

SAMPLE

Eyeing Easter, Walking through Lent:

A Bible Study with Global Baptists

Eight online adult Sunday school lessons



Produced in partnership by the Baptist Center for Ethics
and the Baptist World Alliance

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Introduction

“Remember, you are dust,” the minister says as he or she makes the mark of the cross on parishioners’ foreheads on Ash Wednesday.

Generations of Christians have participated in this solemn and deeply meaningful ritual that marks the beginning of the season of Lent. Very few among them, however, have traditionally been Baptists.

Tracing their origins to protest movements that withdrew from established Christian traditions, most Baptist churches have historically viewed Lent with suspicion and their neighbors who bore the sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads with curiosity. Discussion about Lent was likely limited to what bad habit or pleasurable pursuit they would avoid.

Because their churches have generally rejected the liturgical calendar and the more formal worship style it encourages, most Baptists have little understanding of the rhythmic seasons of the church year and their meanings. In forsaking the formal, Baptists have also deprived themselves of some important tools in the Christian journey.

Things began to change noticeably in the Baptist world when more Baptist churches began observing Advent. While Lent has taken root less quickly in Baptist soil, it too has captured the imagination of many Baptists, introducing them to a spiritual discipline they now recognize that they need.

Especially for those Baptist churches that use the liturgical calendar for worship planning and education, Lent, like Advent, has become a much anticipated and carefully planned season. Beginning with Ash Wednesday, a day Auburn, Alabama First Baptist Church pastor Jim Evans says is “devoted to recalling God’s embrace of our humanity,” Christians around the world commence “a 40-day vigil devoted to reflection and repen-

tance.” More than giving up something, Lent for Christians is a challenge to reclaim, restore and renew their faith.

“During Lent,” says Heather Entrekin, senior pastor of Prairie Baptist Church, Prairie Village, Kansas, “we have an opportunity to do things, or to stop doing things, that can help us pay attention to God and become more open and available to God.”

While Lent encourages some elements of personal introspection, it must not stop there. Observing Lent challenges us to reorder our priorities and change our values. It causes us to recognize and confess the sin in our lives not only as individuals, but as communities, cultures and societies. Personal sins have far-reaching effects, resulting in false ideologies, harmful structures and destructive patterns that cause suffering for others and block the spread of justice. Lent demands an inside-out change.

It calls us from purely private faith to a faith that shows itself in actions that work for the good of the community and the world. It challenges those of us in positions of power and wealth to remember and act on behalf of those who suffer from poverty, injustice and violence.

We need look no farther than the early experiences of the Hebrew people and the teachings of Jesus for examples of this kind of living faith.

As the children of Israel made pilgrimages to Jerusalem for religious observances and celebrations, songs helped them not only pass the time but also reinforce their faith and teach their children. Many scholars believe that the Psalms of Ascent (120-134) were used during these journeys.

These psalms deal with concerns every serious traveler faces, including new direction, guidance, anticipation, fear, doubt, joy, security, perseverance, hope and deliverance. The physical journey these pilgrims made up to Jerusalem, the imagery in

the Psalms and the spiritual concepts they convey offer parallels to Christian discipleship.

From the moment of his birth, Jesus too was on a journey, one that would lead him not only to the cross but also to resurrection. As a Jew, he would have known and sung the ancient pilgrims’ songs.

Jesus modeled the journey of faith and invites us to follow. His teachings, coupled with those significant Hebrew songs, provide us a map through Lent that leads to intentional spiritual inventory and necessary course correction.

In 2005, Ed Hogan, pastor of Jersey Village Baptist Church, Houston, Texas, undertook such a Lenten journey that resulted in significant spiritual, emotional and relational growth not only for him but also for his congregation.

Inspired by Eugene Peterson’s book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, which examines the Psalms of Ascent, Hogan determined to walk 1,000 miles in the 100 days preceding Easter and use the time he walked each day to draw closer to God.

Sometimes he walked alone; at other times he was joined by members of his congregation. As he walked, his health improved, he lost weight and he developed deeper bonds with his parishioners. He chronicled his experiences in a personal blog (<http://thelentenwalk.blogspot.com/>).

Recalling Peterson’s words, Matthew 20:17-19 and its reference to Jesus and his disciples going “up” toward Jerusalem, Hogan wrote: “That one small word... up... is so important. This was more than a trip, and these disciples were more than tourists. They were pilgrims, and they were heading toward an encounter with God. Anywhere you walked in Israel it was always ‘up’ to the temple. In making this journey, the disciples were heading up toward God, and God was making the journey

with them. Long before it dawned on them that they were heading toward God, God had found them and was nudging them up the hill.”

As we move toward Easter’s celebratory encounter with God, rather than taking a thoughtless leap, Lent compels us first to evaluate, repent, reflect and recommit to the life of faith we claim. These Bible study lessons are designed to guide that process and challenge Baptists to:

- reflect on God’s history of deliverance;
- repent from self-centered and self-sufficient living;
- reaffirm their dependence upon God;
- recommit to walking the life of faith.

Inspired by examples from the lives of people touched through the Baptist World Alliance, goodwill Baptists from around the world can join in prayer and action to further God’s redemptive work in the world. As people changed by God’s love and forgiveness, we can embrace our responsibility to help others and create positive changes in their lives.

As we move from Lent to Easter and beyond, we see past the empty tomb to discover Jesus among those he came to seek and serve—the poor, the captives, the sick, the oppressed, the marginalized. As global Baptists work together to serve them, we will truly “bless the Lord.”

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Create In Me a Clean Heart

Psalm 51

Theme: Confession opens the door to renewal.

Introduction

The ritual is assumed. It is a habit really, one that those who do it regularly do not likely notice. In many places of the world where hot running water is a luxury, people, before a meal, line up at or are served by one who holds a basin in one hand with a towel draped over the forearm and, with the other hand, pours lovingly warmed water from a pitcher. Hygiene is very important and this ritual is mostly about hygiene.

However, for someone from the western world of modern conveniences where hygiene is a private matter, there is something about the stance, something about the posture and something about the engagement of this ‘third-world’ cleansing ritual that strikes deep.

The stance is vulnerable. Hands are out-stretched, palms upward, awaiting the water’s flow. No fist. No power. No dexterity. Just wait.

The posture is humble. One’s body tilts forward, to watch, to witness the flow of cleansing liquid poured out hopefully without hesitation.

The engagement is confessional. Eyes are diverted for the focus is on the dirt that must be seen in order to be washed away.

What strikes deep is the realization that unless I bow down, I cannot enter in. It is the realization that I need another to make me clean and that being welcomed to the table hinges on the acknowledgment of my sinfulness. From another's mercy comes the possibility of communion.

Those who regularly assume this position for physical cleansing, those whose lives are filled with poverty, injustice, violence, persecution, suffering, disease and material deprivation, become for Christians in wealthy and powerful communities teachers of spiritual truths. Their lessons are both simple and profound: cleansing is an essential first step on the path to wholeness. And apart from mercy, we can't begin the journey.

Clean water, life-giving and life-sustaining, is a rare and precious commodity in many parts of the world. In the African nation of Benin, for example, only 50% of the population has access to it. Many of the diseases to which Benin's people fall victim are related to the lack of clean water and basic hygiene.

Person by person, village by village, Baptist World Aid, the compassionate arm of the Baptist World Alliance, provides wells, water purification systems and education on water usage, cleaning and sanitation to those most vulnerable to disease. The changes that come to individuals, families and communities once they have regular access to pure water point to the possibilities of inner change from the living water, Jesus Christ.

Our path to Easter begins with a similar cleansing during Lent. It begins when we realize that our first stance, our first

posture and our first engagement on the path towards full forgiveness at the resurrection of Christ, is vulnerable, humble and confessional. It begins when, from this position, we appeal as David did, "Have mercy on me, O God."

The Biblical Witness

The situation is clear for the inscription tells us that David's lies have caught up to him in the person of Nathan. Nathan's own servant-like and wise nature led him to invent a story about an only lamb. After all, David was the king and you have to be smart when confronting a king. But Nathan played it right. He did not accuse. It was David's own indignant declaration that was the sentence: The rich man who had taken the poor man's lamb deserved to die (2 Sam 12:5). David, in his kingly decisiveness, knew what it would take to make this situation right, to restore justice. A death is called for, he declared. It did not take much for Nathan to help David see that the death he called for was his own.

All David could do then, as he awaited the day of his death, was plead. And David did just this.

Psalm 51:1-9 Coming Clean

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. ⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶You desire truth

in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

The time for an attempted cover-up is gone. No more can David attempt to hide deceit with deceit. There is no room left for any rationalization of his behavior: I am king so I can have any woman I want. There is no space for blame: She should not have been bathing when I looked her way. Nor is there any place for comparison: Others have done much worse things than this.

David is completely vulnerable and totally humiliated. He has been exposed. The verdict is in and David, he alone, is at fault.

The pleas start pouring out. They seem to come slowly at first. A trickle is not going to do it this time. Then, as he puts words to his heart's cry, his self-loathing increases and he awakens to the fact that he finds himself disgusting. The pleas come more quickly, more intense, more emphatic as if the water itself is not that which cleans. The spring rain becomes a deluge. A light rinse will not get out this stain. Detonating the grime from these tight crevices will require the full force of the water's power. Cleaning this mess requires the hose on full blast.

Blot out (vv 1, 9), wash (vv 2, 7), cleanse (v 2), purge (v 7) ... have mercy. The images are of power, force and desperation. The talk is of full elimination—the ink must be dissolved in order to erase David's name from the signed sentence of death, and the filth of his actions requires

bleach. Only mercy, only true benevolence can fulfill justice's mandate while, at the same time, forgive the criminal. Mercy, only mercy, can do both.

Psalm 51:10-16 **Mercy's Gifts**

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. ¹³Then will I teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. ¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

Mercy. David seems to know of that which he desires. His pleas are mixed with longings. There is a reminiscent quality to his words. It is as though he remembers times of mercy demonstrated, moments when he heard joy and gladness, glimpses of God's face, and periods of companionship. Joy restored comes only after joy once experienced.

As much as David's desires are for his own release, they are also for God to be God. Be the God that you are, yes, for my sake, but not just for my sake. Act according to your steadfast love. Move according to your abundant mercy. Create as you have created in the past. Focus on that which is good in this, your world, and in me, your servant. Stay close. Be present. Speak it and it will be so.

If God will be God again, then David will teach transgressors God's ways, sing aloud of God's deliverance and declare God's praise (v 13).

These descriptions of David's ensuing activity after God acts like God again are not presented as matters in the negotiation of forgiveness. He is not saying to God, if you do that for me, I will do this for you. David is not even remotely in a position to bargain. Not at all. That time has passed.

Rather, these descriptions are also part of David's same reminiscence. Unless God is God again, David will never again experience the delight that comes with teaching, the joy that comes with song and the energy that comes with declaration. He remembers what it was like to be right with God, to be in communion with God, and because of this, to be in right communion with others. These activities are the natural responses of a loved one to the beloved.

Psalm 51:17-19 **Restored for Service**

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, ¹⁹then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

In response to the declaration that, because of his sin, he must die, all that David can offer as he pleads for forgiveness is a broken and contrite heart. And that is all that God may consider worthy of acceptance

A broken and contrite heart is one that is ready to be taught the truth about the human heart. It is one that is ready to be

purged with strongest substance, the only substance that can cleanse death. It is one that desires to hear directly from God. It is one that acknowledges that God's help is required to live with the ever-present memory of past sins. It is one that needs to be changed, re-created. It is one that needs that assurance of God's presence. It is one that is ready to rejoice again. And, it is one that desires to will that which God wills for God's people and God's world.

A broken and contrite heart, restored and renewed, becomes a pure vessel through which God can work to relieve poverty and violence and establish justice.

We receive mercy and are restored for a purpose: to extend mercy to others.

Daring to Hope

Lent is an in-between time. It is the time between the declaration of guilt and the actualization of the sentence our guilt deserves so that justice is reestablished. It begins with Ash Wednesday, the day that declares death is certain. And, it ends with Easter, the day that begs to differ.

But what of the in-between days? In between are the days that we have to live with the sentence. In between are the days that we bring the only sacrifice we have, a broken and a contrite heart, to God. We have to face the likelihood that there is no way out. We have to acknowledge that what we have done or not done deserves this retribution. We have to wait until the day when the executioner calls our name. In between are the days that we wait in the agony of reality and in the improbability of hope.

A man joined the line outside of the barren, concrete-blocked four walls and tin roof. It was early on Sunday

morning and some of the women, like every Sunday at this Rwandan Baptist church, serve tea to those who do not have food for breakfast.

This man knew the protocol. The line is for cleansing so that entrance to the table may be granted. He had grown up at this church and his family is still part of the community. However, since the events of the 1994 genocide, he had been in prison, accused of and guilty of butchering members of this same community with a machete.

His time in the prison is finished, but what of the sentence of this community? The families of his victims are here but this is the only community he knows. To where else would he go? He remembers the times of gladness, the moments of rejoicing, even the games he had played with his friends, the very men he had attacked.

Might he dare hope for the possibility of yet another of those moments in this place and with these people? Might these people understand that his presence here is an act of vulnerability, that he comes in utter humility ready to confess? Might he allow himself to imagine that he, after all he has done, will be welcomed?

He is not sure that anyone has recognized him yet. No one knew he was coming today. He waits in the line daring to hope. It feels like forever. It feels like he has been waiting for days.

What of your in-between days this Lenten season? As you face your sinfulness, as you plead for God's mercy, and as you remember the joy of God's companionship, pray that God will be God again.

Acknowledge that you need God's help to make you clean, and that being welcomed to the table hinges on the ac-

knowledgment of your sinfulness. Thank God for mercy that restores the possibility of communion.

As you explore and contemplate the amazing work of God in people's lives around the world during this Lenten season, resist the comfort of privatized faith. Recognize and confess the pervasive nature of corporate sins that create problems and suffering for others.

Determine to look beyond yourself to a world that needs the mercy, justice and restoration a pure heart can help it find.

Written by Carla Nelson, education consultant, Canadian Baptist Ministries, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Create In Me a Clean Heart Leaders Guide

Theme: Confession opens the door to renewal.

**Text:
Psalm 51**

Before You Lead

► To frame the context of Psalm 51, read 2 Samuel 11-12. Make a list of key events from this passage that led to David's confession. Be prepared to summarize the story of Uriah, David and Bathsheba when you lead this Bible study.

► Read Psalm 51, the Preface and "Create In Me a Clean Heart" from the Students Guide. Then read the following suggestions.

► If possible, purchase enough bottles of drinking water for each person in your group to have one. Also obtain a pitcher, a basin or bowl and a towel. Before this session begins, fill the pitcher with water.

As You Lead

Introduce the Lesson

► Involve adults in a friendly competition to see who can find the most references to *cleansing* or *water* in Psalm 51.

List these on a board or chart as adults suggest them; review them and their verse references once the list is complete.

► Note that the Bible includes hundreds of references to water: 442 in the *New International Version* and 363 in the *King James Version*.

Point out that water is considered a purifying agent in most religions, and many in addition to Christianity incorporate ritual washings in their practices, including Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Shinto.

Stress the importance of water by relating these facts:

- All known forms of life depend on water. In order to function properly, the human body requires between one and seven liters of water daily to avoid dehydration (the precise amount required depends on activity level, temperature, humidity and other factors). And humans require water that does not contain too many impurities or bacteria.
- Throughout history, civilization has flourished around water. Mesopotamia, known as the cradle of civilization, lay between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; major cities like Rotterdam, London, Montreal, Paris, New York and Tokyo owe a large part of their success to their easy access to water and the subsequent expansion of trade.
- The converse is also true: In places where water is scarce and pure water even scarcer, people struggle to maintain existence and face disease, famine and death.

- The availability of clean water is a major social and economic problem. Around 1 billion people around the world routinely drink unhealthy water. Even if we meet the 2003 G8 Summit goal of halving the number of people worldwide who lack access to safe drinking water, an estimated half billion more will still lack this access, and over 1 billion will remain without access to adequate sanitation facilities.
 - In 2000 alone, more than 2.2 million people died from diseases related to the consumption of contaminated water or drought. The UK charity WaterAid reported in 2004 that a child dies every 15 seconds from water-related diseases that are easily preventable.
 - Overpopulation in some parts of the world, mass consumption, misuse and abuse and water pollution have resulted in an inadequate and shrinking supply of drinking water worldwide. Water has become a strategic resource and an important factor in many political conflicts.
 - In developing nations, 90% of all wastewater goes untreated into local rivers and streams.
 - Forty percent of the world's people lack sufficient fresh water for minimal hygiene.
- Suggest that these facts make the story in the Introduction of the Students Guide even more poignant. Stress that, just as people in many parts of the world must undergo a ritual cleansing before being allowed “at the table,” we too must assume a similar stance spiritually in order to receive forgiveness, experience renewal and enjoy full fellowship at God’s table. Note that our appeal must begin as David’s

did: “Have mercy on me, O God,” and that Lent provides us with an opportunity to begin the journey toward restoration and renewal.

► As time permits, review some of the symbols and important elements of Lent, using the information in the Introduction to the Students Guide and the appendix at the back of this Leaders Guide. Ask adults to consider these questions:

- *In what ways is Lent a journey?*
- *What should be our goal as we journey through Lent toward Easter?*
- *Why is a privatistic faith an incomplete one, and how does Lent challenge the notion of a purely private faith?*

Explore the Bible

► Lead adults to recall events in the lives of David, Bathsheba and Uriah that led to David’s remorse and guilt as expressed in Psalm 51. Point out specific verses from 2 Samuel 11-12 as necessary to explain David’s circumstances.

► Read aloud Psalm 51:1-9 and lead adults to discuss it by asking such questions as:

- *How do you define mercy?*
- *On what occasions have you experienced mercy? What was the result?*
- *When have you extended mercy to another person? When have you failed to do so?*

- *When God is God for you, how is your life different? How is your engagement with the world and its people different?*

Stress that when God is God and we are in right communion with God, we can also be in right communion with others, seek justice for them and work for the common good.

► Read aloud the remaining verses of Psalm 51. Stress that confession, forgiveness and restoration are not an ending. Instead, they mark the beginning of a transformed life that is lived in service to God and others. We receive mercy and restoration for a purpose that extends to others.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Call attention to the explanation from the Students Guide of Lent as an “in-between time.” Stress that our journey during Lent toward Easter must begin with the confession that comes from a broken and contrite heart.

To symbolize confession, repentance, forgiveness and cleansing, pour water from the pitcher into the basin or bowl, wash your hands and then dry them. Then pass the basin or bowl and the towel from person to person in your group, inviting them to wash their hands to symbolize the cleansing that comes from God’s mercy and forgiveness and to remind them of the millions of people around the world who assume this posture regularly as a hygienic practice.

► Next, give each person a bottle of water and ask them to keep it somewhere throughout the season of Lent to remind them of the importance of spiritual cleansing and of the people around the world who lack access not only to clean water but also to the living water of Jesus Christ.

► Close with prayer for those who work through the ministries of the Baptist World Alliance and Baptist World Aid to provide wells, irrigation systems and hygiene education to those who lack clean water and adequate sanitation.

For over 80 years Baptists have been making a difference and caring for those in need irrespective of their race, creed or color through Baptist World Aid, the compassionate ministries arm of the Baptist World Alliance. By providing food, medicines and medical equipment; conducting agricultural and educational projects; building churches and seminaries and distributing Bibles, Baptist World Aid extends relief, development and fellowship assistance around the world.

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Lesson Title	Writer
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Prepare the Way	Randy Hyde, pastor, Pulaski Heights Baptist Church, Little Rock, Arkansas
Look Beyond the Here and Now	Daniel Carro, professor of Divinity, John Leland Center, Arlington, VA, and Dina Carro, member, Baptist World Alliance study and research executive committee
Ask, Seek, Knock	Martin Accad, academic dean, Arab Baptist Theological Seminary and director, Institute of Middle East Studies, Mansourieh, Maten, Lebanon
Shout for Joy	Craig Sherouse, senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Griffin, Georgia
Invite the Poor	Paul Montacute, director, Baptist World Aid, Baptist World Alliance, Falls Church, Virginia
Depend on God	Emmanuel McCall, vice president, Baptist World Alliance, Atlanta, Georgia
Come, Bless the Lord	Parush Parushev, academic dean and lecturer in applied theology, International Baptist Theological Seminary, Czech Republic

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