

# Guilt and Man's Response to it

## Introduction:

Guilt is a major problem for the human race. It destroys our peace. It destroys our relationships, both with God and man. Guilt has caused untold misery for people since the time of Adam. It is a universal problem. People all over the world suffer from the miseries of guilt.

Secular psychologists and psychiatrists are trained to help people deal with guilt. Their goal is to help their clients dismiss the guilt from their minds. Often with such secular help, the client does, indeed feel somewhat better about himself.

However, that is not the goal of this booklet.

We do try to help the reader recognize "false guilt" or feelings of guilt that are not the result of wrongdoing. However, other than that our purpose is not to deal with the guilt.

Guilt is our human emotional response to a broken law - or what we perceive as a broken law. Our purpose is not to deal with the emotional guilt response, but to deal with the sin that has caused it. There is no good solution for *guilt* - but the Bible gives us the solution for *sin*. When the sin is dealt with, the guilt will disappear.

The world attempts to deal directly with the guilt. But we need to recognize that true guilt is caused by sin, and sin is what we need to deal with. Guilt is an important emotion, because it helps alert us to sin. Guilt plays a large part in conviction of sin, which is necessary to recognize our need of salvation.

Nearly all religions recognize that man has sinned against his God. Yet Christianity is the only religion that actually deals with that sin.

May each reader find peace and freedom from guilt through God's plan of salvation from sin.

## What is Guilt?

*"Guilt is our response to a broken law."*

Ever since the story of Adam and Eve in the first pages of Genesis, mankind has been struggling with guilt. After they had disobeyed God by eating of the fruit of the forbidden "tree of the knowledge of good and evil", the account says, "**their eyes were opened.**" They

now knew the difference between good and evil, as the account tells us: **“And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil:”** (Gen. 3:22) They had lost their innocence. It cost them peace of mind - “they knew that they were naked.” Before there was a law, their nakedness was no sin, because sin is the transgression of the law. They didn’t know better. But now they were under the moral law. They now knew the difference between good and evil. Guilt is our response to a broken law.

What was our first parents’ response to this guilt? The first response we read of was right and proper. The account tells us that **“they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.”** They were trying to right the wrong. The next response we read of is when they heard God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Their response was to hide from God. A common response to guilt is to hide; to cover up and try to hide the evidence.

We find that when his guilt came to the open and Adam was charged by God, he did not deny his guilt, but neither did he confess it. He put the blame on someone else: “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” Eve was not ready to take full responsibility either: “The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.”

They each felt they had a valid excuse. But God still held each of them responsible. Adam blamed Eve. Yes, Eve was to blame, but that did not in any way justify Adam. Eve blamed the serpent. Yes, the serpent was guilty and would have to bear the consequences. But Adam and Eve were also guilty. They each knew God’s command and they each disobeyed. Pushing the blame to someone else did not justify themselves, it only incriminated more guilty ones. They *all* had to be punished.

Today, it is no different. We can make excuses for ourselves, saying that everyone else does it. But that will not justify us. We know what God would have us do, and if we are disobedient we are guilty regardless if everyone else is guilty.

The Bible is full of stories of guilt. We could go on to Cain and Abel, etc. but let us look at the various ways in which people respond to guilt, and why.

## Man Attempts to Quench Guilt because of Pride and Fear

*“Man will stoop to nearly anything to appear justified - and can often even convince himself.”*

I question whether there is a more powerful force working in the average person today than pride. Our carnal nature wants to look good to those around us, and will stoop to almost any means to accomplish this. When he has done wrong, man will go to any extent to cover it or get out of it. The most important thing on his mind is to “save face”. Either he didn’t do it, or it wasn’t his fault, or it wasn’t wrong because his reason for doing it was good, etc. Man will stoop to nearly anything to appear justified - and can often even

convince himself. Here you see humanity at its worst, most deceptive state. Dealing with guilt in this way results in an irresponsible, miserable life. Following are some ways in which man attempts to quench guilt.

## Dismiss Guilt as a Cultural thing

The world today would like to do away with the idea of guilt as the product of religion and the “notion” of right and wrong. Some of the vilest things are today supported as “alternate lifestyles”, and it is made to look as though those who still look at it as sin are narrow-minded. As Christians, however, we have a point of reference whereby to determine right and wrong. God’s own Word tells us clearly.

## Deny Guilt by Claiming Innocence

There are some who think they are not guilty, because they feel they have lived a life as good as they knew how under the circumstances. This is an illusion of the devil. The Bible tells us that **“all have sinned”**. 1 John 1:10 says: “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” If someone does not feel the necessity of forgiveness by God, it is not because of his own purity, it is because of his poor carnal sight. As an example, we might sweep a floor and say it is clean. But if we were to see that floor through a high powered microscope, we would be startled by the amount of filth, including live bacteria, virus, fungi, and other organisms. In the same way, man’s lack of guilt can be caused by not seeing his own life clearly enough. “Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.” (John 9:41) The Bible tells us that “There is none good but one, that is God.” (Mark 10:18) We are all guilty and we need to face it.

The methods we have looked at above are all destructive ways of dealing with guilt. They destroy the tenderness of our conscience, our honesty, our credibility with others and most of all, they destroy our peace and fellowship with God. Fortunately, however, there is a constructive way to deal with guilt.

## Identifying False Guilt

*“In the case of already confessed sin, we need to transfer our focus from the sin, to God’s plan of salvation from sin.”*

Guilt is the response of our conscience to what we, consciously or subconsciously and correctly or incorrectly, believe to be wrong. Sometimes we need to classify the guilt. Our conscience is not always a reliable guide to determine right and wrong. Our conscience needs to be trained by the Holy Spirit to be depended upon.

Example #1: Someone who has been converted from another religion may feel a sense of guilt long afterward in certain situations. For instance, a former Adventist or Jew might feel guilt about working on Saturday or eating certain meats, even though he knows that Christians are not under the Old Testament law.

Example #2: An individual might feel guilt about something for which he has already made restitution to the best of his ability and confessed to God (and man where it applies) and asked forgiveness.

If the guilt is caused by something for which proper confession and restitution has been made, or something which is not wrong according to the Gospel and moral law, the guilt is not caused by sin, but by a lack of faith in the grace of God or lack of faith in the truth of the Gospel. In the case of guilt feelings caused by the programming of a former religion or beliefs, the answer may be to study the Scriptures to become more deeply rooted in the truth of the Gospel and become more built up in the faith. We need to recognize that this guilt is *not* caused by sin. In the case of sin that has already been confessed and taken care of we need to *transfer our focus from the sin, to God's plan of salvation from sin*. We need to look in faith to God's plan for dealing with sin. We will cover that in more detail later.

## Shifting our Focus from Guilt to the Sin

*"Now, since we have shifted our focus from guilt to sin, we have a cure for it!"*

In the case of guilt caused by unconfessed sin in one's life - this is the valid guilt. This is the real guilt. What can we do about it? Where can we go with it? Guilt can make us miserable. Where can we get relief? The first step is to *acknowledge it as sin*. It is no longer just guilt - we acknowledge it as guilt caused by *sin*. This is important. We cannot deal with it until we acknowledge it as sin.

Now, since we have shifted our focus from guilt to sin, we have a cure for it! Man's solutions for guilt: concealing, denying, deceiving, etc. to avoid it because of pride and fear, are all high stress, difficult methods that, although they may be successful in convincing others that we are not guilty, never really clear the heart. More importantly, they do not clear us in the sight of God. In fact, they compound the problem and the burden gets heavier instead of lighter.

But now that it is not merely guilt but sin, God has given a solution for it:

**"And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin." (1 John 3:5) "... if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:" (1 John 2:1)**

## God's Plan to Deal with Sin

*"After confession, the focus must shift from our sins to **Christ's atonement** for our sins and only then can we have real peace with God."*

Jesus was "**manifested to take away our sins.**" Most religions recognize that man has sinned against His god, and that a god would need to be just and punish for sin. But the Christianity of the Bible is the only religion that actually deals with those sins. Other religions have the sinner sacrifice something, endure pain or humiliation, do good works, etc., in an attempt to appease his god.

What does appeasement have to do with justice? The purpose of appeasement is to pervert justice. Even an honest earthly judge would scorn an attempt to appease him. We can be assured that our just God will not be appeased. Regardless how much God loves and pities the sinner, He cannot simply remove the penalty for sin. The price of our sin will be paid, and it is beyond our ability to pay it.

So God made a provision for us by taking upon Himself the entire debt of sin that we had incurred. To grasp how He did this, let's look at the parable Jesus gave explaining it.

In Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus told the story of a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants<sup>1</sup>. One servant was brought who owed him the equivalent of several million dollars. The sentence of justice was that he, his wife and children and all that he had be sold to make the payment. But when that servant fell down and worshiped his lord, asking for patience, "Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt."

Notice, that for the servant to be free, the lord had to take the entire loss himself that the servant had incurred. That loss could not simply disappear. If the servant didn't take the loss (and he couldn't, because he didn't have the money), he would have to be sold to eternal punishment. The only possible way out is if the lord would take the entire loss himself.

This is the way that it is with our sin. If we cannot make restitution for our sin - somewhere it is on account. If our sin is against God, that is where the debt is. What are you going to do about it? What *can* you do about it?

In the story Jesus told, the lord took upon himself the entire debt that was on the servant's account. He took the whole loss himself - although he was in no way responsible for it. He did it out of compassion for the servant.

In the same way, we have all, like the servant in the story, sinned against our Lord. There was no way that we could pay the penalty for our sins. It is beyond our ability to pay. So God, in Jesus, came into this world, to live as a perfect man, and finally to be condemned

and die for the sins of this fallen race. He was rejected of man and now He was forsaken of God, because sin cannot be in the presence of God. He cried out, **“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”** (Mat. 27:46)

The prophet Isaiah spoke of this: **“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** (Isaiah 53:6)

So the solution is to go to Jesus with the sin, confess it and ask His forgiveness. Also confess, ask forgiveness and make restitution with man where it applies (if it was a sin against man.) James 5:16 says, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.” But remember, confessing to man cannot clear you in the sight of God. As far as making restitution with God - this is impossible. If we realize the sinfulness of our sin and the holiness of God, we can see that it is not possible for us to make amends for sin. Many have tried, either by zealous work for God, or by putting themselves through difficulties, discomforts and humiliation to atone for their sins, but it is not possible. Our only hope is in the supreme sacrifice that has already been offered: that is Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross for our sins. We need to in faith accept Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for our own sins. After confession, *the focus must shift from our sins to **Christ’s atonement** for our sins* and only then can we have real peace with God.

This can be very hard in this day and age, because it requires faith, and I fear we are living in a time that faith does not come easily. Most of us have very little faith, and have a hard time developing faith.

How do we go about to develop our faith in Christ? Let us go back a step further, what is faith? The Bible describes faith as, “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” That is a good answer, but perhaps a bit too simple and brief for us to grasp in this complex time in which we live.

In its simplest form, we might say faith is belief in something. But what is believing? Suppose we were to go to a heathen tribe in Africa and explain the plan of salvation and they would come to love and trust in the Lord and their lives would be completely transformed - they would love and forgive each other, where before they had only hate. We would know even without asking them that they were believers with faith. Now suppose we come back to our own setting, and we explain the plan of salvation to one who has heard the Gospel all his life but was living a carnal life of pleasure, pride and grasping after wealth with no concern for others. “Oh, yes,” he says, “All this have I believed from my youth.” He has read the entire Bible and he can talk intelligently about nearly anything in it. But his life still doesn’t show the power of a heart transformed from serving self to serving God. Is this faith? No. It is merely knowledge.

Faith is not a matter of understanding the words about something. Faith is a heart trust in Christ that lets go of all that is of ourselves and surrenders in trust to Christ for all of righteousness and salvation. It is *to know that Christ is **living within** us in reality!* Colossians 1:27 says: "To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:"

To become a Christian is to accept Christ within our heart. When Christ is really working within us, we become like Him. We do not merely live good moral lives because we want to live like Christians, but because we "have the mind of Christ", we want to do those things that Christ wants to us do. We have a burden for what burdens Him. We look at others as He looks at them. Christ's presence within us *will* change us from the inside out as we allow Him.

Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me." Other religions have their way of life to be attempted in the individual's own strength. In Christianity, our faith is in One who dwells within us, whose motives, desires, and works come through in our own lives. "For it is God which worketh in you *both to will and to do* of his good pleasure." (Phil. 2:13)

What does all this have to do with our faith in God's grace and forgiveness of our sins? In answer, let me quote here part of Romans 8: "What shall we then say to these things? *If God be for us, who can be against us?* He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? **Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.** Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." (Rom. 8:31-34)

If Christ who died for our sins, and is now making intercession for our sins is living within us and the life we are living, we are living through the power of His Spirit, then we are among God's elect, and: "*Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.*"

Jesus "was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." (Rom. 4:25) and "*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*" (Rom. 8:1)

## Turning from Sin to Righteousness

*"This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent."*

How do we obtain righteousness? How do we change from sinners to saints? The apostle to the Romans records Israel's unsuccessful attempt, and why it was unsuccessful: "But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? **Because they sought it not by faith**, but as it were by the works

of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; . . . For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." (Rom. 9:31-32, 10:3) A few verses later, he gives the true solution: "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Rom. 10:13)

Is that not our own weakness today? We too, seek righteousness, but like Israel, too often we do not attain it because we "*sought it not by faith.*"

"True Christianity" says William Law, "Is nothing but the continual dependence upon God through Christ for all life, light, and virtue; and the false religion of Satan is to seek that goodness from any other source. So the true child of God acknowledges that 'no man can receive anything except it be given him from above.'"

Salvation from sin is not salvation in sin. Our salvation does not only include forgiveness of former sins. It includes salvation from our slavery to sin. Many people are enslaved to some besetting sin. It has a hold on them. They put forth all efforts to overcome this sin, they make it a matter of earnest prayer, but they are not released from its bondage. Why?

Because they are only dealing with the sinful act, and that act is not the real problem. The real problem is that their preference is to at least somewhat serve themselves rather than God. Sin is our voluntary preference toward self gratification rather than serving God. Sin is a breach of our commitment to God. That sinful act is a *symptom* of the problem. Instead of asking God to help us overcome the symptom, we need to repent of the underlying problem, surrendering our all to God and ask Him to take control of our hearts.

If we today, like the multitude in John 6:28, would ask Jesus, "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?" Jesus' answer would still be the same: "*This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.*" (V.29)

The first true righteousness that is possible for a sinner, is to repent and make a complete transfer to loyalties and goals from serving self to serving Christ. We may be living good moral lives and doing much good by the power of our own wills, yet this is not the work or righteousness of God. Like Israel, we are following after righteousness but not obtaining it. The reason we are not obtaining it is that we "*sought it not by faith.*" The work of God is that we "*believe on him whom he hath sent.*" Until we do that, all the "good" we do is not real service to God, but only self-righteousness.

Righteousness can only be obtained by the presence of Christ within the heart. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." In contrast, he also wrote, "***But we have the mind of Christ.***" (1 Cor. 3:14,16) This shows the two options: Either we are controlled by our human nature, which is



motivated by selfishness - even in the good it does, or we are motivated by “The mind of Christ” or the Holy Spirit in our heart.

This is beyond following Christ to becoming a part of Christ and having Christ be a part of us. Or “putting on” Christ, as the apostle says: “But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.” (Rom. 13:14) To accomplish this we need to surrender our own wills and desires to what God puts before us. As we do this more and more, we will find that the presence of Christ and His Holy Spirit will continue to be a more present and active part and power in our lives and we will look to Christ for guidance in every aspect of our lives.

In summary then, guilt is the response of our heart to a broken law, or what we perceive as a broken law. Often that law is the instinctive “knowledge of good and evil” that man received in the garden of Eden. Because guilt is a miserable thing to live with, man wants to get rid of it, either by denying it, justifying it, or facing it. Facing it is the only effective solution. Sometimes someone feels guilt when there has been no sin, or even after sin has been confessed and repented of, in which case we need to change our focus from the sin to Christ’s atonement for sin.

If the guilt is caused by unconfessed sin, the only solution to it is to acknowledge and confess the sin, then God has a remedy for it. Jesus, who “was manifested to take away our sin” (1 John 3:5) “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) If we want Jesus to cleanse us from all unrighteousness and live within us we need to surrender our lives to Him, allowing His Will to be accomplished in our lives. We will then be focused on living a life of righteousness (fulfilling His will), rather than simply avoiding sin. May each one of us be able to say with the apostle Paul: **“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”** (Gal. 2:20)

~Glenn Wenger

2003 © Weaverland Publications / 298 Wheat Ridge Ephrata Pennsylvania 17522 / PH: 717-351-0218

---

<sup>i</sup> In this parable, Jesus is showing how God forgives us, so we, too, are responsible to forgive others, by accepting on ourselves the consequences of their sins against us. He makes the point that unless we can do that, we cannot expect to be forgiven of God.