Psalm 51, Nehemiah 1:
Confession, forgiveness, and repentance

This study addresses issues of confession, sin, forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation, which have to be addressed in our prayer lives. After a couple of short opening passages, we’ll look at Psalm 51 for an example of personal confession. If time permits, we’ll briefly look at Nehemiah 1 as an example of confession on behalf of one’s nation or society. You only need to hit major application points on the study topic, not necessarily an in-depth analyses of the passages. Based on these examples, we’ll practice praying according to these prayer models, for our sinfulness, weaknesses, and omissions (things we should have done but haven’t), and for the sins of your nation, society, and culture (or nations, etc., if bicultural/binational, such as Asian-American).¹

Introduction.
Look at the following. Based on these, what can hinder our prayer lives? What else might hinder our prayers? Why would these hinder our prayers and our ability to pray? Why would they come between us and God?

- Matthew 6
- Matthew 5:23-24
- 1 John 1:9
- Psalm 66:18
- 1 Peter 3:7 (treatment of others)

What do terms like ‘confession’ and ‘repentance’ mean?² Why are they necessary for our spiritual lives?

Why are repentance and confession important components of worship and prayer?
Do you need to make amends or reconcile with someone? If possible, how would you do it? If it is no longer possible, what do you do?

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¹ Parts of these notes are adapted from previous study materials.
² The term ‘confess’ as in 1 John 1:9 and elsewhere in the New Testament is the Greek homologeo, literally meaning “to say the same (thing)”, i.e., “to agree, acknowledge, admit” – agreeing with God that something is sinful, that one has sinned, admitting and acknowledging one’s guilt; ‘repentance’ (metanoa) = “(completely) changing one’s mind”, a total attitude change.
Psalm 51.

Background.

This psalm represents David’s confession and repentance after his sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12); we can assume most people are familiar with the story, so you don’t need to go into all the background. This is one of seven penitential psalms, or psalms of repentance (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143).

First, for younger believers, it’s important to understand the concepts of forgiveneness, confession, and repentance, and the difference between forgiveneness when we are saved and when we later commit specific sins. When we’re saved, we’re forgiven once and for all for all sins – past, present, and future – as a necessary prerequisite for entering into a relationship with God. It is forgivenness in that general sense. However, now that we are in a relationship, specific problems and barriers that come up have to be dealt with in order to keep the relationship strong and healthy. But those in no way end the relationship, but they come between us and God. It’s just like a family or marriage relationship. We’ve entered into a permanent relationship with God, which can’t be changed. But at times disagreements, arguments, and problems arise in the relationship, which strain the relationship. But that doesn’t mean the relationship ends over a relationship difficulty, in a proper relationship – a parent doesn’t abandon the child, and one spouse doesn’t abandon the other. Rather, reconciliation and repentance have to be done to restore the relational intimacy. With us and God, God doesn’t abandon us when we sin and thus offend him. But we can’t have the intimacy and blessing that we need with him, and which he wants with us (note the difference: we need him and the full relationship for our sake). So we have to confess and repent toward God, who is our Father and the lover of our souls, just like in a parent-child and a marital relationship. If we don’t, we get into further trouble with our Father.

You undoubtedly know various New Testament verses dealing with sin, confession, and repentance. But it is important to make them practical by relating to real life events such as David's and our own. Besides the obvious matters of understanding confession, repentance, and forgiveness, it is important to realize our need to be able to hear God's voice speaking to us about our sins, sinfulness, and weaknesses; developing a lifestyle of confession and repentance, not just occasionally or when we really mess up; avoiding sin by having a close walk with God; the basis of our forgivenness; how not to abuse God's grace and forgivenness (e.g., rationalizing sin by virtue of the fact that you can be forgiven, using forgiveness as an excuse to sin); the reality of sin and how it offends God and hurts our relationship with God (esp. within the covenant relationship framework); how to pray; honesty before God; that God loves us and wants to forgive us if we are truly repentant, and there is no sin He can't forgive; the power of the cross of Christ for our forgivenness, renewal, and spiritual healing; humility and brokenness before God. It is also helpful to understand that we cannot abuse God's grace, for when we fall into sin and don't repent, God in His love disciplines us. It's easy to talk about sins of commission (doing things we shouldn't do), but what about sins of omission (things we should do but don't)? Aside from obvious things like helping others, being a witness, sharing our faith, helping and praying for fellow believers, etc., there are more fundamental omissions to talk about. How about our walk with God? Do we make good use of our time, including our free time, in a way that would please Him? Do we take time regularly to have genuinely meaningful, quality devotional times with God? Do we make use of our time to pray, read Scripture, meditate on God's word like we should? Quality spiritual fellowship with others? Not just socializing together, but also spiritual sharing, making each other accountable, praying together...

No matter how spiritual or mature we are, we need to realize and confess our spiritual weaknesses, sinful tendencies, failing to spend time to develop true intimacy with God, attention to worldly things rather than to God, and not giving God full worship and importance in our hearts (say, compared to worldly or selfish pursuits and attitudes). When we become heart-broken over the state of our sinful hearts (e.g., v5) and the failings in our spiritual lives, and when we become desperate for God and knowing Him intimately, then we become broken, and brokenness should be our aim (not spiritual guilt trips, which have no lasting effect). If we can become broken and renewed, then God's Spirit can really revive us and use us.
Questions.

How does he begin asking for forgiveness – based on what aspects of God’s nature? [v1-2] Why? How is this the basis for God’s forgiveness? What else is the basis of forgiveness (see 1 John 1:9). Why is it important to remember both of these principles as the basis of seeking forgiveness? What happens if we don’t? What kind of spiritual imbalance results?

What does it mean for God to cleanse and wash you? [v2, v7]

When do you sin, whom do you sin against? Why do we need to recognize God’s authority and holiness in confession and repentance? [v4]

When you sin, what are the spiritual consequences? Emotional? Physical? [v8ff.] In our relationship with God? In our relationships with others? In our ability to serve God, to serve in the church or fellowship? Can you give some specific personal examples.

What does it mean to ask God to make your heart pure? [v10] To be in God’s presence? [v11] To have the joy of your salvation? [v12]

What is important in making things right with God? Why? [v13-17]

Nehemiah 1.

Background.

Briefly read the prayer of repentance of Nehemiah, a Jewish aid to the Persian king, who went to Jerusalem after the Israelites were allowed to return after their captivity in Babylon. He is distraught by the lack of progress in rebuilding the city (its walls for its protection, and its temple), hence his move to Jerusalem to help direct the reconstruction and restoration of Israel. He prays on behalf of his entire nation and people, confessing the corporate sins of his people, including those of past generations, whose waywardness led to their judgment, conquest, and deportation at the hands of the Babylonians.

The concept of corporate or community confession of sins of one’s culture, nation, or society runs contrary to modern views of the individual, especially to Western individualism, where we focus only on an individual and his/her sins. Asians can probably better relate to the concept of corporate guilt and confession. As members of a given society, we are all affected in some way by the sins of our culture, society, or nation, even if they are things we personally oppose. (Or they may be things that we haven’t done our best to prevent or work against.) The Bible takes this perspective from Ancient Near Eastern and Jewish culture, and so the purely individualistic view of guilt as in Western culture is not really supported in Scripture. We thus have to sometimes confess the sins of our nation, society, or culture, and pray for God’s forgiveness and mercy, which include God’s working in people’s hearts to bring our nation, society, or culture in line with his will.

3 51:7 refers to hyssop, a family of aromatic herbs with a strong, minty flavor. They had a wide variety of medicinal purposes in the ancient world. It is mentioned here, though, because according to the Mosaic Law, hyssop branches were to be used for springkling sacrificial blood or water for ceremonial cleaning of buildings, vessels used in worship, persons, etc. (Exodus 12:22; Lev. 14:4; Numbers 19:18). Some commentators may draw a metaphorical connection with this and forgiveneness thru the blood of Christ.

4 Of course, we sin against others and ourselves, but David’s poetic statement, “against you only have I sinned” means that ultimately, he sins primarily against God.
Questions.

What are the components of Nehemiah’s prayer? How does he begin and end it?

Why does he pray with “we”? Whose sins is he confessing? What kinds of sins does he refer to? When did these take place? Did he have anything to do with these sins? Why does he confess them in the first person (“we”)?

What is the concept of corporate sin, guilt, and confession? Does it seem unusual or unfair to you to be considered responsible for sins of your society that you have nothing to do with?

What are some particular sins of your nation, culture, or society? Or areas where you/we fall short of God’s will as a people?

What are some sins, problems, or omissions of the Christian Church? Of the Church in your culture or nation? Of your/our own church or fellowship? Why is it important to acknowledge and confess these? How can this lead to spiritual growth or healing?

For the above examples of sins and other problems in society or the Church, explain how they might have affected you. Explain how you are in a sense one who shares in this group responsibility.

Prayer time.

For your group, make an outline like below of prayer items to list during the discussion, for prayer during the extended prayer time. Again, at least 30-45 minutes should be allowed for prayer.

1. Adoration, worship, thanksgiving.

2. Confession and repentance.
   - our sinful nature, particular sins, personal weaknesses (People need not pray this part aloud; they can pray silently here.)
   - reconciliation and making amends with others (Can be silent)
   - areas where we haven’t followed God’s will (omissions)
   - asking God to search our hearts and show us where we fall short
   - asking for God to cleanse and purify us
   - national, social, and cultural sins
   - shortcomings and sins of the Church in general, of the Church in your nation, of your/our church or fellowship
   - others...

3. Supplication (prayer requests).