

LEARNING FROM LIFE'S PROBLEMS #1 - GUILT

The handwriting was shaky - probably coming from the hand of an older person. The letter addressed to the U.S Government written on lined notebook paper said simply: *I am sending \$10 for blankets I stole in W.W. 2. My mind could not rest. Sorry I'm so late. Signed, An ex-GI. P.S. I want to be ready to meet God.*

There has been so much money sent by people with guilty consciences to our government that a Conscience Fund has been set up to accommodate all of it. An average of \$45,000 a year is received. The largest amount received was in 1950 when people with guilty consciences sent in \$350,000.

Some amounts are very small. One Colorado woman sent in 8 cents because she used an 8 cent stamp twice. She had noticed that an 8 cent stamp had not been cancelled on her envelope so she cut it out and used it again - and her conscience was bothering her.

A Salem, Ohio man submitted a dollar bill with the following note: *As a boy, I put a few pennies on the railroad track so that the train could flatten them. I also used a dime and a quarter in a silver-coating experiment in high school. I have since learned that there is a law against defacing our money, so here is a dollar to cover the money I have destroyed.*

Not every letter is from citizens of our country. One man writing from Brazil recently sent \$50 to cover the cost of some boots, pants and a case of K rations that he had stolen from the army between 1943 and 1946.

My personal favorite is a letter written recently addressed to the IRS. In the envelope was \$150 in cash. The anonymous letter accompanying the money said, *I haven't been able to sleep nights because last year, when I filed my income tax form, I deliberately misrepresented my income. I should have paid about \$1,200 more in taxes. I have enclosed \$150. If I still can't sleep, I will send you more money.*

A guilty conscience is a horrible thing, isn't it? It's a nagging, continual source of irritation. Oh, there are times when we can drown out the silent voice in the busyness of a day's activities, but when we are alone or at night, that incessant voice just keeps coming back. *You have done wrong. You have sinned.* The longer I live my own life and deal with people and their personal problems, the more I have become convinced that one of the most basic root problems in many people's lives is a guilty conscience.

Now people deal with their guilty consciences in many different ways.

\*Some become very judgmental and accusatory of others. They seem to feel if they can find enough wrong in others, they will feel better by comparison. You probably will remember King David's response when the prophet Nathan told him that story about the rich man who had stolen a favorite sheep from his

poor neighbor. David's strong overreaction revealed his own guilty conscience that the prophet would then address.

\*Others deal with their guilty consciences by imposing some kind of penance on themselves. They try to make their consciences feel better through self-inflicted suffering because they feel inside that they deserve to suffer for the wrongs that they have committed. I believe that many people enjoy some degree of inner suffering simply because it makes their guilty consciences feel better. Like the prophets of Baal in Elijah's day who cut and slashed themselves, they feel more righteous when they are in some degree of pain.

\*By far the majority of people in our world today try to cope with their guilty consciences by trying to deny their guilt as a figment of their imagination. In a day when relative truth reigns, they just keep telling themselves over and over again that what they did really wasn't wrong. The guilt that they are feeling is false guilt. They made the best decision that they could make at the time. In these days of situational ethics, there is no real standard of right and wrong, they tell themselves consolingly. God predicted that the majority would take this moral road in the last days. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, *The Spirit clearly says that in the 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. 1 Tim. 4:1,2.* There are many in our world today who have consciences that have been seared as with a hot iron. They seem to have the ability to perform even the most wicked and hideous of all acts without seeming to have any remorse.

But God never intended for us to deal with our guilty consciences by trying to deny the reality of our sin. For the nagging doubt of wrong still lingers. And this road opens the door to all kinds of wicked and vile acts.

I believe that we must begin to learn life lessons from guilt in our lives by seeing our guilt from a divine perspective - as a good thing. You see, when most people hear the word *guilt* a negative connotation immediately comes into their minds. Guilt brings bad feelings; guilt brings inner pain and discomfort; guilt brings feelings of unworthiness and shame; therefore, guilt must be bad, something to be avoided and denied and rejected.

But we must realize that God created us with the capacity to feel guilt. As human beings, we have been created with the capacity to feel guilt when we do wrong. Animals do not have this same moral sensitivity. A dog does not feel inner guilt when it slips out of the house for a night of immoral carousing on the town. A bird does not feel inner guilt when it flies over a car pulling out of a car wash and messes up the clean hood. The moles out under the front lawn of the church don't feel inner guilt as they burrow their tunnels, killing the grass, causing added expense to the church's budget. Now domestic animals can

sometimes look like they are embarrassed or shamed when they sense the displeasure of their owners, but generally speaking those of the animal kingdom act following their instincts, without a sense of moral right or wrong.

But it is different with people, isn't it? Each of us has a conscience which acts as an inner judge to rule on the morality of each of our actions. When we violate that conscience, we have an inner sense that we have done wrong and we feel badly about it. Now our consciences are not the infallible judges of our actions, for our consciences have been twisted and perverted by our sinful natures just like the rest of us. But our consciences are an important, God-given resource for our overall emotional and physical and spiritual health.

Our consciences are to our soul what our nerve-endings are to our bodies. We might call the conscience the nerve of the soul. Our nerves tell our bodies when there is danger about. When our hand is placed on a hot stove, the nerves scream at us to remove the hand immediately. If we didn't have nerve-endings in our fingers, none of us would have any fingers left. For we would all have gotten them burned off or cut off or eaten off. In spite of the pain that we suffer because of the nerve-endings in our fingers, we are all thankful for them, for they are a means of protection for us against greater damage.

Now the blessing that our nerves are to our bodies is similar to the blessing that our consciences are to our souls. Sin has the potential to inflict mortal damage to us. Sinful practices have the potential to enslave us. When our consciences protest, this is God's way of warning us of danger. So feelings of guilt are good - they have been given by God as a protective resource to us.

But having done their God-given job, feelings of guilt can become a heavy burden to us. Nobody wants to live their lives with a nagging conscience. Nobody wants to live their lives with continual feelings of shame. Nobody wants to live their lives with perpetual inner unrest. If feelings of guilt have been given by God, we need to know the provision that He also has given to us to relieve feelings of guilt so that we can know inner peace and contentment again.

In Psalm 38, we have an example of a person who was suffering from a guilty conscience. The Psalmist writes in verse 4, *My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.*

We believe that David was the author of this Psalm. His name is in the inscription. We do not, though, have much of a clue as to the occasion of its writing. David had committed some sin that had brought a burden of guilt into his life - a burden that was too heavy for him to bear. This Psalm is not traditionally linked to David's great sin with Bathsheba like Psalms 32 and 51 were, but this could be the occasion of this Psalm. Was it after his sin of numbering the people late in his life when 70,000 innocent people died in the plague that resulted when he composed this Psalm? Was it after some other more secret

sin that is not recorded in the bible that David wrote it? We simply don't know for sure. But perhaps it is best for the silence in the Bible on this point allows us to see this in a general sense as applying to feelings of guilt universally rather than in a specific case.

The strain of these guilt feelings on David is obvious throughout this Psalm:

\*He begins with his sense of alienation from God in verse 1. *O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.* David felt that God was angry with him. This is always the case when our consciences rebuke us. The conscience's job is to detect moral failures in our life. When we feel guilt, we sense that we have done wrong, that we have failed to maintain God's standards, that we have let God down. It is only natural that we would feel that God is angry with us, that He is upset with our behavior, that He even doesn't love us or even like us anymore. Now it is important for us to realize that our consciences don't always accurately reflect reality. Just because we feel that God doesn't love us doesn't mean that He has stopped loving us. But that is how we feel when our consciences accuse us, isn't it?

\*Notice, David goes on to speak of the effect that his guilt had on him physically.

*\*there is no health in my body; my bones have no soundness because of my sin 38:3*

*\*My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly. 38:5*

*\*My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart 38:7,8*

*\*My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes 38:10*

*\*For I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me 38:17*

There can be no question that David's guilt was taking a severe toll on him physically. He was suffering physical symptoms that were being caused by guilt in his life.

Now it is important that we realize that while all sickness is the result of sin in general, not all physical ailments that we personally suffer are the result of sins we commit and the guilt that we suffer for those sins. There are germs that are spread through the air all around us. We can catch a virus and get sick whether we sin or not. We all have physical handicaps that we bear. We can have poor eyesight or a bad back or an arthritic condition whether we sin or not. Before sin entered the world, there was no sickness or suffering. But now, in a world that has been tainted with sin, germs and diseases and handicaps are all around us. Not all illness is due to personal sins that we commit. Even good people get sick and eventually die.

But having said that - one of the symptoms of a guilty conscience is often found in physical illness. And sometimes illness just comes as a natural consequence to a guilty conscience. A person with a guilty conscience often has difficulty sleeping at nights and is filled with anxiety. As a result of the insomnia, the

body eventually wears down, becoming more susceptible to physical ailments. And physicians are finding more and more evidence today for the relationship between tension and stress and anxiety and physical diseases and ailments.

\*David moves on from his physical ailments to his emotional state of depression.

*I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. 38:6*

*I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart 38:8*

Now again, it is important for us to realize that not all depression comes as a result of guilt in our lives. There are many reasons for depression. There is a depression that comes after emotionally high experiences in life that is just part of the natural ups and downs that we have. Elijah illustrated this after the Mt. Carmel victory. There is a depression that comes with physical illness like that which Job had. There are depressions that can result from hereditary disposition or chemical imbalances in our bodies. There are many causes for the depressions that we feel - and that is the reason for us spending an entire time on this topic later.

But when we are harboring guilt in our lives, one of the symptoms is often depression - and David speaks of his feelings of despair in this Psalm.

\*Then David moves on from his emotional struggles to his social struggles as well.

*My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away 38:11*

It is interesting that David begins the Psalm by speaking of his feelings of alienation from God, but he now gets to his feelings of alienation from his friends and neighbors as well. Inner guilt causes people to not feel comfortable with themselves. When we are not comfortable with ourselves, we are not going to be free to be comfortable with others either. So inner struggles that we have naturally affect every aspect of our lives - even our social lives.

Well, we all recognize the reality of guilt feelings in our life because we have all felt them. We all have experienced what guilt does in our relationship with God, our own selves and others. And we all realize that it is better not to live with guilt. But how do we get rid of guilt in our lives? How can we be free from this burden that often becomes too heavy for us to bear?

Notice the solution that David gives to us in the final verses of this Psalm.

READ Psalm 38:18-22:

*I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin. Many are those who are my vigorous enemies; those who hate me without reason are numerous. Those who repay my good with evil slander me when I pursue what is good. O Lord, do not forsake me; be not far from me, O my God. Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Savior.*

I would invite you to note 3 steps that David took to relieve his guilt very quickly as we close.

1. He recognized that the source of his guilt feelings was sin and he confessed that sin to the Lord.

The word *confess* literally means to say the same thing or agree with. We have a colloquial expression - *tell it like it is*. That's what the word *confess* means in the bible.

You see, our natural tendency when we sin is to cover our sin. We are ashamed of our action; we are disappointed in ourselves for doing it; we are afraid of what God will think of us. So we naturally try to hide our sin or deny our sin or run from our sin. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, their first response was not to meet God when He came to walk with them in the cool of the evening and tell Him all about their eating of the forbidden fruit, but their first response was to run and hide from the presence of God. But we can never hide from our sins because we carry with us the knowledge of them wherever we go. And while we can pretend that an omniscient God doesn't know about our sins, the reality is God knows all things, even the most hidden thoughts of our hearts. As long as we try to deny or run from our sins, we will remain a prisoner to our guilt. We must confess our sins. We must admit them openly to ourselves and to God - and to any other people that have knowledge of them. If we admit our sins openly and ask for God's forgiveness for them, He promises to remove our sins from us.

*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness 1 John 1:9*

So the first , and most important step is to admit our sins openly before God. David said, *I confess my iniquity.*

2. But then David goes on to indicate that he realized that he didn't live in a perfect world. Not everybody was going to agree with him. There would be many who opposed him. There would even be those who repaid his good deeds with evil. But David was not going to allow others who would try to manipulate him through guilt to do so.

*Many are those who are my vigorous enemies;  
those who hate me without reason are numerous.*

*Those who repay my good with evil  
slander me when I pursue what is good.*

We all long for a perfect world. We all long for a world free from any sin or evil. But the reality of life is that this world is perverted and defiled by sin. Not everyone is going to agree with us. There will even be those who try to manipulate us for their own ends. Some of these manipulators have become very adept at using false guilt to their advantage. If they can make us feel guilty for something, they feel that they can influence our behavior in some way.

The most proficient in this methodology is the Devil himself. He is called the *accuser of the brethren*

in the Bible. Satan loves to nag at us trying to make us feel guilty for he knows that a person who is plagued by guilt is going to be severely hindered in making positive progress in life. So he repay good with evil and slanders us when we pursue good trying to make us feel guilty even for doing good.

Whenever I have a question about whether I have done something worthy of true guilt in my life, I have found a surefire way to deal with that issue in my own life. For sometimes we honestly question whether we are experiencing true or false guilt for an action. Are we experiencing true guilt because what we have done is wrong or are we experiencing false guilt because somebody is trying to manipulate our behavior? What I do is sincerely confess my sin to God with the confidence that God will honor His promise to forgive my sins and cleanse me from all unrighteousness. If the guilt that I had been feeling was true guilt because of some sin, the Holy Spirit then does His work in bringing comfort and encouragement into my life. But if I continue to have nagging feelings of guilt, I know that the enemy is doing his accusing and destructive work in my life. I then can reject those false guilt feelings with confidence because I know that they are coming from the enemy.

3. David never forgot that his ultimate source of help was in the Lord. The Lord was his Savior. So even though he felt alienated from God, he still maintained his fellowship with God. He didn't lose his faith in the Lord. The Psalm ends with the words:

*O LORD, do not forsake me;  
be not far from me, O my God.  
Come quickly to help me,  
O Lord my Savior.*

God created us with capacity to feel guilt. He did this for our own good; as a protection for our souls. So it just stands to reason that God would be the only one who can really help us be freed from our feelings of guilt. The Lord is our Savior. God can even help us to learn valuable lessons from guilt in our lives. He alone can free us from the chains of guilt that bind our souls and hinder our spiritual growth.