

Guilt



SABBATH—JANUARY 22

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Genesis 3:8–13; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 32; 1 Timothy 4:1, 2; Matthew 26:75; Romans 8:1.

MEMORY VERSE: “Lord, suppose you kept a record of sins. Lord, who then wouldn’t [would not] be found guilty? But you forgive. So people have respect for you” (Psalm 130:3, 4, NIV).

FEELING GUILTY IS ONE OF THE MOST PAINFUL and crippling emotional¹ experiences. It may cause shame, fear, sorrow, anger, depression (deep sadness), and even illness. But these feelings can be used by God to lead sinners to Him and to the foot of the cross. There, those who feel guilty can find the forgiveness they have been searching for. Sometimes guilt makes people feel guilty about something that is not their fault. Some people who have done nothing wrong, such as children of divorce or people who survive accidents that kill others, may feel guilty.

But often, a sense of guilt comes from doing wrong. Then feeling guilty can be helpful. It can cause enough discomfort to make a person do something about it. Depending on personal choices, guilt may be highly destructive (Judas) or highly positive (Peter).

This week we will study four Bible stories about guilt in order to better understand how it works and to find out what we can learn about it. We will learn how guilt can be used by the Lord to help save us. So much depends, really, on our attitudes (thoughts and feelings) toward guilt and what we choose to do with it.

1. emotional—having strong feelings (such as love, anger, joy, hate, or fear).

SUNDAY—JANUARY 23**SHAME (Genesis 3:8–13)**

Read Genesis 3:8–13. How did Adam and Eve show the guilt they were feeling? What was bad about Adam’s action?

Guilt was the first negative emotion felt by humans (people). Right after Adam and Eve sinned, they started to act differently. They “hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (verse 8, NIV). This action showed that they were afraid of their Father and Friend (God). At the same time, they were ashamed to face Him. Before their fall, they found joy being with God. But now they hid from Him. A beautiful bond was broken. In addition to fear and shame, Adam and Eve felt sorrow because they now knew the terrible results of disobeying God.



After they sinned, Adam and Eve hid from God among the trees of the Garden.

Notice Adam’s and Eve’s words: “ ‘The woman you put here with me . . .’ ” (Genesis 3:12, NIV) and “ ‘The serpent tricked me . . .’ ” (verse 13, NIV). Guilt causes people to put the blame on somebody else or to make excuses for their own actions. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis,² called this behavior³ “projection.” He argued that people project (put) their guilt on others or on situations so that they can avoid the burden of guilt. This “projection” is how people protect themselves from their feelings of guilt. But blaming others does not work well for relationships. It does not open the way for God’s forgiveness. The true answer is accepting full responsibility for our own actions. We must go to God, who is the only One who can give freedom from guilt. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus are no longer under God’s sentence [of guilt for their sins]” (Romans 8:1, NIV).

Sometimes a person suffers from guilt for the wrong reasons. For example, someone whose close relative commits suicide or the survivor of a serious accident or the child of a recently divorced couple. Each of these is an example of someone who suffers from needless (unnecessary) guilt. People in these situations need to be told that they cannot be held responsible for the behavior (actions) of others. They are also not responsible for events beyond their control. And if they do have some blame, then

2. psychoanalysis—a method of explaining and treating mental and emotional disorders by having the patient talk about dreams, feelings, memories, and so on.

3. behavior—how a person acts.

they must take responsibility for their actions. They must ask forgiveness from those whom they have hurt. They also need to hold fast to such Bible promises as “He [God] has removed our lawless acts from us as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12, NIV).

How do you behave (act) when you are guilty? Are you quick to blame others for your wrong actions as Adam did? How can you learn to face up to the things you have done wrong and then move on with the help of God’s grace?⁴

MONDAY—JANUARY 24

JOSEPH’S BROTHERS’ DISTRESS⁵ (Genesis 42:21)

According to Genesis 42:21, what memory continued to bother Joseph’s brothers? What does that tell us about them?

Guilt often can be connected to events that happened in the past. Sometimes guilt appears as a memory that is played over and over again in the mind. At other times, it may appear in dreams or nightmares. The memory of the young Joseph begging his older brothers for his life must have bothered Jacob’s sons (Joseph’s brothers) again and again.

How else did guilt bother Joseph’s brothers, according to Genesis 45:3?

People bothered by guilt think on it often. They often feel sorry for doing what they did. They also fear what the results of their words or actions will be and start blaming themselves. Feeling guilty causes much mental suffering, frustration, and anger at oneself for not having done things differently. Unfortunately, no matter how much time is spent remembering those thoughts, the past will never change. Repentance⁶ and forgiveness are required. Joseph’s noble character⁷ comes forth when he offers forgiveness to his brothers and encourages them to stop being angry at themselves. Joseph comforts his brothers by telling them that God used what happened to save many lives. God was able to use the evil action of the brothers for good. But it does not change the fact that they were guilty of a horrible crime.

How would claiming the promises in James 5:16 and 1 John 1:9 help us deal with guilt?

All sins bring pain to the sinner and to God. Many sins also involve other people. Each corner of the triangle (God—others—me) needs to be worked out to solve past wrongdoings. John tells us that God is prepared to forgive

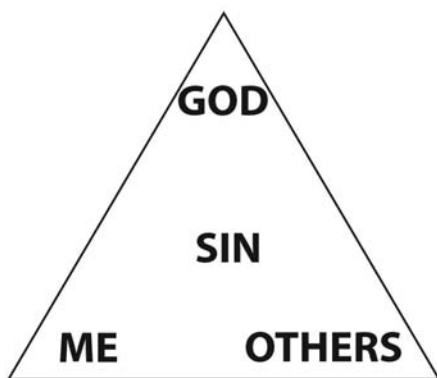
4. grace—God’s gift of forgiveness and mercy (kindness that is not deserved) that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

5. distress—unhappiness or pain; suffering that affects the mind or body.

6. repentance—to feel or show that you are sorry for something bad or wrong that you did and that you want to do what is right.

7. character—the way someone thinks, feels, and behaves; someone’s personality.

us and to make us pure. James tells us to confess sins to each other. We should do this, especially to those whom we have done wrong.



All sins bring pain to the sinner and to God.

Humble confession is the only way to free ourselves from guilt. “Your sins may be the same as mountains before you. But be sure to humble your heart, confess your sins, and depend on the crucified [to put to death on a cross] and risen Savior. Then He will forgive and will cleanse you from all unrighteousness [sin]. . . . [The work of His righteousness] is peace, and with it comes quietness and trust in God’s promise forever.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [Leaders]*, page 566. What do you need to confess so that you can experience the promises here?

TUESDAY—JANUARY 25

**SAPPED (WEAKENED)
STRENGTH (Psalm 32:4)**

What does Psalm 32 teach us about guilt and confession? What does David mean by “keeping silent”? What happens when one remains silent? How did David deal with his guilt?

Honest confession is good for the soul. It is also good for the body. David’s language clearly suggests that the guilt he felt was causing him physical pain too. Bones wasted away (verse 3, NIV) and his strength was sapped (verse 4, NIV). Health professionals today understand the close connection between stress and physical problems. The disease caused by stress is called “psychosomatic⁸ disease.” It means physical problems caused largely by mental stress. More recently, research has shown that our state of mind helps protect our bodies from, or exposes them to, diseases.

Guilt can cause a person to behave poorly. It also can destroy physical health. But there is no need for those who know the Lord to put themselves at risk. The testimony of David shows the right “medicine” for guilt: “Then I admitted my sin to you. . . . And you forgave the guilt of my sin” (verse 5, NIV).

Shame, feeling sorry for doing something wrong or bad in the past, sadness, and hopelessness caused by guilt can vanish through the Lord’s wonderful forgiveness. Joy and happiness can come instead (verse 11).

8. psychosomatic—involving both the mind and the body.

What does Paul mean by seared (burned) consciences in 1 Timothy 4:1, 2?

Paul warned Timothy about people who would teach strange doctrines (beliefs) to believers. They would do this because their consciences had been “burned as if with a hot iron” (verse 2, NIV). Fire may burn nerve endings and make certain parts of the body unable to feel pain. In the same way, a conscience also may be seared (scarred) by (a) breaking the rules of good behavior over and over again until a person no longer feels that he or she is doing wrong; or (b) anything that causes a person to believe that something wrong is right or that doing what is right does not matter.

What things bothered you in the past but do not bother you now? Could you have a seared conscience? Try to step back and think long and hard about things you do that do not bother your conscience but perhaps should.



Paul warned Timothy of false teachers who would teach strange doctrines because their consciences had been “burned as if with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:2, NIV).

WEDNESDAY—JANUARY 26

BITTER WEeping (Matthew 26:75)

One of the greatest examples of guilt appears in Matthew 26:75. What made Peter’s sense of guilt so great? Have you ever had the same experience? If so, what did you learn from it that could help you avoid making the same mistake?

Two times Peter said that he would be firm and never deny the Master. Peter made his second statement even after the Lord foresaw that Peter would deny Him three times that very night. Hours later, two women recognized Peter as one of Jesus’ disciples (followers). And Peter denied the Lord each time. Then a group of servants from the household of the high priest said they knew Peter was a follower of Jesus. Peter said, “‘I am not’ ” (John 18:25, NIV). Notice that the accusers (young people, females, servants) were considered of low social class. This must have added to Peter’s shame and guilt later on.

But the important point is that Peter’s weeping led to repentance, to a change of heart, and to a true conversion.⁹ Peter went through this process, even though it was very painful. Sometimes that is what it takes. We need to see ourselves as we really are. We also need to see what is really in our hearts, and what kinds of negative actions we are capable of. Then we will fall, broken like Peter, before the Lord.

9. conversion—the time when a person fully believes in Jesus and decides to turn his or her life around, doing away with sinful habits completely.

“With blinding tears he [Peter] makes his way to the quiet places of the Garden of Gethsemane. There he puts himself on the ground where he saw Jesus lie. At that time the bloody sweat was forced from Jesus’ pores by His great suffering. Peter remembers with deep sorrow that he was asleep when Jesus prayed during those fearful hours. Peter’s proud heart breaks, and tears of sorrow drop to the same soil that was recently stained with the bloody sweat drops of God’s dear Son. Peter left that Garden a converted [deeply changed] man. Peter was ready then to pity those who were tempted.¹⁰ Peter was humbled and could feel sorry for those who were weak and fallen.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*¹¹ for the Church, volume 3, page 416.

The first half of the book of Acts gives powerful proof of Peter’s conversion (change). His preaching and leadership and miracles (wonders) were outstanding and led to the saving of many souls. His work also led to the foundation (setting up) of the church as the body (group) of Christ. The death of Peter was foreseen by Jesus in John 21:18 and was received by Peter as an honor. This is because it is believed that Peter died in the same way his Master did.

How have your falls and failures made you more sensitive to the falls and failures of others? How can you use the experience of your

own pain to learn to minister to (help) others in theirs?

THURSDAY—JANUARY 27

TOTAL FORGIVENESS (Romans 8:1)

What does Romans 8:1 promise us? How can we make this promise our own?

God’s forgiveness is so great, so deep, and so wide that it is impossible to understand it fully. Even the best of human forgiveness cannot compare with God’s. God is so perfect, and we are so imperfect. But through God’s gift in Jesus, we all can have full and complete pardon as soon as we claim God’s promises for ourselves in full faith and surrender (giving ourselves) to the Lord.

Read Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 1:18; and Micah 7:19. How do these verses help you understand God’s forgiveness?

The Bible uses stories and symbols (word-pictures) from real life to help us understand the meaning of difficult ideas. Snow and wool are good examples of whiteness. The deep blue sea is one of the deepest places we can think of. And nothing on the earth can be farther apart than east from west. But these symbols are too limited to give us a full

10. tempted—to cause someone to do or want to do something that is wrong, bad, or unwise.

11. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.

understanding of God's forgiveness.

In the Abbey of Elstow in England, a stained-glass window shows a picture from Bunyan's story *Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian, the main character (a person in a story), is shown kneeling at the foot of the cross. His heavy burden of guilt is rolling away from his shoulders. This brings great relief to his soul. Christian says, "I saw it no more." The burden was gone. Its pain, sting, anxiety (fear and worry), and shame disappeared forever. Because we are not perfect, it is very hard for us to understand the perfect and total forgiveness of God. We must simply accept it by faith and pray, "Lord, I humbly confess my sins to You and accept Your pardon and cleansing. Amen."



God's forgiveness is deeper than the deepest part of the sea.

How can we be sure our sins are forgiven if we do not feel that they are forgiven? What reasons do we have to believe we are forgiven, even though we may feel differently?

¹². glory—great beauty, power, and royal perfection.

FRIDAY—JANUARY 28

ADDITIONAL STUDY: "Sin may struggle for the control of the human heart. Guilt may seem to weigh down the soul and burden the heart. Unbelief may cloud the mind. But who lets in the beams of light? Whose grace is enough to conquer [overcome] sin? And who gives the precious forgiveness and pardons all our sins, casting out [getting rid of] the darkness, and making us hopeful and joyful in God? This is Jesus, the sin-pardoning Savior. He is still our Advocate [Lawyer] in the courts of heaven. Those whose lives are hid with Christ in God must arise and shine, because the glory¹² of the Lord has risen upon them."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Bible Training School*, May 1915.

"If you have insulted or hurt your friend or neighbor, you are to confess your wrong. And it is his duty freely to forgive you. Then you are to ask the forgiveness of God. This is because the brother you have wounded is the property of God. In injuring him you have sinned against his Creator."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, page 128.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Madame Mao, the wife of Mao Tse-tung, the former leader of Communist China, lived in constant fear and guilt because of the many bad things she had done. She was so suspicious and

full of guilt that any sudden noises, any unexpected sounds, would send her into cold sweats or make her very angry. It got so bad that she ordered her servants to keep birds away from her home so that she did not have to hear them singing. Madame Mao's case was very serious. But what does this tell us about the power of guilt to ruin our lives?

② What advice would you give to someone who is struggling with guilt over past sins? He or she probably claims to have accepted Christ but still cannot get rid of the feelings of guilt. How can you help this person?

③ In Thursday's study, the Bible gave us several examples to describe God's forgiveness. Have class members come up with some of their own symbols to describe how deep the forgiveness of Jesus is for those who will accept it.

④ In a world where there was no God, could there still be guilt? Discuss your answer.

⑤ As we saw this week, God can use guilt to bring us to faith and repentance. Are there any other ways that guilt can help us? If so, what might they be?