

Guilt



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 3:8–13; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 32; 1 Tim. 4:1, 2; Matt. 26:75; Rom. 8:1.*

Memory Text: “If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (*Psalm 130:3, 4, NIV*).

A sense of guilt is one of the most painful and incapacitating emotional experiences. It may cause shame, fear, sorrow, anger, distress, and even physical illness. Although often unpleasant, these feelings can be used by God to lead sinners to repentance and to the foot of the Cross, where they can find the forgiveness they've been longing for. Sometimes, however, the guilt mechanism makes people feel guilty about something for which they are not responsible, as in the case of some accident survivors or children of divorce.

But when the sense of guilt is justified, it serves as a good conscience. Guilt produces enough discomfort to make the person do something about it. Depending on personal choices, guilt may be highly destructive, as in the case of Judas, or highly positive, as in the case of Peter.

This week we will study four biblical accounts of guilt in order to understand this process better and to see what we can learn about it. We can see how, if properly channeled, guilt can be used by the Lord to our advantage. So much depends, really, on our attitude toward the guilt we feel and what we choose to do with it.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 29.*

Shame

Read Genesis 3:8–13. How did Adam and Eve manifest the guilt they experienced? What especially was bad about Adam’s reaction?

Guilt was the first adverse emotion felt by the human race. Soon after Adam and Eve sinned, their behavior changed. They “hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (*vs. 8, NIV*). This unprecedented reaction indicated fear of their Father and Friend and, at the same time, their shame to face Him. Up until their fall, they had found joy in God’s presence, but now they hid before His approaching. A beautiful bond was broken. In addition to fear and shame, they felt sorrow, especially as they were made aware of the terrible consequences of having disobeyed God.

Notice Adam’s and Eve’s words: “ ‘The woman you put here with me . . .’ ” and “ ‘The serpent deceived me . . .’ ” (*NIV*). Guilt brings about a seemingly automatic reaction to place the blame on somebody else or to justify one’s own behavior with argumentation. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, called this reaction “projection” and argued that people project their guilt on others or on circumstances in order to lighten the burden of guilt. This “projection” is considered a defense mechanism. But blaming others does not work well for interpersonal relationships and poses a barrier to God’s forgiveness. The true solution consists of accepting full responsibility for one’s own actions and seeking the only One who can provide freedom from guilt: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (*Rom. 8:1, NIV*).

Sometimes people suffer from guilt for the wrong reasons. Close relatives to those who commit suicide, survivors of a massive accident or calamity, and children of a recently divorced couple are typical examples of what is, in most instances, unfounded guilt. People in these situations need to be assured that they cannot be held responsible for the behavior of others or for unforeseeable events. And if in certain cases they do have some blame, they must take responsibility for their actions, seek forgiveness from those whom they have hurt, and then hold fast to such Bible promises as: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (*Ps. 103:12, NIV*).

How do you find yourself reacting to guilt? Are you quick, as Adam was, to blame others for your wrong actions? How can you learn to face up to the things you have done wrong and then, through the grace of God, move on?

Joseph's Brothers' Distress

What particular remorse-eliciting memory lingered in the minds of Joseph's brothers? *Gen. 42:21*. What does that tell us about them?

Guilt is associated with a particular occurrence of the past, sometimes an image or a brief event that tends to be replayed mentally. Other times it takes the form of a flashback image that invades one's mind or appears in dreams or nightmares. The image of the adolescent Joseph pleading with his older brothers for his life must have come to Jacob's sons again and again.

How else did guilt affect Joseph's brothers? *Gen. 45:3*.

People affected by guilt think on it repeatedly, lamenting the fact that they did what they did, showing fear for the consequence, and entering into self-blame. Such rumination produces much distress, frustration, and anger at oneself for not having done differently. Unfortunately, no matter how much time is devoted to recalling those thoughts, the past will remain unchanged. Repentance and forgiveness are required. Joseph's noble character emerges, and he offers forgiveness and encourages them to stop being angry at themselves. He assures them that the occurrence of events had to do with God's design to save many lives. The fact that God was able to use their evil action for good doesn't, however, change the fact that they were guilty of a horrible crime.

How would obeying what's in these verses help us deal with guilt? *James 5:16, 1 John 1:9*.

All sins bring pain to the sinner and to God. Many sins also involve other people. Each corner of the triangle (God—Others—Me) needs to be worked out in order to bring a resolution to past wrongdoings. John tells us that God is prepared to forgive and to purify us from unrighteousness. In addition, James tells us to confess sins to each other; we should do this, especially to those whom we've wronged.

Humble confession is the only way to free oneself from guilt. "Your sins may be as mountains before you; but if you humble your heart and confess your sins, trusting in the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour, He will forgive and will cleanse you from all unrighteousness. . . . [The work of His righteousness] is peace, and its effect quietness and assurance forever."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 566. **What do you need to confess in order to experience the promises here?**

Sapped Strength

Read Psalm 32. What does this teach us about guilt and confession? What does David mean by “keeping silent”? What happens when one remains silent? What was David’s solution to his guilt?

Honest confession is good for the soul, and seemingly also for the body. David’s language clearly suggests that his mental state of guilt was causing physical pain, as well: bones wasted away (*vs. 3, NIV*) and strength sapped (*vs. 4, NIV*). Health professionals today recognize the close link between psychological stress and physical maladies. The expression “psychosomatic disease” has been part of the health professionals’ language for decades, and it refers to physical symptoms caused largely by psychological processes. More recently the field of psychoneuroimmunology has identified the key role that mental states play in protecting our bodies from or exposing them to diseases.

Guilt, as does any other strong adverse emotion, causes immediate deterioration in behavior and can, in the long run, destroy physical health. But for those who know the Lord, there is no need of putting themselves at risk.

David’s testimony reveals the antidote for guilt: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you. . . . And you forgave the guilt of my sin” (*vs. 5, NIV*).

Thus, shame, remorse, sadness, and hopelessness caused by guilt can vanish through the Lord’s wonderful forgiveness, and joy and happiness can come instead (*vs. 11*).

Read 1 Timothy 4:1, 2. What does he mean by seared consciences?

Paul forewarned Timothy of individuals who would teach strange doctrines to believers. They would do this because their consciences had been “seared as with a hot iron” (*vs. 2, NIV*). As fire may burn nerve endings and make certain parts of the body insensible, a conscience also may become seared by: (a) repeated violation of correct principles until no sense of wrongness remains and (b) strong environmental influences that cause one to view something wrong with indifference or even as good.

What things that once bothered you now don’t? If so, might that be a seared conscience at work? Try to step back and take a good look at things you do that don’t bother your conscience but perhaps should.

Bitter Weeping

One of the greatest manifestations of guilt appears in **Matthew 26:75**. What made Peter's sense of guilt so great? Have you ever had a similar experience? If so, what did you learn from it that could help you from making a similar mistake?

On two occasions Peter stated his intention to be firm and never to deny the Master. His second affirmation came even after the Lord had predicted that Peter would deny Him three times that very night. Hours later two women identified Peter as one of Jesus' disciples, and he denied the Lord each time. Then a group of servants of the high priest's household identified him, and he exclaimed: "I am not" (*John 18:25, NIV*). Notice that the accusers (minors, females, servants) were considered of low social rank in the context. This must have added to Peter's shame and guilt later on.

The crucial point, however, is that Peter's weeping led to repentance, to a change of heart and to a true conversion, no matter how painful the process itself. Sometimes that's what it takes: we need to see ourselves as we really are, to see what's really in our hearts and what treachery we are capable of—and then we will fall, broken like Peter, before the Lord.

"With blinding tears he [Peter] makes his way to the solitudes of the Garden of Gethsemane and there prostrates himself where he saw his Saviour's prostrate form when the bloody sweat was forced from His pores by His great agony. Peter remembers with remorse that he was asleep when Jesus prayed during those fearful hours. His proud heart breaks, and penitential tears moisten the sods so recently stained with the bloody sweat drops of God's dear Son. He left that garden a converted man. He was ready then to pity the tempted. He was humbled and could sympathize with the weak and erring."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 416.

The first half of the book of Acts provides an unquestionable testimony of Peter's transformation. His preaching and leadership and miracle workings were extraordinary and led to the salvation of many. His work also led to the foundation of the church as the body of Christ. His death, anticipated by Jesus in John 21:18, was received as an honor, for he died in the same manner as his Master.

In what ways have your falls and failures made you more sensitive to the falls and failures of others? How can you learn to minister, out of your pain, to others in theirs?

Total Forgiveness

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1, NKJV). What does this text promise us? How can we make this promise our own?

God’s forgiveness is so great, so deep, and so wide that it is impossible to understand fully. Even the best quality of human forgiveness cannot compare with that of God. He is so perfect, and we are so flawed; and yet, through the provision God Himself provided in Jesus, we all can have full and complete pardon the moment we claim the promises for ourselves in full faith and surrender to the Lord.

Read the three texts below. How do they shed light to help you understand God’s forgiveness?

Ps. 103:12 _____

Isa. 1:18 _____

Mic. 7:19 _____

The Bible uses allegories from the concrete and familiar realms in order to help us understand the meaning of difficult concepts. As far as we can perceive, snow and wool are good examples of whiteness; the depths of the sea are among the deepest places we can imagine; and nothing can be geographically farther apart than east from west. Yet, these are limited allegories of God’s forgiveness.

In the Abbey of Elstow, a stained-glass window portrays an image inspired in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christian, the central character, can be seen kneeling at the foot of the Cross. His heavy burden of guilt is rolling away from his shoulders, bringing ineffable relief to his soul. Christian says: “I saw it no more.” The burden was gone. Its pain, sting, anxiety, and shame disappeared forever. Because of our imperfection, selfishness, and defective relationships, it is very hard for us to understand the perfect and total forgiveness of God. We simply can accept it by faith and pray: “Lord, I humbly confess my sins to You and accept Your pardon and cleansing. Amen.”

How can we be sure our sins are forgiven if we don’t feel that they are forgiven? What reasons do we have to believe we’re forgiven, despite our feelings?

Further Study: “When sin struggles for the mastery in the human heart, when guilt seems to oppress the soul and burden the conscience, when unbelief clouds the mind, who lets in the beams of light? Whose grace is sufficient to subdue sin, and who gives the precious forgiveness and pardons all our sins, expelling the darkness, and making us hopeful and joyful in God?—Jesus, the sin-pardoning Saviour. He is still our Advocate in the courts of heaven; and those whose lives are hid with Christ in God must arise and shine, because the glory of the Lord has risen upon them.”—Ellen G. White, *Bible Training School*, May 1915. “If you have given offense to your friend or neighbor, you are to acknowledge your wrong, and it is his duty freely to forgive you. Then you are to seek the forgiveness of God, because the brother you have wounded is the property of God, and in injuring him you have sinned against his Creator.”—Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, p. 128.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Madame Mao, the wife of the former leader of Communist China, Mao Tse-Tung, lived in constant fear and guilt, all because of many of the bad things she had done. She was so paranoid, in fact, so full of guilt, that any sudden noises, any unexpected sounds, would send her into cold sweats or into a fury. It got so bad that she demanded that her staff keep birds away from her compound so she didn't have to hear them singing. Though an extreme case, what does this tell us about the power of guilt to ruin our lives?
- 2 What advice would you give to someone who is struggling with guilt over past sins, who claims to have accepted Christ and yet still can't get rid of the feelings of guilt? How can you help them?
- 3 In Thursday's lesson the Bible gave us a number of images to describe God's forgiveness. Have class members come up with some of their own metaphors to describe the depth of the forgiveness that is found in Jesus for those who will accept it.
- 4 In a world in which no God existed, could guilt exist? Discuss your answer.
- 5 As we saw this week, God can use guilt to bring us to faith and repentance. Are there any other “benefits” to guilt? If so, what might they be?

Finding a Spiritual Home

Jason Feng grew up in the mountains of Taiwan, off the coast of China. His grandparents were Seventh-day Adventists, but most of the church's handful of members were elderly, and Jason didn't feel that he belonged. His friends attended the larger Protestant church in his area, so he joined them. He became a Sunday School teacher and youth leader.

When Jason was injured in an accident he spent time at home recovering. He was disappointed that no one from the Protestant church came to visit him as custom dictated. But the Adventist pastor came, and he brought Ken, a young ministerial intern. Jason and Ken became friends.

Jason's grandmother noticed Jason's growing friendship with Ken and asked the pastor to hold meetings on Friday in her home. She invited Jason and his family. Out of respect for his grandmother, Jason attended. Even Jason's father attended the meetings, although he didn't go to church on Sabbath.

Ken, the young intern, invited Jason to study the Bible with him, and Jason agreed. Jason's grandmother's Bible study grew, and soon a new congregation of believers formed in the area. Jason joined the new church and felt spiritually fed. He realized that church wasn't a place to just have fun with friends, as he had with his friends in the Protestant church he had attended. He realized that the church provided an opportunity to worship God and study deeply into His Word.

Jason felt a burden to reach out to other young people who had left the Seventh-day Adventist Church and invite them back. He encourages these youth to become leaders in the church that they had once left. Several have returned to the church because of his influence.

Today a new church stands in Jason's village, and the Adventist youth join the 30 or so worshipers in a lively service each Sabbath. During school holidays, the congregation grows as Adventists who have moved away from the area return to celebrate the holidays with their families. Jason and several other youth were baptized into the new Adventist church that has been established in his village. At last he felt at home.

"I find such gratitude and satisfaction when I see people accept Jesus and grow in Christ," Jason says. "I want to do this till Jesus comes."

JASON FENG is preparing to become a pastor or Global Mission worker among his indigenous group in the mountains of Taiwan.