

## Living Word Small Group Study Guide

February 2, 2020 – February 8, 2020

Sermon Series: Forgive/Forgiven

### Week One: “As Far as the East is from the West”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

#### **Suggested Opening Prayer:**

*Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.*

*Almighty God, whose Word is authority and power and whose way is love, grant unto us today clear minds, understanding hearts, and willing spirits so that we may wisely appropriate your Word of Truth. In the name of Christ, Amen.*

#### **This Week’s Sermon Theme:**

We don’t like to think we are sinful. We reserve “sin” as a label for those who are far worse than we are. Therefore, we don’t need “as much forgiveness” as those who do not acknowledge Jesus. However, the apostle Paul wrote “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Webster’s dictionary defines “forgive” as “to give up the resentment against or the desire to punish; to pardon an offence or offender.” When have you received forgiveness from someone you had hurt or wronged? When have you had to offer forgiveness? How did it go?

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** Psalm 32:1-2 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

#### **For Group Discussion:**

##### ***What does the text actually SAY?***

*The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.*

Look at several Bible translations to see the variety of words used in answering the following questions.

What different words are used in the passage to describe sin? (32:1-2)

What words are used to describe the way God responds to sin? (32:1-2)

What words are used to describe the disposition of the person whose sin God responds to in this way? (32:1-2)

## ***What questions does the text raise for us?***

*The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged.*

Depending on the translation used, forgiven people feel “blessed” or “happy”. How are “blessedness” and “happiness” related? What does either one really mean? What change does God’s forgiveness accomplish in us?

Does sin being “covered over” mean it gets swept under the rug? Is everything better simply because everything is hidden, or ignored?

What is meant by a “spirit in which there is no ‘deceit’ or ‘dishonesty’”? Might it relate to the temptation to hide our sins from God?

## **Commentary on the text:**

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

Read also: Psalm 32:3-11; Psalms 6; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143; Psalm 90:8; Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8

Psalm 32 is the second of the Bible’s seven “penitential psalms”. The other six are Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. Each of these psalms focus on three things. First comes the confession of individual sin. Second is the seeking—even the crying out for – God’s forgiveness. And finally, third, is a strong emphasis on announcing to others the blessing that has been received from God – the confidence the psalmist has in God’s forgiveness. The announcement itself usually takes the form of praising God for God’s faithfulness and love. While the penitential psalms are prayers to God, they also are intended as teaching tools. Notice in Psalm 32:3-11 the way the psalmist teaches the personal benefit of confession of sin, and of receiving God’s forgiveness, to those who pray this prayer of penitence.

We should also notice that the psalmist uses three different metaphors for sin, and three different metaphors for forgiveness in Psalm 32. Some of these metaphors lose their weight in English translation, but in the original Hebrew language, the vividness of the meaning comes through. In the first line of verse 1, sin is called “transgression”, or “wrongdoing”, and it is described as “forgiven”. But in the Hebrew original, the sin here is envisioned as an object, as something that one has to carry. It is a burden that, as it is carried, can bring consequences. The verse refers not to any particular *action*, but to the weight of previous sin that “burdens” us. The nuanced meaning of the word then translated as “forgiven” is, in Hebrew, more specifically “carried away”. The verse might be translated “Blessed is the person for whom the burden of sin has been carried away.” The reference is to someone who has had their heavy load taken up by someone else – a metaphor for forgiveness that many who have deeply understood God’s forgiveness can strongly identify with.

In the second line of verse 1, we find the second metaphors for sin and forgiveness. Here, sin is something that God sees ever in front of God, and that angers God. A more straightforward use of this metaphor is found in Psalm 90:8 – “You put our sins right in front of You, set our hidden faults in the light from Your face” (CEB). In this metaphor, forgiveness consists of God covering the sin so that God no longer looks on it, and therefore, no longer acts in judgment upon it. The imagery is not simply of “sweeping sin under a rug”, but doing away with sin completely. The Hebrew word implies not only

concealment, but eradication, or utter removal from one's presence. Since it no longer "exists", there is nothing left for God to act in judgment upon. The biblical language often refers to this eradication of sin symbolically, saying it has been removed "as far as the east is from the west".

The third metaphor shows up in the first line of verse 2. Now, sin is "guilt" or, in older translations "iniquity", and it has to do with the legal state of a person due to their objective guilt or innocence in transgressing a known law. God has the jurisdiction, as Supreme Judge, to pass the judgment that someone is a sinner, and hence, has the jurisdiction to punish or to withhold blessing based on that judgment. In this verse, forgiveness consists of God abandoning that judgment, no longer "imputing guilt", or "considering guilty". In the Psalm, God makes the judgment that the psalmist is no longer to be considered a sinner. It represents an objective change in the guilty/innocent status of the psalmist before God. The focus is not on carrying away the burden of sin, or covering over the sin, but on God's perspective on the sinner themselves.

Each of the three metaphors suggests a different way the psalmist understands the experience of God's forgiveness. The burden of carrying unconfessed sin is carried away by God Himself. The sin itself, which sits ever before God's face, is removed, covered over, hidden from God's sight – by God's own action. And finally, the qualitative status of the sinner before God is changed – God no longer judges the writer of the psalm a sinner – he is no longer guilty, but innocent! Each of these ways of understanding forgiveness fills the psalmist with a sense of blessedness, or happiness. This blessedness, or happiness, is rightly understood as not just a feeling or an emotion, but the sense of joy and completeness of a right relationship with God. In the psalmist's spirit, there is no deceit, and no dishonesty – rather than hiding it, he has confessed his sin before God, and God has forgiven.

The verses that follow this week's reading remind us that every one of us needs to follow the psalmist's lead, and confess our sins before God. The apostle Paul also reminds us in his letter to the Romans that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Similarly, the apostle John writes that "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Right relationship with God begins with acknowledging this reality, owning our responsibility for our own sin, confessing that sin to God, and allowing God's grace to flow over us in response.

### **Final Thoughts for Discussion:**

*The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.*

Have you ever experienced the burden of denying your own sin? How do you relate to the psalmist's description of the burden of unforgiven sin?

Can you testify to the experience of the joy of receiving God's forgiveness after confession of sin? What words would you use?

Which of the three metaphors used in speaking of sin/forgiveness resonates most deeply with you – having a burden carried away, hiding or covering over the sin from God's face, or the change in your personal status before God from guilt to innocence?

Is there deceit or dishonesty lurking in your spirit? What sins are you tempted to pretend don't exist?

Are you experiencing the kind of blessedness, or happiness, the psalmist describes in relation to being forgiven? If not, why might that be?

**Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Holy God, show us the places in our lives where we need to confess our sin. Remind us that forgiveness is something we all need, and that we only deceive ourselves by refusing to confess our sin. Help us to know the psalmist's joy in the receiving of forgiveness. We give You thanks that You are a merciful and loving God, and ask for Your help in extending the same mercy and love to others. We pray in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*