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## Gnawing Guilt

The only restorative for a guilty conscience  
is a sight of Jesus suffering on the cross.

~Charles Spurgeon

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

~Isaiah 55:7



# NINE

## Gnawing Guilt!

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The 1970's tear-jerker, *Love Story*, claimed to provide the key to living a guilt-free life of true love and happiness: "Love means never having to say you're sorry." For the Christian who understands the God of love took our guilt and nailed it to a cross, nothing could be further from the truth!

For far too many in our world today, a sense of guilt is as underdeveloped as it is unappreciated. The world tells us that a guilty conscience leads to a life of low self-esteem, and low self-esteem leads to a sense of desperation, depression, and a defeated life. The world says, "A guilt trip is not a trip I ever want to take!" Yet the presence of God and His Holy Word does just that. It sends us on a *guilt trip* to the cross on Golgotha's Hill where we find forgiveness for our sins, reconciliation to our God, and the strength to go on.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16)

As with most major life issues the world misses the mark time and time again. They are focused on guilt when they should be focused on the sin that produces it. Getting rid of guilt is like putting a band aid on the Titanic.

So, what is this thing called guilt? The dictionary definition of guilt is a feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime, wrong, etc., whether real or imagined. The biblical definition of guilt involves three elements: responsibility, blameworthiness, and the obligation to make good through punishment or compensation.<sup>1</sup>

Adam and Eve were the first to experience guilt. They offended a holy and righteous God, and they knew it deep down in the fabric of their being. Their conscience convicted them of their sin and how far short they had fallen from the standard God had set before them. They stood guilty before the judgment seat of the Most High God. To be sure, there is a good guilt and a bad "GNAWING" guilt, and we will unpack both in this section.

## GOOD GUILT

God has given each person an internal compass that allows us to draw the distinction between what is right and what is wrong, between what is good and what is evil. When we violate the standard God has set, we feel guilty.

In 2 Timothy 3:16 we saw that God's Word is profitable for teaching and training in righteousness, but it is also profitable for reproof and correction. In other words, guilt is profitable in the hands of the Redeemer. There is a good guilt. Rather than pulling us down as many believe, it lifts us up and puts us back on track in our walk with Jesus. It is a sense of guilt that comes from the prompting of the Holy Spirit that pricks the conscience and drives us to the cross with a heart of repentance toward God and reconciliation toward all those we have wronged. This is a good and godly guilt that is an instrument of sanctification in the hands of God. It was promised by Jesus in the person and work of the Holy Spirit:

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me. (John 16:7-9)

David knew this kind of guilt when he was confronted by the prophet Nathan after his sin with Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. (Psalm 51:1-4)

Peter also knew this kind of guilt after he had denied his Lord three times on the night He was betrayed, just as Jesus predicted.

Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

(Matthew 26:74-75)

A sense of guilt for having offended God that drives you to the cross to be washed clean in the blood of the Lamb is *good* guilt. It is rooted in the understanding of the Gospel that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), but because of what Jesus has done on the cross the law no longer condemns and stands in judgment over us.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13-14)

One of the most beautiful pictures of good guilt is found in the story of the parable of the prodigal son. His sense of guilt drove him to his senses and back to his father. And what did he find at the end of his journey home?

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:17-24)

This son was driven by his guilt to the only place he could go to find forgiveness and wholeness: to the Father. The law, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, was designed to drive us to the cross work of Jesus. This is the language of good guilt, which is lifted up to the Lord in repentance and laid down at the foot of the cross in reconciliation.

But there is a bad, or “false”, guilt that cuts us off from the flow of God’s blessings.

## **GNAWING GUILT**

Before he was the great reformer, Martin Luther the monk, lived with a sense of gnawing guilt. He would spend hours each day confessing his sins . . . every one he could possibly think of! One of his confessors said to Luther, “God is not angry with you, my son. It is you who are angry with God.”

Luther's gnawing sense of guilt demonstrated a heart that was beating in fear for God—not faith. Millions of Christians live this kind of guilt-ridden life each and every day, guilt inherited from parents, teachers, coaches, society . . . and sadly, the church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer identifies guilt as one of the most difficult idols from which to rid ourselves. We believe if we hang on to guilt long enough we will finally get right with God. We equate our right standing before God with the depth of our gnawing guilt. If we don't feel guilty enough, God surely will not receive us back into His good graces. This notion smells like smoke and comes from the pit of hell, as my friend Steve Brown likes to say. You will remember in our chapter on repentance we talked about a man-centered repentance that was not unto God. The same is true of guilt. Far too much guilt is man-centered, not God-centered.

Gnawing, man-centered guilt causes us to live in the past, rather than learn from the past by dealing with the past appropriately. We have seen the instruction of 2 Corinthians 7:10—"Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." Gnawing guilt keeps our focus in the wrong place. It keeps us focused on ourselves, rather than on God and those we have offended. Gnawing, man centered guilt is more concerned about *feeling* guilty, rather than the fact that we are, indeed, guilty! Gnawing guilt leads to death, not life.

Gnawing guilt denies what Jesus has done for us on the cross. It denies the reality of our union with Him. It causes us to live a life of fear because of what we have done rather than faith because of what Jesus has done on our behalf. It is the place Satan wants every Christian man to live in. Instead of living out of the reality of having been delivered from the reign of sin and into the reign of our Savior, we live paralyzed lives, devoid of the power of the Gospel. Gnawing guilt distorts and denies the fact that we are dead to sin and alive to Christ, forever keeping us trapped in a past marked by sin and disobedience.

Gnawing guilt is the clear and present evidence of a heart devoid of faith and trust in Jesus. When He cried out "It is finished!" as He hung on the cross, He meant what He said! Every—sin, past, present, and still to come—was paid for by Jesus. You cannot pay a debt that has already been paid, and that is exactly what gnawing guilt is attempting to do. God is not moved by a guilt-ridden conscience that drives us into the depths of despair. Those who believe this are attempting to broker God's favor by the degree and duration of their guilt and remorse. Guilt for them becomes a *good work* . . . a "good work" that is never done and never amounts to more than filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). It is a

constant *striving* without ever arriving. It is living life on the performance treadmill, as we have spoken about earlier in this program. Those who thrive on a sense of gnawing guilt are attempting to earn from God what Christ has already earned for them on the cross: forgiveness, pardon, reconciliation with God, and eternal life, where one day there will be no more tears, sorrow, pain, or GUILT!

Gnawing guilt not only hurts the one who is living under its infinite weight, it hurts all those who live with them. The guilt-ridden conscience increases duty without devotion, seeking worthiness through work. These individuals become beasts of burden and so does everyone around them. They infect everyone with a sense of guilt, where joy and gladness is as far as the east is from the west. For every request they feel compelled to say 'YES,' simply to ease their burden of gnawing guilt. "No" is simply not an option, as they *work* to try to gain the approval and affection of God that they have already been given in Christ.

Gnawing guilt keeps us living like orphans, rather than dearly loved children of the Most High God.

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:18)

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. (Ephesians 5:1)

It is because we are His children that we can rise above the kind of guilt that keeps us from growing up and moving forward in life. That is why we must continually remind ourselves of what Jesus had done for us. That is why we must preach the Gospel to ourselves every day. When we do, we are empowered to live out the truth of Isaiah 6:7.

And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Charles Spurgeon had much to say on the subject of guilt, words which have been a great source of comfort for me over the years.

We are now—even now pardoned; even now are our sins put away; even now we stand in the sight of God accepted, as though we had never been guilty. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." There is not a sin in the Book of God, even now, against one of His people. Who dareth to lay anything to their charge? There is neither speck, nor spot, nor wrinkle, nor any such thing remaining upon any one believer in the matter

of justification in the sight of the Judge of all the earth. Let present privilege awaken us to present duty, and now, while life lasts, let us spend and be spent for our sweet Lord Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

The sin Jesus paid for with His death on the cross, also paid for the guilt that goes along with it. Good guilt keeps us living in the shadow and strength of the cross. Good guilt keeps us plugged into the power source of a godly sorrow that leads to repentance that leads to life that leads to unimaginable joy. When Paul identified himself as the “chief” sinner he was making it clear that he was guilty as charged. Yet it was his understanding of the Gospel and the overwhelming love of God, through Jesus Christ, that empowered him to acknowledge his guilt and to get back up and get on with the life God was calling him to live.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

As Pastor Tullian is fond of saying, “Jesus plus nothing equals everything.” It’s NOT Jesus plus guilt! We must remember that God is pleased with us—not because of our atonement, but rather because of the fully atoning work of Christ on our behalf. Every child of God would agree with this statement, but guilt-ridden Christians find it impossible to embrace it and live it out. Because perfection will not happen until we are received into glory, we need to look to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. In His perfection, He took all of our sin, shame, and guilt and crucified it once and for all (Romans 6:10). NEVER FORGET THAT . . . AMEN!

1. Orr, James, M.A., D.D. General Editor. "Definition for 'GUILT'". "International Standard Bible Encyclopedia". [bible-history.com](http://bible-history.com) - ISBE; 1915.

2. Charles Spurgeon, Morning and Evening, Hendrickson Publisher, May 15 Morning, 272



## BROTHER TO BROTHER

1. Please rate yourself in the area of good guilt. (1 = a low amount; 5 = a high amount)

1      2      3      4      5

2. Please rate yourself in the area of gnawing guilt. (1 = a low amount; 5 = a high amount)

1      2      3      4      5

3. The presence of God and His Holy Word sends us on a *guilt trip* to the cross on Golgotha's Hill? Do you agree or disagree? Why does it do this?

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4. Consider 1 John 1:9—"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Why is this verse important to remember when it comes to effectively dealing with gnawing guilt? Please explain

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5. Does gnawing guilt hurt only the person trapped in it? Or is the impact even larger than on just the individual?

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6. Is there anyone in your life who seems to be trapped in gnawing guilt? If yes, why do you think this is happening to them? How can you help them?

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7. What one change would you need to make to rid yourself of gnawing guilt? Is it worth the effort?

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