

Dealing with
Guilt

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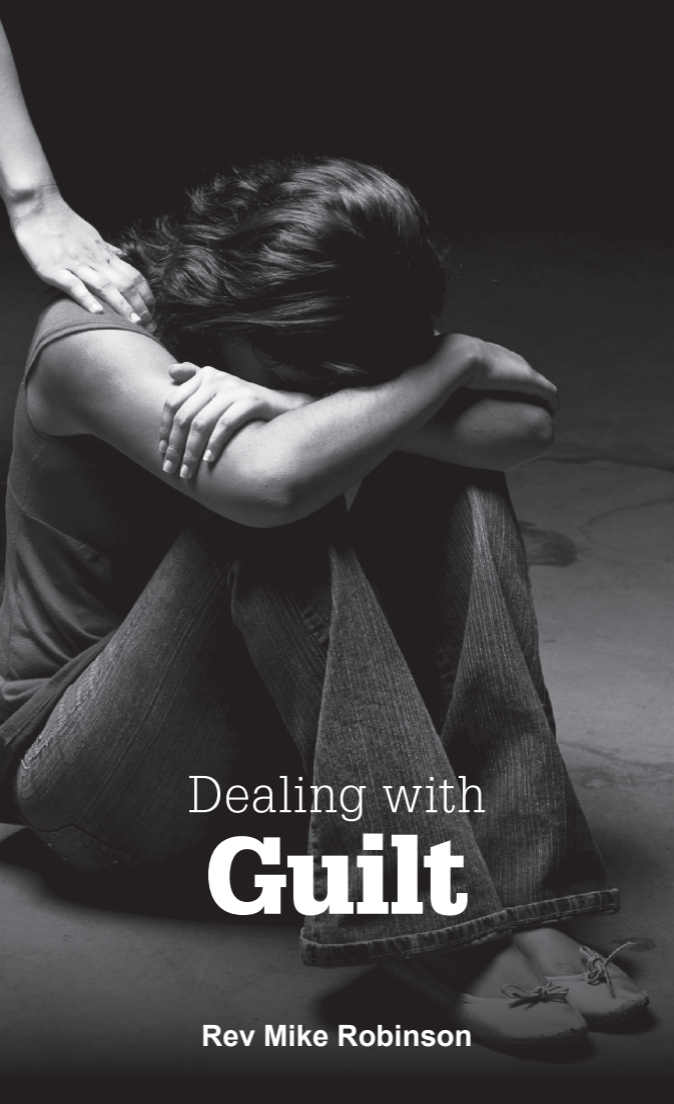
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INTRODUCTION

Emily was a very happy and loving mother. Each afternoon she waited at the school gate for her 6 year old daughter, Samantha. One day she was distracted by an urgent call on her mobile phone. Caught up in the urgency of the message she was hearing, she was only vaguely aware of Samantha saying, 'Mummy, can I cross the road now?'

In her state of pre-occupation, Emily absent-mindedly said, 'Yes.' The next 5 seconds changed her life forever. The screech of tyres... the cries of other mothers... the sickening thud as flesh and metal collided.

From that day to this, Samantha has been bound to a wheel chair. Emily is so very grateful that she still has a daughter. But she continues to battle with a relentless sense of guilt as she lives in the prison of the 'What if' and the 'If only'.

There are few emotions that can enslave us like unresolved guilt is able to do. Could it be said that followers of Jesus Christ often feel the emotion of guilt even more than other people? Thank God that it can be dealt with through Jesus Christ!

A DEFINITION

How would you define guilt? It is something we all feel from time to time but it is not easy to define. Here is one definition: Guilt is feelings of

personal disapproval when we violate our inner code of ethics and/or conduct.

This definition can apply to all people – religious or not – who embrace any kind of value system or belief system that identifies words, actions or attitudes that are either right or wrong. Such a value system will vary from person to person. What is wrong for one person may be perfectly acceptable to another – depending on the factors or conditioning that has determined that person's values and beliefs.

Those 'feelings of personal disapproval' may vary in their impact from a vague uneasiness to a crushing, soul-destroying sense of serious failure.

A classic Biblical example of the impact that guilt can have is found in the story of King David. Following his adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah (which David had engineered), he went through a season of deep guilt. Here's what he wrote about that time in his life:

'When I refused to confess my sin, I was weak and miserable, and I groaned all day long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.' (Psalm 32:3-4 NLT)

Some scholars believe that this time of guilt-induced stress lasted about 12 months before

David was prepared to face his guilt and acknowledge that what he had done was a transgression of his values and beliefs as found in his relationship with God. Finally, he broke through to the confession of his transgression and found great relief and release.

Psalm 32:5 (also vs. 1, 2 NLT) *'Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the LORD.' And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. Oh, what joy for those whose rebellion is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the LORD has cleared of sin, whose lives are lived in complete honesty!'*

Given the impact guilt can have upon our lives, let's now explore some of the key dimensions of this powerful emotion.

GUILT – FRIEND OR FOE?

It's not true to say that every form of guilt is necessarily unhealthy. Genuine guilt that leads to confession and repentance and a new beginning can be quite positive in its effects. Think of it this way; not all physical pain is desirable but, if it alerts us to some malfunction in our bodies, that pain may be exactly what is needed to save us from further damage. In fact, we might go so far as to say that pain can be a gift if it keeps us from further harm. Guilt, likewise, can be a gift

if it leads to the positive results of forgiveness and freedom.

However, while not all guilt is necessarily bad, there is a guilt that is very unhealthy and destructive. This kind of guilt is a pseudo guilt that sabotages lives, wrecks relationships and is a harsh taskmaster. It is unreasonable, unjust and unappeasable. The nature of guilt is determined by its source.

It is very important that we learn to distinguish between what we might call “appropriate guilt” – that which should be present in a given set of circumstances - and “pseudo guilt” – that which is false and inappropriate for that particular situation.

So, the question is, ‘What are the possible sources of our sense of guilt?’

THREE SOURCES OF GUILT

A psychologist or a psychiatrist might point to a wide range of sources or causes in answer to our question. We are nominating just three sources and these three have often been the experience of many, many Christian believers over the years.

A. GOD – THE CONVICTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

The Bible presents God as holy, just and righteous. In the Old Testament He is the one

who gave the Ten Commandments and the associated laws or principles for living life to the full. These laws were designed for our protection; not to restrict and limit us in ways that would take the joy and fulfillment out of living. The people of God were called to a life of loving obedience and blessing. However, there was always the potential for them to choose disobedience and to live selfishly.

Similarly in the New Testament we are called to live in conformity to the will of God but to do so in the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to bring to our attention those attitudes and actions that do not align with God's holy purpose for our lives. Jesus explained it like this:

'But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. When He comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.' (John 16:7-11 NIV)

When the Holy Spirit convicts us we feel a sense of guilt that is appropriate. In fact, if we didn't feel convicted, there would be something

terribly wrong. But remember this: the Holy Spirit's conviction is not meant to crush us but to lead us to the place of confession, God's forgiveness and a fresh start.

B. SELF – THE CONSCIENCE OF THE PERSON

Our conscience is a kind of 'moral monitor' that can either encourage us when we do right or accuse us when we do wrong. A sensitive and informed conscience can be the experience of any human being – religious or not.

Conscience should never be ignored but neither is it infallible as a moral guide. Conscience can fail us at 2 extremes:

- It can be an over-sensitive, poorly informed conscience that produces a false, inaccurate and inappropriate guilt. E.g. setting impossible goals and failing to achieve them?
- It can be what the Bible calls a 'seared' conscience – 1 Timothy 4:1, 2

'The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.'

How can a conscience become 'seared'? The imagery here is of a person who has so ignored the warnings of 'the voice of conscience' that

they have become de-sensitised and cut off from their conscience; like would happen in the physical realm if someone was to take a red-hot branding iron and apply it to their body. After a time that part of the body would most likely lose all sense of feeling.

C. SATAN – THE CONDEMNATION OF THE DEVIL

In Revelation 12:10, 11 the devil is referred to as the one who accuses believers. It is important that we learn the difference between the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the condemnation of Satan:

- *The Holy Spirit convicts with a view to repentance and restoration.*
- The devil condemns with a view to bondage and destruction.
- *The conviction of the Holy Spirit is precise, specific and clear.*
- The devil's condemnation is vague and shadowy.

DEALING WITH FALSE GUILT

Sometimes people become the victims of guilt feelings that are unreasonable and inappropriate. To determine if those feelings of guilt are legitimate, here are a few questions to be asked in 3 key areas.

- **Our Emotions** – ‘I feel guilty, so I must be guilty.’ Not necessarily. Such self-condemnation may be the result of unfair self-judgment or, more likely, demonic insinuation.
- **Our Intellect** – Is my guilt reasonable? Was the situation out of my control? (e.g. Genetic malfunction that led to the birth of a deformed child)
- **Our Will** – What was my intention? Did I mean or plan for this to happen? Was the situation the result of human error or willful choice?

While the answer to these questions doesn't guarantee a resolution of false guilt, the questions may help the person struggling with false guilt to more accurately assess their situation.

THE RESOLUTION OF REAL GUILT

What about ‘real’ or ‘appropriate’ guilt? Left unresolved, even legitimate guilt can have negative consequences. How should we respond to those guilty feelings that can plague us at times?

- Test your feelings of guilt against the Scriptures. If it is clear that you have sinned against God and your relationship with Him, take the next step which is....
- Recognize the full and perfect provision that God has made for your forgiveness and restoration.

- Walk the path of confession and repentance so that you can receive God's forgiveness.
1 John 1:9 *'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.'*

This is a great verse to memorise. Even after we have confessed our guilt and experienced the joy of forgiveness, the devil will often try to bring us down with a sense of condemnation. It is at such times that we can quote the truth of God's Word (like this verse) and expose his strategy of condemnation.

If your transgression involves having wronged another person, acknowledge that fact to the person concerned and seek their forgiveness.

FINALLY.....

Take a few moments to reflect upon these verses from Romans. Note the sequence. What do they tell you about the resolution of guilt?

Romans 5:1 *'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.'*

Romans 8:1 *'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.'*

Romans 12:1 *'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship.'*

A PRAYER

Whether you are already a Christian or someone who is seeking to know the reality of God in your life, here is a prayer that may express what is in your heart at this moment:

Loving Lord, I come to you and acknowledge that I have sinned against you. I confess that I have thought, spoken and acted in ways that have grieved you, hurt others and betrayed myself. I admit that I am guilty.

But you are a God who is rich in mercy and forgiveness. I thank you that Jesus died and rose from death so that I could be forgiven. I now receive your forgiveness and I thank you that not only am I forgiven but the guilt of my sin is now removed.

I thank you in Jesus' Name,

Amen

If you have expressed that prayer from your heart or you would like more information, then we would be delighted to hear from you.

HOW TO RECEIVE JESUS AS YOUR SAVIOUR

If God has been speaking to you as you have read this booklet and if you are willing now to take Jesus Christ as your Saviour, here is what you should do:

Confess – tell God in your own simple words that you are a sinner, needing a Saviour. (Read Romans 3:23)

Accept – tell God that you see Jesus Christ your only Saviour and will accept Him now. (Read Romans 6:23)

Believe – that Jesus Christ has saved you because you asked Him to do so. (Read Romans 10:13)

If you have made this decision today then sign your name here and tell someone else what you have done. Join a church where you can hear God's Word preached and have fellowship with other believers.

I acknowledge myself to be a sinner in God's sight.

I accept Jesus Christ now as my Saviour.

I thank Him for saving me.

Date _____/_____/_____

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