

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

59.1 How Can I Get Rid of My Guilt?

Part I

Scripture: Colossians 2:6-15; Hebrews 7:25-27; 9:11-14; 10:22;

I John 1:8-10; 2:1-2; John 19:30; Psalm 130:3-4

It is understood that no one lives entirely free of guilt, not even people who have never been convicted of committing a crime. Guilt is everyone's companion, it is found in the best of families and it is here this morning in our midst with its crippling influences. This means that if you are a normal person you have experienced the disturbance of conscience which accompanies behavior which has fallen short of certain ideals. The renowned psychiatrist Dr. Paul Tournier has concluded, "It is abundantly clear that no one lives without the experience of guilt."

Conscience is that faculty which provides an awareness of the moral worth of our motives or acts. It further impels us to do what is right and to avoid the wrong. Conscience has been a very real factor in the behavior of people throughout all of history. It is the conscience which is responsible for feelings of guilt. It appears very unscientific and unsophisticated to speak of conscience today, nevertheless it continues to be the "worm which never dies" and is a viable influence to be reckoned with. Most people learn to cope with the pangs of conscience in one way or another although some are driven to take their lives because of their inability to bear the crushing load of guilt any longer. Not a few of the 21,000 people who commit suicide in the United States in a year's time are propelled by guilt. The point is that man is incapable of doing wrong and feeling right about it, and this feeling which we call guilt is most unpleasant. It must be gotten rid of. Unless we find release from our guilt there will be loss of self-esteem and feelings of failure, grief, fear, and depression. Apathy sets in and soon the days are not worth living anymore. These form the experiences of people every day regardless of the "new morality" and "psychological maturity" which belittle and distort our understanding of what is really wrong with us. This is a broad study but suffice it to say at this point that we have multitudes of people who seek deliverance from this anxiety or that, never realizing that the real solution lies in finding release from guilt.

My concern with you as we turn to the Scriptures is the unfortunate, if not tragic, experience of many people who are Christians concerning the problem of guilt. I feel it is the favorite ploy of Satan to deceive believers concerning the matter which lies at the very heart of the Christian message, that of a perfect and complete forgiveness. The great message of the Christian gospel is that the guilt problem has been resolved for anyone who established his faith in the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross. At least, I mean to say, the problem is resolved before the God we are all accountable to. Once forgiveness has been obtained, it is final and enduring. This is what I want to think about as we continue together.

I. THE MEANING OF FORGIVENESS - Psalm 130:3-4

The word “forgive” is common enough. We hear it repeatedly and are quite able to use it intelligently should the occasion arise. However, I wonder how many of us have ever stopped to think about what actually happens when forgiveness is offered to someone. What takes place is a kind of bestowal. Something is being given. Essentially, forgiving is giving, as the main part of the word suggests. When we forgive someone we surrender or give away the right we have to retaliate because of what has been done to us. We release them from any intention or purpose we have to get even with them. We grant them freedom from the burden of their misdeed, and by so doing we assuage their guilt. Now the opposite of this was the Old Testament concept of *“Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.”* It was written, *“you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”* (Exodus 21:23-25) When you stop and think about it, this was an equitable principle. If someone maims me in a certain way the law of Moses was that I may do precisely the same thing to him. If someone put my eye out I could reserve the right to relieve him of one of his eyes. If you think that is terrible, you are right, it is, but it was terrible for him to put my eye out in the first place. Everything will be even-stein at least. And that is just the point while we are mentioning this. It is not the law of the jungle. The law of the jungle is that if someone were to intentionally put my eye out, I would want to retaliate by taking his head off, but I would be restrained from doing that because of what Moses taught. The reason for mentioning this is to emphasize the contrast between justice and forgiveness. Forgiveness would be for me to lose my eye and not retaliate at all, it would be to release the offender from the wrong he has done and never try to collect in any way. I give away my punishable right.

In Psalm 130 David has this matter on his mind. He is saying something extremely important, something every Christian should be mindful of. He is saying it is not the law of tooth and eye which describes God's dealings with us. If God was scrutinizing our lives and keeping a record of our iniquities there isn't anyone of us who could stand in His presence. The word "mark" means to keep an itemized account. That is not what God is doing at all. David made a great discovery about God. God reacts toward him in forgiveness. (Psalm 130:3-4) God has given away His right to respond to David's disobedience. God forgives. He releases us from the wrong we have done against Him and He will never collect on it. Christians must come to appreciate this perspective concerning forgiveness. If we do not, we will never really be able to trust God. We will not be able to respond to Him the way He desires. It would be a heavy thing to think of God as keeping an itemized account of our failures, only to zap us with them someday. That is the tragic way some Christians think of God and it is little wonder they are plagued with guilt.

II. THE GROUND OF CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS - Colossians 2:6-15

This release from guilt presented a real problem to God (if it be allowable to speak of a problem for God). Some psychiatrists distinguish between "real" and "pseudo" guilt. Real guilt arises from a consciousness of having transgressed the law of God, or of having fallen short of His standard. There is an internal moral law which God has written within the hearts of all men. This is spoken of in Romans 2:15 where we read, *"Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another."* Paul had the awareness of right and wrong in mind as he spoke of the Gentile world which did not have the law of God. Any normal person, excluding those who are not of age or mentally deranged, would feel guilty if this innate law is violated. There is also the more objective and external law which is mentioned in Exodus 20 and Matthew 19. Transgression of these stated laws is sin according to I John 3:4. In this same epistle (5:17) we learn that *"all unrighteousness is sin."* This includes attitudes along with acts. Another definition is given in James 4:17, *"Therefore to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin."* There are sins of omission. (There is yet another in which brings guilt mentioned in John 16:8-9, but which does not apply to the Christian, it is rejection of Christ. The Holy Spirit reproves the world of *"sin because they believe not on me."*) These then are the theological definitions of sin which spark the conscience and are the cause of guilt in the

lives of Christians. Sin is lack of conformity to the inward and written laws of God in disposition or act as well as the omission of something which God has enjoined to be done. There is not a single Christian who lives a single day without committing a single sin. We all disobey or fall short in some way every day of our lives. It would seem only natural for us to feel the pangs of conscience and the heaviness of guilt, that is, if it were not for one thing, and that is God's forgiveness. God has given away the right to count these transgressions and to remember them against us. How has God been able to do this?

Colossians 2:14 describes how God is able to forgive us. The word picture in this passage is very powerful. The words "*handwriting of ordinances against us*" might be better rendered "the charge-list which set out our self admitted debts." The word for "*handwriting*" is "*cheirophon*" and has a technical meaning. When a prisoner was convicted in a Roman court of laws a death certificate was prepared. The scribe of the court would write on papyrus or vellum (a substance made from animal skins) the crimes the felon was guilty of. Every crime was listed. These were the crimes the prisoner was in debt to Caesar for. The list would then be signed by the guilty man, he would admit to them. It was a writ of self confession. He agreed to what had been said about him. The list was then posted to the door of his cell. These were the ordinances against him. Paul is saying that believers have a death certificate, a list of laws they have broken, these are the laws of God which have been broken. Now Paul explains that God has done something with that list of accusations. He nailed it to the cross of Christ. In verse 15 we read about principalities and powers being spoiled. In Scripture these words describe Satan and his demons. Paul searched human activity to produce a picture graphic enough to illustrate how completely God has wiped out the condemnation due us because of our sins. There is no legal ground upon which Satan can accuse us again or belittle the forgiveness of God.

These ordinances were blotted out according to verse 14. The material upon which the prisoners crimes were listed was costly and therefore a certain kind of acid less ink was used which did not penetrate much beyond the surface of the material. Once the debt of a crime had been paid the word "tetelestai" was written over the certificate of death. The word meant that the debt to Caesar had been paid and the work of propitiation was done. With that a scribe would take a sponge and wipe the writing from the surface of the writ. The prisoner could never be punished again for those crimes.

Please note in the Colossian passage verse 13. In nailing the record of our offenses to the cross of Christ, God forgives “all” our trespasses. The entire record of an entire life was identified with the work on that cross. Sins before the moment of belief, as well as those following, found their place there. Through centuries unborn God moved His holiness against all of our sins when He cut His Son off from Himself. He gave up His right to punish us for any sin we would ever commit when He punished His Son for them. On this ground, without violating His holiness and decree to punish sin, God has forgiven us. There is a sense in which no Christian needs to come to God to ask forgiveness because when he/she accepted Christ all his/her sins past, present and future were forgiven. However, sin does break our fellowship with God and so Jesus taught us to pray, *“forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* Also, the Apostle John says, *“if we are confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.”* (I John 1:9) God wants us to see our disobedience as sin. We are to see it as He sees it. We are to say the same thing about it as He does. This kind of recognition on our part will restore fellowship which has been broken and bring again the realization that God has been faithful in forgiving our sins. The confession here is not a request for forgiveness. All of our sins were forgiven when we came to the faith.

Scripture does not encourage any believer to feel psychological or emotional guilt because of his shortcomings. On the contrary, we suspect God wants us to be so burdened. The thing is that God knows such guilt will do nothing for one of His children, i.e. nothing worthwhile. It will only serve to promote **thoughts of punishment** (something God never does to a child of His, He chastises with the rod, but never punishes with the sword), give rise to the question of eventual rejection, and bring about a dismal self-image. When these things happen a Christian joins hands with the unbeliever and is driven to deal with his guilt in one way or another. Guilt is one of the most powerful energizers known to man. Sometimes it will drive a person to a life of good deeds in the desire to compensate for wrongdoing. It can cause a person to rationalize about his conduct feeling that circumstances were to blame, or the influence of others, including Satan. The “devil made me do it” theology is very popular. Others try to shake their guilt by indulging even more in their waywardness inflicting a kind of self punishment. These methods do not work. They do more harm than good. Guilt serves no purpose in the life of the Christian, but in the life of the unbeliever, it serves the greatest purpose of all, it drags people down, tears them to pieces, and ties them in knots, so that they will listen to what the Bible has to

say about forgiveness and find it in Christ. In the 10th chapter of Hebrews we have God's answer to guilt. The Old Testament sacrificial system certainly was not the answer. (10:1-2) The answer is in the person and work of Christ whose work causes our hearts to be sprinkled clean from an evil (guilty) conscience. (10:19-22) Verse 17 makes it clear that God dismisses from His mind the memory of every sin which is under the blood of Christ. I do hope we have this straight. God has forgiven us! Glory!

III. THE ENJOYMENT OF CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS - I John 2:1-2

In Revelation 12:10 Satan is called the accuser of the brethren. If it is beyond his ability to take away our salvation, the next best thing for him to do is to make us miserable. He is going to condemn us before the Father and before our own hearts. (I John 3:20) Guilt in the Christian's life has not come from God, it has come from Satan. There is a kind of Godly and constructive sorrow mentioned in II Corinthians 7:9-10 which produces good and lasting results, but it is not an incriminating destructive guilt which causes a believer to feel that God is going to reject him, that he is worthless to God, or that punishment looms on the horizon of his life. Let us be mindful of Satan's tactics. God has come to see us as accepted in "*the beloved.*" Jesus is the "*beloved one.*" (Ephesians 1:6) Guilt should not have a place in our lives as those whom God sees this way.

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