

Confession *and* Repentance: The Conditions *of* Revival



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 5:30–32, 2 Cor. 7:9–11, Lev. 5:5, 1 John 1:9, Heb. 12:17, Ps. 32:1–8.*

Memory Text: “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (*Proverbs 28:13, NKJV*).

Throughout Scripture, both repentance and confession have prepared the way for spiritual revival. God has always prepared His people to do a great work for Him by leading them to godly sorrow for their sins. Once we acknowledge our sins and confess them, we are on track to have victory over them.

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (*2 Pet. 3:9*). Repentance and confession are two prerequisites needed in order for us to receive the Spirit’s power in abundance.

In this week’s lesson, we will trace the importance of true repentance in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as it is revealed in the book of Acts. We will also contrast true repentance with false repentance. Most of all, we will discover that repentance is a gift that the Holy Spirit gives in order to help us to reflect Jesus’ love to those around us.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 10.*

Repentance: God’s Gift

During the weeks before Pentecost, the disciples earnestly sought God in prayer. Acts 1:14 says that they were in “one accord in prayer and supplication.” This experience of “one accord” reveals a strong unity and harmony among Christ’s followers that would not have been possible without repentance and confession. Prayer and confession prepared them for what was going to come.

Read Acts 5:30–32. What important points can we take from what Peter said here?

Peter makes two critical points. First, repentance is a gift. As we open our hearts to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives us the gift of repentance. Second, the disciples themselves were witnesses in their own lives of the reality of repentance. They not only preached repentance, they experienced it.

“As the disciples waited for the fulfillment of the promise, they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief. As they called to remembrance the words that Christ had spoken to them before His death they understood more fully their meaning. . . . As they meditated upon His pure, holy life they felt that no toil would be too hard, no sacrifice too great, if only they could bear witness in their lives to the loveliness of Christ’s character.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 36.

Repentance and confession are common themes throughout Acts (*Acts 17:30, 31; 26:19, 20*). It is “the goodness of God” that leads us to repentance; it is the convicting power of the Holy Spirit that brings us to the realization of our need for a sin-pardoning Savior. At the same time, we must remember that the Holy Spirit does not fill unrepentant hearts (*Rom. 2:8; Acts 2:38, 39; 3:19*). The Holy Spirit fills hearts emptied of selfish ambition, of the desire for personal recognition, and of the drive for personal glory.

Why is it so difficult to acknowledge our sins and repent of them? Why is it so easy to let self get in the way of true repentance?

True Repentance Defined

How does the apostle Paul describe true repentance? *2 Cor. 7:9–11.*

Repentance is a God-initiated sorrow for sin. It also includes a decision to forsake whatever specific sins that the Holy Spirit brings to mind (*Ezek. 14:6, Zech. 1:4*). Genuine repentance does not lead Christians into a state of deep depression because of their sinful natures or deeds. “Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation” (*2 Cor. 7:10, NKJV*). It leads us, instead, to focus on Jesus’ righteousness, not our sinfulness. It produces a “diligence” in “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (*2 Cor. 7:11, Heb. 12:2*).

Throughout the New Testament, we see that the enormity of our sin is never greater than the enormity of His grace. For “where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (*Rom. 5:20, NKJV*). This was certainly true in the apostle Paul’s experience.

Read 1 Timothy 1:14–17 and Acts 26:10–16. What do these passages tell you about Paul’s sinfulness and Jesus’ righteousness?

When the apostle Paul realized that he was persecuting the Lord of glory, he was driven to his knees in genuine repentance and confession. Throughout his entire life he never tired of telling the story of his own sinfulness and God’s grace. His repentance did not leave him in a state of depression; instead, it drove him into the arms of an all-loving and forgiving Savior. The confession of his sin did not leave him feeling guiltier than before. His focus was not on how unrighteous he was but on how righteous Jesus was.

Have you ever felt that you were the “chief” of sinners? Or, if not the chief, still too sinful to be saved? How can you learn to rest in the assurance that Christ’s righteousness is enough to save you?

True Repentance and Confession

What spiritual principles do we learn from Leviticus 5:5; 1 John 1:9; Isaiah 1:16–18; and Acts 26:19, 20 regarding the nature of true repentance and confession?

Genuine repentance is always accompanied by confession of specific sins. The Holy Spirit does not give us vague feelings of guilt. He convicts us of our definite shortcomings.

“True confession is always of a specific character, and acknowledges particular sins. They may be of such a nature as to be brought before God only; they may be wrongs that should be confessed to individuals who have suffered injury through them; or they may be of a public character, and should then be as publicly confessed. But all confession should be definite and to the point, acknowledging the very sins of which you are guilty.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 38.

The purpose of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit is to reveal our need of the saving grace of Christ. Repentance does not make God love us more; rather, it enables us to appreciate His love more. Confession does not earn God’s forgiveness; it instead enables us to receive His forgiveness. God does not love us more when we repent or love us less when we fail to. His love for us is constant. The only variable is our response to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The truth is that our hearts are hindered from receiving the abundant blessings that God has for us while our spiritual arteries are clogged with the sludge of sin. Sin deadens us to the Spirit’s prompting and makes it harder for us to respond to Him. Repentance and confession open the clogged channels of our spiritual hearts so that we may receive the overflowing of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power.

However much we long for forgiveness when we confess and repent, we must remember that this is a two-way street. That is, how do we respond to those who have treated us wrongly and who ask for forgiveness? Whom, though totally undeserving of our forgiveness, do we need to forgive anyway, and why is it so important for us to forgive?

True and False Repentance Contrasted

There are some very specific examples in the Bible of people who sought repentance but were not forgiven by God. They wept. They were sorrowful. They confessed their sin but were not forgiven. Read the accounts of Pharaoh, Balaam, Esau, and Judas in Exodus 12:29–32, Numbers 22:32–35, Hebrews 12:17, and Matthew 27:4.

What common thread do you see running through each story in regard to repentance and/or confession?

One phrase in Hebrews 12:17 sums it up well. Speaking of Esau, the passage says that “when he wanted to inherit the blessing” (*NKJV*) he repented. Like Pharaoh, Balaam, and Judas, Esau’s heart was not broken over the pain that his sin had brought to his family or to the heart of God. His concern was over the birthright he had lost. He was sorry that he had not received that which he believed to be rightfully his. His motives were not pure. His sorrow was for himself. False repentance focuses upon the consequences of sin as opposed to the sin itself.

The law of sowing and reaping is a divine law. It is true that sin brings dire consequences, but repentance is not consumed with the negative results of sin. It is concerned, instead, with the dishonor and sorrow that our sin has brought to God.

True repentance is always characterized by at least three things. First, a sorrow that our sin has broken God’s heart. We are hurt because we hurt the One who loves us so much. Second, there is an honest confession of the specific sin that we have committed. True repentance is not laced with excuses for our behavior. It does not place blame on someone else. It takes responsibility for our actions. Third, true repentance always includes the decision to turn away from our sin. There can be no genuine repentance unless there is a corresponding reformation in the life. False repentance, on the other hand, is self-centered. It is concerned with the consequences of our sin. It is an emotional state of sorrow because our sins often bring negative consequences. It makes excuses and lays the blame on someone else. It is unconcerned about the changing of behavior unless the change will personally bring its own rewards.

Confession's Healing Power

Confession lances the boil of guilt and allows the poisonous pus of sin to drain. Confession is healing in many ways. It opens our hearts to receive God's grace. Through confession we accept the forgiveness that Christ freely offers us from the Cross. Confession is healing because it allows us to receive grace. Confession also breaks down barriers between us and other people. It heals relationships.

Read Psalm 32:1–8. What does this teach us about confession and repentance?

Read Acts 24:16. The apostle Paul strove for a “conscience void to offence toward God, and toward men.” What does that mean?

Is guilt good or bad? It all depends. If the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, and the guilt of that sin drives us to Jesus, guilt is good. If we have already confessed our sin and continue to feel guilty, the guilt may become destructive. “This feeling of guiltiness must be laid at the foot of the cross of Calvary. The sense of sinfulness has poisoned the springs of life and of true happiness. Now Jesus says, ‘Lay it all on Me. I will take your sins. I will give you peace. Banish no longer your self-respect, for I have bought you with the price of My own blood. You are mine. Your weakened will I will strengthen; your remorse for sin I will remove.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 9, p. 305. The answer to guilt is Jesus. His grace abolishes the destructive guilt sin lays upon us.

There are times we may have confessed our sins and we still feel guilty. Why? One reason might be that the devil is attempting to rob us of the assurance of salvation. He loves to steal away the blessed assurance of forgiveness and salvation that we have in Jesus. Second, the Holy Spirit may be pointing out something that exists between us and another individual. If we have hurt another individual, our troubled conscience will be eased when we confess our wrong to the person whom we have hurt.

How has guilt impacted your relationship with the Lord and with others? What can you do to help to alleviate the burden of guilt that you carry? Even if you have done wrong and the guilt is in a sense justified, what promises can you claim from the Bible to help you to move on?

Further Study: “Confession will not be acceptable to God without sincere repentance and reformation. There must be decided changes in the life; everything offensive to God must be put away. This will be the result of genuine sorrow for sin. The work that we have to do on our part is plainly set before us: ‘Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.’ Isaiah 1:16, 17. ‘If the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die.’ Ezekiel 33:15.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 39.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What crucial lesson about forgiveness can we learn from Jesus’ willingness to forgive those who nailed Him to the cross? If He was willing to do that, how much more so should we be willing to forgive those who have hurt us?
- ❷ In your own experience, how has confession of sin been a blessing to you? In what ways has it helped you in your relationship, not only with the Lord but with others?
- ❸ Though we read this week about the need, at times, to confess to other people whom we have wronged, why must we always be very careful in what we say to others?
- ❹ True repentance, we have read, includes a putting away of sin. What happens, however, if we—struggling with that sin—fall into it again? Does that mean our repentance wasn’t sincere? Does it mean we cannot be forgiven for it again? If this were true, what hope would any of us have? How are we to understand the nature of biblical repentance while always keeping in mind the reality of our sinful natures?
- ❺ From what we have studied this week, why is repentance a vital component in the whole issue of revival and reformation? How do the terms *revival* and *reformation* contain within themselves the idea that we do need to repent?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Psalm 32:1–5*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize the importance of the ways in which both repentance and confession relate to revival and the reception of the Holy Spirit.

Feel: Foster sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s convicting power, which leads to repentance and confession.

Do: Apply the biblical principles of repentance and confession to his or her own life and, with the apostle Paul, seek a “‘conscience without offense toward God and men’” (*Acts 24:16, NKJV*).

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Understanding the Nature of Repentance and Confession

- A** What is the difference between repentance and confession?
- B** Why are repentance and confession essential prerequisites to receiving the fullness of the Holy Spirit? Who initiates both repentance and confession?
- C** When is guilt destructive, and when is it healthy? Is guilt ever healthy? Explain.

II. Feel: Delivered From Guilt and Condemnation

A As Paul considered the sinfulness of His own life, he called himself the chief of sinners (*1 Tim. 1:15*). How did he deal with the guilt of his past? In what way did Paul understand sin and righteousness? What difference does this understanding make in our lives?

B What must occur for repentance and confession to be effectual in our lives?

III. Do: Experiencing the Joy of a Clear Conscience

A In what way does the experience of God’s forgiveness affect our relationships with others?

B Why is confession healing for the soul?

► **Summary:** In the upper room, the disciples repented and confessed their sins to God and, if necessary, to one another. They were reconciled to God and in harmony or of one accord. They prepared their hearts to receive the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Sin hinders that same mighty outpouring in our own lives. It blocks the flow of God’s Spirit. Repentance and confession of specific sins in our lives opens the clogged channels of the soul so that it may receive heaven’s richest gift, the Holy Spirit, in His fullness.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Psalm 32:1–5*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Repentance and confession are key elements of spiritual growth. Unless we acknowledge our sins and confess them, the Holy Spirit’s power in our lives will be limited. When we yield to the promptings of the Spirit and prepare our hearts to receive Him, He will come into our lives in all of His fullness.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize how important it is to carefully listen to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit and confess any sin that stands between God and us. It is only if we are honest with ourselves before God that we can receive the blessings He longs to bestow upon us.

Clint was a new Christian attending a Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic meeting in New England. He was deeply moved by the biblical presentations on prophecy. One evening a presentation on the second coming of Christ particularly impressed him. When the evangelist asked, “Is there anything in your life that would keep you from being ready for the coming of Jesus?” the Holy Spirit brought something specific to Clint’s mind. Years before, with a group of other teenagers, he had robbed a home in his community. Clint claimed Christ’s promise for forgiveness and confessed his sin.

A few weeks went by, but Clint was still troubled by what he had done. He discussed it with the evangelist, who explained that there was a difference between moral and psychological guilt. Moral guilt is the guilt that comes from breaking God’s law. Psychological guilt is the guilt we experience when we have wronged another. Our moral guilt is gone when we confess our sins to God, but, at times, psychological guilt remains until we confess our sins to the ones we have wronged. When Clint understood the need to ask forgiveness and, if necessary, make restitution to the ones he had wronged, he immediately asked the evangelist to help him to develop a plan to make things right. The evangelist contacted the family, and they were very willing to forgive this young man. When the evangelist explained to Clint that the family had a simple response, “We forgive you,” he broke down in tears. His psychological guilt vanished. His burden was lifted. Freedom to live a Spirit-filled life comes when we ask God to forgive us both for our sins against Him and for the times we have wronged others.

Discuss With the Class: When is it appropriate to go to another person and ask him or her to forgive you for something hurtful you have done or said? Is it ever appropriate to confess that sin to God alone without talking to the other person about it? Discuss. When should we confess to God alone?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. The Certainty of Forgiveness *(Review 1 John 1:9 with your class.)*

The Epistle of 1 John contains vital truths for God’s people of every generation. Some Bible scholars have called it “The Epistle of Christian Certainties.” We read about the certainties of Jesus as the Son of God, the promise of eternal life, the assurance of answered prayer, deliverance from the evil one, and forgiveness of sin. In 1 John 1:9, the apostle gives the followers of Jesus this assurance, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (*NKJV*). Here is something certain. When we confess, God forgives.

Our passage describes two things that God is and two things that God will do. He is faithful, and He is just. He will forgive, and He will cleanse. Referring to this passage, *The SDA Bible Commentary* makes this insightful comment: “It is also clear that he [John] is speaking of specific acts of sin, and not of sin as an evil principle in the life. Accordingly, confession should be more specific than the mere admission of sinfulness. The recognition of the precise nature of a sin and an understanding of the factors that led to its commission are essential to confession and to building up strength to resist a similar temptation when it recurs.”—Vol. 7, p. 632.

In the first century, the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples as they acknowledged their sins and prepared their hearts with confession and repentance. What was true for God’s followers then is equally true for His people living in these last days.

Consider This: Our sinful acts are the result of our sinful choices. Our sinful nature is the result of being born into a world of sin. When we accept Jesus as our personal Savior and are born again, what happens to our old nature? What is the old nature, and how long will it remain?

II. The Joy of Forgiveness (Review Psalm 32:1–5 with your class.)

Our passage begins with the word *blessed*. The Hebrew word is *ashre*, which means “happy,” “content,” or “at peace.” Confession leads us down the pathway to genuine happiness, true contentment, and lasting peace. David declares, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity” (*vss. 1, 2, NKJV*). Notice these three words: *transgression*, *sin*, and *iniquity*. Each one has a different shade of meaning in the original language. Transgression implies willful rebellion against the will of God. In this passage, the word for “sin” means “missing the mark” or “failing to obey God’s commands.” Iniquity has to do with moral distortion or crookedness. True joy, perfect peace, and inner contentment come when we confess our sins and acknowledge our guilt before God. The grace of God is fully capable of covering our transgressions, sins, and iniquities. There is nothing for which His righteousness cannot atone.

For a whole year after his affair with Bathsheba, David did not confess his sin to God. The results of this denial became obvious in his own body. In Psalm 32:3, 4, David describes what was physically going on inside. His “bones grew old” through his “groaning all the day long” (*NKJV*). He was filled with guilt and shame. His energy was sapped, and his vitality was gone. When David confessed His sin and acknowledged his guilt, he found in God forgiveness, security, and joy. He discovered a God who would instruct him and teach him in paths of righteousness.

Consider This: Unconfessed sin is a barrier to both our inner peace and Christian joy. It becomes an obstacle between our souls and God. It severely limits that which God can do with our lives. It inhibits the powerful moving of the Holy Spirit through us to reach others with the gospel. Why are confession and repentance essential if we long to experience the promised revival?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Thought Questions:

- 1 Read Leviticus 5:5, 6. What does this passage teach us about the true nature of confession? Why does God invite us to be specific in our confession? If there is something specific that the Holy Spirit is leading you to confess right now, take a moment to do so in silent prayer.

2 The apostle Paul strove to have “ ‘a conscience without offense toward God and men’ ” (*Acts 24:16, NKJV*). Can you think of anyone whom you may have offended? Is the Holy Spirit leading you to seek to rebuild any damaged relationship? What can you do to begin that process of healing and reconciliation?

Application Questions:

- 1** Invite your class members to spend a few moments examining their own hearts, asking themselves two questions:
 - a. Is there anything between me and God that I have not confessed?
 - b. Is there anything between me and someone else that I need to deal with?
- 2** After a moment in silent prayer, pray a short prayer asking God to take full control of each class member’s life.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: All biblical revivals are accompanied by confession and repentance of specific sins. Each revival throughout history has been characterized by earnest confession and heartfelt repentance. When the Holy Spirit truly moves upon God’s people, reconciliation takes place. Wrongs are righted, and relationships are restored.

Individual Activities:

- 1** Have you ever had an experience where someone came to you and asked your forgiveness for something that he or she had said or did? How did that make you feel? What impact did it have on your relationship?
- 2** Have you ever gone to another person and asked him or her to forgive you? How did you feel after you asked for forgiveness?
- 3** Can you think of a time in your life when you entered into earnest confession before God because of some sin? How did you feel after confessing?