



“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9).

### **The Guilt Trip**

**Central Truth:** Life without guilt takes on a new quality.

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**Topic:** Guilt: Of Sin; Sin: Of Men.

“Fly at once; all is discovered!”

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is reported to have sent that message to twelve famous people. It was intended as a joke, but all twelve were gone within twenty-four hours.

The incident, whether true or not, indicates that no one is completely innocent. “*There is not a just man upon the earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not*” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). It is important, therefore, to study what God says about guilt.

Guilt is a condition; one is guilty before God. Guilt is a feeling; “guilt” is an abbreviation of “feelings of guilt.” It is so uncomfortable that it might be called a disease (a dis-ease, the most miserable of all conditions). Paul Tournier said, “There is no worse suffering than a guilty conscience and certainly none more harmful.” It is the number one cause of mental/emotional disorders today.

It is useless to deny guilt. Each person must deal with it. The Bible speaks on the subject, recognizing its problem and offering a solution. Life without guilt takes on a new and improved quality. This subject is needed and will be helpful today.

## **I. DEFINITION OF GUILT**

**A. Guilt is the feeling of failure toward someone or something outside oneself.** That is a psychological definition. It has been called “the

cutting edge of conscience that is called into action by the dissonance that exists between one's behavior and one's values." That means that a person feels bad because he does not live up to what he knows is right. While those definitions are correct, guilt goes deeper than most psychologists admit.

**B. Guilt is the individual's response to having violated God's holiness.** That is the biblical definition. God has set a standard for human conduct. He has put in the human heart a consciousness of whether or not one lives up to that standard. To fail is to be accused in one's own spirit (Romans 2:15). That inner self-accusation is identified in the Bible as guilt.

Draw a distinction between guilt and anxiety. Anxiety is fear for the future; guilt is dread of the past. The one is concerned about what might be; the other about what has been.

## **II. KINDS OF GUILT**

**A. Social guilt comes because of the violation of some social ethic.** One feels guilty for having failed to thank his hostess, for spilling his drink at an important dinner party, or for not dressing formally for a formal affair. Such guilt is very real and quite disturbing to a person.

**B. Civic guilt comes because the violation of some legal obligation.** It comes from cheating on a tax report, breaking a traffic law, or dealing unfairly with a business associate. It is more serious than social guilt, but not the worst of all.

**C. Spiritual guilt comes because of violation of the law of God.** When some basic spiritual, moral, ethical principle is broken, the person is guilty before God. That is the most serious guilt of all. The discussion which follows will apply to all kinds of guilt, but special emphasis will be put on guilt before God.

## **III. BENEFIT OF GUILT**

Guilt is good when a principle has been violated. Like physical pain, it is a warning that something is wrong. Just as one seeks to remove the cause of pain, so he must seek to remove the cause of guilt. Hence, guilt can lead to purity.

If guilt is ignored, anxiety continues to work. Many physical, mental, and emotional problems are due to unresolved guilt. A Christian psychiatrist said, "Over two thirds of my patients would have no need of my services if they could handle guilt." The benefit of guilt is that it can point to the need for forgiveness and change of life-style.

Dealing with guilt may be painful. One must deal with the cause of guilt, not its symptoms. Otherwise it will sink into the subconscious mind and continue to work. But facing the cause may lead to confessing sin and asking for forgiveness, which some find very difficult to do.

#### IV. PRODUCTS OF UNRESOLVED GUILT

A. Depression accompanies unresolved guilt. A person may feel that God and people are angry with him. David spoke of his burden of guilt: *“My bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer”* (Psalm 32:3, 4). He spoke of the *“bones which thou hast broken”* and of losing *“the joy of thy salvation”* (Psalm 51:8, 12). What relief is felt when the load of depression is lifted by forgiveness.

**B. Rejection accompanies unresolved guilt.** The guilty person will feel that *“all these things are against me”* (Genesis 42:36). His sense of unworthiness may be so great that he questions the affection of members of his immediate family. He may think that God has cast him away. But let him come with a humble and confessing spirit, and he will find that God has not rejected him. His guilt, which has separated him from God, can be forgiven.

**C. Fear accompanies unresolved guilt.** The guilty person knows that punishment is deserved, and he may be convinced that it is coming by some means on some day. He may even see punishment in neutral things. He lives in a state of chronic unhappiness. *“Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness”* (Proverbs 14:13).

**D. Insecurity accompanies unresolved guilt.** The sinner is marked by boredom of spirit, fatigue of body, restlessness of mind, plus mental and emotional illness. The prophet Isaiah said it best: *“The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked”* (Isaiah 57:20, 21).

Why would any person bear the load of depression, rejection, fear, and insecurity caused by guilt when forgiveness is so readily available? Do not rationalize sin, minimize sin, or suppress conviction of sin. Confess it and be free!

#### V. HOW TO HANDLE GUILT

**A. Thank God for guilt.** It is a safety factor, if you respond to it correctly. It is His way of letting you know that something is wrong. He warns you of the problem because He has the remedy. God loves you too

much to permit you to go on in sin. He convicts with feelings of guilt that He might forgive.

**B. Be sorry for guilt.** Of course it works sorrow. But “*godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation*” (II Corinthians 7:10). Remorse is sorrow that one was caught. Repentance is sorrow that one was guilty. Remorse leads to death. Repentance leads to life. Let your sense of guilt lead you to repentance and forgiveness.

**C. Relate the Holy Spirit to your guilt.** He reveals your failure as He convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). If it seems that you are “*cut to the heart*” (Acts 5:33) by His conviction, it is because guilt is so serious. To reject true feelings of guilt is to reject the work of God's own Spirit. Do not resist the Spirit as He leads you to relief.

**D. Remember grace for guilt.** There is our hope. We are not called to salvation by obedience but to salvation in spite of our disobedience. When you feel guilty, confess to God, receive His forgiveness, and be free. David said, “*I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin*” (Psalm 32:5). To every guilty person God promises, “*Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound*” (Romans 5:20). Praise God for His grace!

## VI. DISTINGUISH BETWEEN TRUE AND FALSE GUILT

The question “Why do I feel guilty?” has two answers. (1) One may feel guilty because the Spirit of God convicts him of known sin. (2) One may feel guilty because the devil accuses him of sins already forgiven. Why do you feel guilty?

False guilt may come when you try to live by standards of people about you, for you can never please them all (I Corinthians 4:3, 4). It may arise from the instruction of false teachers who set standards not found in the Bible (I Timothy 4:1-3). It always comes from the accusation of the devil, who sends out seducing spirits to teach demonic doctrines (I Timothy 4:1). He is “*the accuser of our brethren*” and will never give you peace if you listen to him (Revelation 12:10).

Ask these questions when you feel guilty. (1) Can I trace my guilt to some violation of a Bible principle? God convicts of specific sin, not of general behavior. (2) Do feelings of guilt persist after I have confessed my sin? God removes the sin and washes away the stain it leaves (I John 1:9), so there is relief when one is forgiven. True guilt will answer yes to the first question and no to the second. False guilt, the accusation of Satan, answers

no to the first and yes to the second.

Respond to conviction by the Holy Spirit with confession and reformation. Respond to Satan's accusations with affirmations of faith and rejection of his lies. Then you will be free from feelings of guilt.

## **VII. END OF GUILT**

Forgiveness is the precious word that signifies the end of guilt. Of the 14,338 words in the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, the sweetest is forgiveness. It is the theme of redeemed saints as they think of their blessed Savior (Revelation 1:5). It is the report of history as God dealt with His people (Psalm 78:38). It is the testimony of the guilty who bring their sins to God (Psalm 32:1-5). It is the experience you will have as you come through Jesus Christ today.

Think about God's gracious offer. *"The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. . . . If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (I John 1:7, 9).

God uses many illustrations to speak of His forgiving us. He told of a son who rejected his father and deserted his home. When the son returned in a repentant spirit, he was received and restored with joy (Luke 15:11-32). He showed how a religious leader who was scandalized by public and violent sin was reclaimed and made a spokesman for God (John 21:1-19). He told of a criminal who, though he broke the laws of the land and was condemned to die, was graciously forgiven and received into paradise (Luke 23:39-43). He spoke of a person who violated the laws of moral virtue but was forgiven freely and told to go and sin no more (John 8:3-11). Thank God that the guilty can be freed.

Guilt must be resolved. God's law is, "Confess or be punished." He has set us free in Christ, and we are in Christ by repentance from sin and personal faith in Him. Take all your guilt to God. Tell Him the truth about yourself. Ask His forgiveness. The past will be blotted out, forgiven and forgotten, as though it had never been. That is the end of guilt. Glory!

## **Questions**

1. How do you define guilt?

2. Why does every person have to deal with guilt?
3. Why is spiritual guilt the most serious kind of all?
4. In what way can guilt be helpful?
5. What happens if one does not resolve his guilt?
6. How is repentance related to guilt?
7. What does Psalm 32:3-5 reveal about guilt?
8. How do you distinguish between true and false guilt?
9. How is guilt ended according to I John 1:9?
10. How does forgiveness stand in contrast to guilt?