek my life lay their snares;
those who seek my hurt speak of ruin
and meditate treachery all day long.

13 But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear,
like a mute man who does not open his mouth.
14 I have become like a man who does not hear,
and in whose mouth are no rebukes.

10. Psalm 1 defines the righteous and the wicked and therefore provides a key to the Psalter's message. A word count confirms that one of the book's chief concerns is how the righteous will fare in light of the wicked ones' ongoing assault against them. For instance, the righteous, and related words (e.g., poor, needy) appear 125 times in Psalms, while the word wicked, occurs 82 times, more than in any other OT book. The wicked don't believe God notices them (Pss 14:1; 73:11) and in the end, the book promises that they will get their wish (Pss 1:6; 92:7–8). They can be likened to oxen (Ps 22:12, 21), lions (Ps 22:13), and dogs (Ps 22:16, 20). The wicked, both personally and nationally, are rarely named and concrete issues are not lodged against them. It is significant that the last phrase of the Psalter before the book concludes with the hallelujah psalms (Psalms 146–150) speaks to the different destinies of the righteous and the wicked (Ps 145:20). The righteous are called servants (e.g., Ps 90:13) and afflicted (e.g., Pss 34:6). The godly actions of the righteous derive from their forgiven relationship with the LORD and not from a state of their moral perfection. No one is righteous before God (Ps 143:2). This is why the plea goes out to him, "Deliver me in your righteousness" (Ps 31:1). The righteous embrace their need for God's grace, protection, and guidance. They are therefore typically pictured as humble, lowly, and needy (e.g., Psalm 131) and express their relationship with God most frequently by means of praise. The righteousness they received as a gift from the LORD propels them to live with integrity

(e.g., Psalm 15). Being close to God is what the righteous yearn for the most and "refuge" is the most common idea that expresses this desire (e.g., Pss 2:12; 11:1). The statement, "I shall not want" (Ps 23:1) demonstrates that their longing is only for God. "One thing I ask from the LORD; this is what I seek, that I may live in the LORD's house all the days of my life" (Ps 27:4). The LORD mercifully grants this longing of the righteous. He transplants them by canals of water (Ps 1:3)—that is, in his holy temple (Pss 46:4; 92:13). David is the model righteous person in the Psalter. In the twelve psalms that present details in his life that led to the psalm's composition (Psalms 3, 7, 18, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 62, 142), most frequently he laments the fact that the wicked are persecuting him even while he acknowledges that the LORD will provide deliverance.

READ: Read the Closing Prayer responsively.

ASSIGN: Assign the Bible reading and questions for the next session.

15 But for you, O Lord, do I wait;
it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.
16 For I said, "Only let them not rejoice over me,
who boast against me when my foot slips!"

17 For I am ready to fall,
and my pain is ever before me.
18 I confess my iniquity;
I am sorry for my sin.
19 But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty,
and many are those who hate me wrongfully.
20 Those who render me evil for good
accuse me because I follow after good.

21 Do not forsake me, O Lord!
O my God, be not far from me!
22 Make haste to help me,
O Lord, my salvation!

Ask yourself:

1. What is the connection between sin and physical pain?
2. How do Ps 38:4, 18 function in the prayer?
3. How does a forgiven sinner live?

PRAYING

The Psalms of Lent

This six-week Lenten Bible study by Reed Lessing follows the themes of the penitential Psalms of Scripture (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102 and 130) typically associated with Lent. Each session in this Bible study includes Bible readings, prayers, questions, an ice breaker and discussion starters related to ways the psalms call us to forgive. Types of forgiveness touched on include vindicating, joyful, healing, renewing, restoring and abundant forgiveness..

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