

Guilt



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 3:8–13; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 32; 1 Tim. 4:1, 2; Matt. 26:75; Rom. 8:1.*

Memory Text: “If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (*Psalm 130:3, 4, NIV*).

A sense of guilt is one of the most painful and incapacitating emotional experiences. It may cause shame, fear, sorrow, anger, distress, and even physical illness. Although often unpleasant, these feelings can be used by God to lead sinners to repentance and to the foot of the Cross, where they can find the forgiveness for which they've been longing. Sometimes, however, the guilt mechanism makes people feel guilty about something for which they are not responsible, as in the case of some accident survivors or children of divorce.

But when the sense of guilt is justified, it serves as a good conscience. Guilt produces enough discomfort to make the person do something about it. Depending on personal choices, guilt may be highly destructive, as in the case of Judas, or highly positive, as in the case of Peter.

This week we will study four biblical accounts of guilt in order to understand this process better and to see what we can learn about it. We can see how, if properly channeled, guilt can be used by the Lord to our advantage. So much depends, really, on our attitude toward the guilt we feel and what we choose to do with it.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 29.*

Shame

Read Genesis 3:8–13. How did Adam and Eve manifest the guilt they experienced? What especially was bad about Adam’s reaction?

Guilt was the first adverse emotion felt by the human race. Soon after Adam and Eve sinned, their behavior changed. They “hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (*vs. 8, NIV*). This unprecedented reaction indicated fear of their Father and Friend and, at the same time, their shame to face Him. Up until their fall, they had found joy in God’s presence, but now they hid before His approaching. A beautiful bond was broken. In addition to fear and shame, they felt sorrow, especially as they were made aware of the terrible consequences of having disobeyed God.

Notice Adam’s and Eve’s words: “ ‘The woman you put here with me . . .’ ” and “ ‘The serpent deceived me . . .’ ” (*NIV*). Guilt brings about a seemingly automatic reaction to place the blame on somebody else or to justify one’s own behavior with argumentation. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, called this reaction “projection” and argued that people project their guilt on others or on circumstances in order to lighten the burden of guilt. This “projection” is considered a defense mechanism. But blaming others does not work well for interpersonal relationships and poses a barrier to God’s forgiveness. The true solution consists of accepting full responsibility for one’s own actions and seeking the only One who can provide freedom from guilt: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (*Rom. 8:1, NIV*).

Sometimes people suffer from guilt for the wrong reasons. Close relatives to those who commit suicide, survivors of a massive accident or calamity, and children of a recently divorced couple are typical examples of what is, in most instances, unfounded guilt. People in these situations need to be assured that they cannot be held responsible for the behavior of others or for unforeseeable events. And if, in certain cases, they do have some blame, they must take responsibility for their actions, seek forgiveness from those whom they have hurt, and then hold fast to such Bible promises as: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (*Ps. 103:12, NIV*).

How do you find yourself reacting to guilt? Are you quick, as Adam was, to blame others for your wrong actions? How can you learn to face up to the things you have done wrong and then, through the grace of God, move on?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Psalm 130:3, 4*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Contrast an unhealthy response to guilt and a healthy, Christ-centered response to guilt.

Feel: Acknowledge a sense of humble confession and acceptance of God's provisions for dealing with our sin.

Do: Confess our sins, accept Christ's forgiveness, and live joyfully in the freedom of His love.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Good for the Soul

A A healthy conscience alerts us to wrongs we have done. How can we cultivate a healthy conscience?

B What is the best way of relating to guilt over sin? What does God do for us when we confess our sins?

C What problems can occur when we don't confess our sins?

D Why is it important to forgive others who sin against us?

II. Feel: Humility and Trust

A What feelings can get in the way of acknowledging our errors?

B What feelings should accompany confession?

C How do we feel when we accept God's forgiveness?

III. Do: Abundant Life

A What sins do we need to confess?

B Once we have confessed our sins, what has God done for us that we need to contemplate, appreciate, and accept?

C What would it take for us to live a free, joyful life in Christ this week? How can we share news of this freedom with others?

► **Summary:** Feelings of guilt arise from unconfessed sin, but sin acknowledged and forgiven brings freedom, peace, joy, and an abundant life that starts now and stretches into eternity.

Joseph's Brothers' Distress

What particular remorse-eliciting memory lingered in the minds of Joseph's brothers? *Gen. 42:21*. What does that tell us about them?

Guilt is associated with a particular occurrence of the past, sometimes an image or a brief event that tends to be replayed mentally. Other times it takes the form of a flashback image that invades one's mind or appears in dreams or nightmares. The image of the adolescent Joseph pleading with his older brothers for his life must have come to Jacob's sons again and again.

How else did guilt affect Joseph's brothers? *Gen. 45:3*.

People affected by guilt think on it repeatedly, lamenting the fact that they did what they did, showing fear for the consequence, and entering into self-blame. Such rumination produces much distress, frustration, and anger at oneself for not having done differently. Unfortunately, no matter how much time is devoted to recalling those thoughts, the past will remain unchanged. Repentance and forgiveness are required. Joseph's noble character emerges, and he offers forgiveness and encourages them to stop being angry at themselves. He assures them that the occurrence of events had to do with God's design to save many lives. The fact that God was able to use their evil action for good doesn't, however, change the fact that they were guilty of a horrible crime.

How would obeying what's in these verses help us deal with guilt? *James 5:16, 1 John 1:9*.

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 in order to bring a resolution to past wrongdoings. John tells us that God is prepared to forgive and to purify us from unrighteousness. In addition, James tells us to confess sins to each other; we should do this, especially to those whom we've wronged.

Humble confession is the only way to free oneself from guilt. "Your sins may be as mountains before you; but if you humble your heart and confess your sins, trusting in the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour, He will forgive and will cleanse you from all unrighteousness. . . . [The work of His righteousness] is peace, and its effect quietness and assurance forever."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 566. **What do you need to confess in order to experience the promises here?**

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Guilt is an inevitable part of the human condition, but it need not be the end of the story. And that’s because God has provided a remedy.

Just for Teachers: Guilt can be overwhelming; it can be emotionally, even physically, debilitating. As you teach this material, aim to place guilt in the context of Christ’s call to repentance and His eagerness to extend forgiveness, a force dramatically more powerful than guilt.

Dr. Kent Kiehl, an associate professor of psychology at the University of New Mexico, immerses himself in the intense, often horrifying, world of criminal psychopaths. He explores their minds—literally—by scanning their brains, searching for similarities in structure that could offer a physical clue as to why some people have an almost complete inability to experience guilt. His interest in psychopaths was sparked as an eight-year-old, living in Tacoma, Washington. His father, who worked on the local newspaper, came home one day talking about Ted Bundy, a seemingly charming, intelligent, clean-cut young man, who had assaulted and murdered at least thirty women. “This was a guy who had grown up just down the street,” says Kiehl. “I said I want to understand why people do bad things—how someone could get to be like Ted Bundy—and I want to study the brain.”—John Seabrook, “Suffering Souls: The Search for the Roots of Psychopathy,” *New Yorker* magazine (November 10, 2008).

Consider This: “Psychopathy” is characterized by a state of moral emptiness—an inability to experience empathy or remorse. People usually view “guilt” in essentially negative terms; it implies failure, doing something wrong. And yet, the idea of a world where people do wrong things *without* the emotion of guilt is horrifying. Ask your class to discuss the positive role of guilt—for individuals and society.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. “I have guilt, therefore I am . . .” (Review with your class *Genesis 3:8–13* and *Romans 5:18, 19*.)

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Sapped Strength

Read Psalm 32. What does this teach us about guilt and confession? What does David mean by “keeping silent”? What happens when one remains silent? What was David’s solution to his guilt?

Honest confession is good for the soul, and seemingly also for the body. David’s language clearly suggests that his mental state of guilt was causing physical pain, as well: bones wasted away (*vs. 3, NIV*) and strength sapped (*vs. 4, NIV*). Health professionals today recognize the close link between psychological stress and physical maladies. The expression “psychosomatic disease” has been part of the health professionals’ language for decades, and it refers to physical symptoms caused largely by psychological processes. More recently the field of psychoneuroimmunology has identified the key role that mental states play in protecting our bodies from, or exposing them to, diseases.

Guilt, as does any other strong adverse emotion, causes immediate deterioration in behavior and can, in the long run, destroy physical health. But for those who know the Lord, there is no need of putting themselves at risk.

David’s testimony reveals the antidote for guilt: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you. . . . And you forgave the guilt of my sin” (*vs. 5, NIV*).

Thus, shame, remorse, sadness, and hopelessness caused by guilt can vanish through the Lord’s wonderful forgiveness, and joy and happiness can come instead (*vs. 11*).

Read 1 Timothy 4:1, 2. What does he mean by seared consciences?

Paul forewarned Timothy of individuals who would teach strange doctrines to believers. They would do this because their consciences had been “seared as with a hot iron” (*vs. 2, NIV*). As fire may burn nerve endings and make certain parts of the body insensible, a conscience also may become seared by: (a) repeated violation of correct principles until no sense of wrongness remains and (b) strong environmental influences that cause one to view something wrong with indifference or even as good.

What things that once bothered you now don’t? If so, might that be a seared conscience at work? Try to step back and take a good look at things you do that don’t bother your conscience but perhaps should.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: Literature and art throughout the ages testify to the pervasive nature of guilt as an inevitable part of human experience. Why is this emotion such a core part of the normal human psyche?

Original “Corruption.” Guilt cannot exist by itself; it is a by-product of something else—sin. Theologians have long debated the concept of “original sin.” They’ve asked, What exactly were the consequences for humanity of Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God’s will?

Read Psalm 51:5. The word *sin* obviously describes specific acts, but does it also describe a general state or condition that humans inherit at birth? Ellen G. White clearly links the human sin problem with Adam’s fall. She writes, “There is in his nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he cannot resist.”—*Education*, p. 29.

Seventh-day Adventist theologian Gerhard Pfandl suggests that the phrase “original corruption” best describes our church’s teaching. We don’t inherit the actual guilt of Adam’s sin (original sin), but we inherit the human tendency to sin. He writes: “The study of original sin and corruption should lead us to a greater awareness of our need of righteousness. That we need a Saviour the day we are born, not only after we have transgressed God’s law. . . . The everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ meets our need.”—Gerhard Pfandl, *Some Thoughts on Original Sin*, p. 22.


Thought Questions:

Consider alternate theories for why guilt exists. (For example, society’s expectations, parental expectations, an innate desire not to harm others, psychological neurosis.) Why aren’t these explanations adequate? Can the emotion of guilt exist without an objective standard of right and wrong?

II. Mea culpa—“I am guilty” (Review Psalm 32:5 and John 16:7, 8 with your class.)

Before modern advances in ventilation and machinery, coal mining was an extremely dangerous activity. One technique used to check the safety of the air quality in the mines was to keep canaries—birds especially sensitive to methane and carbon monoxide—in the mine shafts. As long as the birds stayed healthy, miners knew the air was safe. A dead canary was the signal to evacuate immediately.

Consider This: In what ways does our conscience act as a “canary in

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Bitter Weeping

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

On two occasions Peter stated his intention to be firm and never to deny the Master. His second affirmation came even after the Lord had predicted that Peter would deny Him three times that very night. Hours later two women identified Peter as one of Jesus’ disciples, and he denied the Lord each time. Then a group of servants of the high priest’s household identified him, and he exclaimed: “ ‘I am not’ ” (*John 18:25, NIV*). Notice that the accusers (minors, females, servants) were considered of low social rank in the context. This must have added to Peter’s shame and guilt later on.

The crucial point, however, is that Peter’s weeping led to repentance, to a change of heart and to a true conversion, no matter how painful the process itself. Sometimes that’s what it takes: we need to see ourselves as we really are, to see what’s really in our hearts and what treachery we are capable of—and then we will fall, broken like Peter, before the Lord.

“With blinding tears he [Peter] makes his way to the solitudes of the Garden of Gethsemane and there prostrates himself where he saw his Saviour’s prostrate form when the bloody sweat was forced from His pores by His great agony. Peter remembers with remorse that he was asleep when Jesus prayed during those fearful hours. His proud heart breaks, and penitential tears moisten the sods so recently stained with the bloody sweat drops of God’s dear Son. He left that garden a converted man. He was ready then to pity the tempted. He was humbled and could sympathize with the weak and erring.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 416.

The first half of the book of Acts provides an unquestionable testimony of Peter’s transformation. His preaching and leadership and miracle workings were extraordinary and led to the salvation of many. His work also led to the foundation of the church as the body of Christ. His death, anticipated by Jesus in John 21:18, was received as an honor, for he died in the same manner as his Master.

In what ways have your falls and failures made you more sensitive to the falls and failures of others? How can you learn to minister, out of your pain, to others in theirs?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

a coal mine,” a divinely given “early warning system”? What exactly does it warn us about?

III. Our Choice—Paralysis or Transformation *(Review Psalm 32 with your class.)*

What happens *after* we are convicted of our guilt before God? Scripture lays before us two possible paths—one leads to spiritual paralysis, the other to transformation.

Paralysis. Read Ezra 9:6 and Psalm 38:4. Martin Luther, whose teachings about God’s grace split the political and religious world of his day, wrote about an earlier period of his life, as a young monk, when he frantically attempted to expiate his sense of guilt through fasting and self-punishments. He wrote, “I lost hold of Christ the Savior and comforter and made of him the stock-master and hangman over my poor soul.”—James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing House, 1986), pp. 78, 79.

Discuss: Consider the experience of Luther and describe how carrying a burden of unresolved guilt can shape us: our thinking, choices, and relationships with others.


Thought Question:

“Catholic guilt”; “Jewish guilt”; “Adventist guilt.” What’s behind the popular idea that those raised within strong faith communities, with high moral expectations, will inevitably live their lives wracked with guilt?

Transformation. Review Matthew 26:75. “Healthy” guilt operates as a catalyst for self-knowledge, spurring us toward repentance and acceptance of God’s forgiveness.

What is transformed? Our self-perception (we recognize not only our guilt but our unfathomable value to God, who has provided a remedy for our guilt); our relationship with God (we repent and seek to make our actions conform to His will); our relationship with others (we try to make good, as far as we can, the consequences of our sin).

Consider This: One of the most beautiful themes in Scripture is that of Christ “reconciling” us to God. Ask three people in your class to read the following passages: Romans 5:10, 11; 2 Corinthians 5:17–20; Colossians 1:21, 22. What emotions do you feel as you hear of God’s efforts to draw

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Total Forgiveness

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1, NKJV). What does this text 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 fully. Even the best quality of human forgiveness cannot compare with that of God. He is so perfect, and we are so flawed; and yet, through the provision God Himself provided in Jesus, we all can have full and complete pardon the moment we claim the promises for ourselves in full faith and surrender to the Lord.

Read the three texts below. How do they shed light to help you understand God’s forgiveness?

Ps. 103:12 _____

Isa. 1:18 _____

Mic. 7:19 _____

The Bible uses allegories from the concrete and familiar realms in order to help us understand the meaning of difficult concepts. As far as we can perceive, snow and wool are good examples of whiteness; the depths of the sea are among the deepest places we can imagine; and nothing can be geographically farther apart than east from west. Yet, these are limited allegories of God’s forgiveness.

In the Abbey of Elstow, a stained-glass window portrays an image inspired in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christian, the central character, can be seen kneeling at the foot of the Cross. His heavy burden of guilt is rolling away from his shoulders, bringing ineffable relief to his soul. Christian says: “I saw it no more.” The burden was gone. Its pain, sting, anxiety, and shame disappeared forever. Because of our imperfection, selfishness, and defective relationships, it is very hard for us to understand the perfect and total forgiveness of God. We simply can accept it by faith and pray: “Lord, I humbly confess my sins to You and accept Your pardon and cleansing. Amen.”

How can we be sure our sins are forgiven if we don’t feel that they are forgiven? What reasons do we have to believe we’re forgiven, despite our feelings?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

us close to Him? How effective are these passages in placing the emotion of guilt within the context of God’s plan for our salvation?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: **The more clearly we see sin, the more intensely we feel guilt’s power. Help your class explore how we can destroy the negative power of guilt in our lives, while still taking seriously the devastating power of sin.**

Life Application: In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*, a puritan pastor hides his affair with a young woman while presiding over her punishment for the sin of adultery. He conceals his guilt until it bursts out in a dramatic moment of confession. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *The First Circle*, describes a prisoner who compulsively records every bad thought or fault by marking a sheet of paper.

How do you typically handle feelings of guilt? Do you tend to brood on them? Are you driven to try to “make things right”? Do you find yourself drawn to confession—to God or to other people?

Activity: Political theorist John S. Mill saw guilt as a good thing, providing a moral restraint on society and preventing people from harming others. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche saw guilt as a sign of human repression and weakness. Sigmund Freud, founder of modern psychiatry, considered guilt a psychological sickness, the product of impossible demands placed on people by an overdeveloped conscience.

How would you describe guilt and its function? As a class, develop your own definition of guilt based on your study of Scripture.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: **Guilt rarely comes unaccompanied into our lives. It also can bring despair, hopelessness, depression, low self-esteem, anger, and frustration. Close the lesson by pointing class members to the One who longs to gather us into His arms of forgiveness and healing.**

When it comes to understanding the power of guilt, Jesus, the guiltless One, chose to walk the path before us.

Challenge class members to make time each day to meditate on Christ’s radical identification with humanity, the fact that He bore our guilt so that we can experience a life free from a paralyzing sense of guilt. Close the class by reading Matthew 11:28–30.

Further Study: “When sin struggles for the mastery in the human heart, when guilt seems to oppress the soul and burden the conscience, when unbelief clouds the mind, who lets in the beams of light? Whose grace is sufficient to subdue sin, and who gives the precious forgiveness and pardons all our sins, expelling the darkness, and making us hopeful and joyful in God?—Jesus, the sin-pardoning Saviour. He is still our Advocate in the courts of heaven; and those whose lives are hid with Christ in God must arise and shine, because the glory of the Lord has risen upon them.”—Ellen G. White, *Bible Training School*, May 1915. “If you have given offense to your friend or neighbor, you are to acknowledge your wrong, and it is his duty freely to forgive you. Then you are to seek the forgiveness of God, because the brother you have wounded is the property of God, and in injuring him you have sinned against his Creator.”—Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, p. 128.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Madame Mao, the wife of the former leader of Communist China, Mao Tse-Tung, lived in constant fear and guilt, all because of many of the bad things she had done. She was so paranoid, in fact, so full of guilt, that any sudden noises, any unexpected sounds, would send her into cold sweats or into a fury. It got so bad that she demanded that her staff keep birds away from her compound so she didn’t have to hear them singing. Though an extreme case, what does this tell us about the power of guilt to ruin our lives?
- ❷ What advice would you give to someone who is struggling with guilt over past sins, who claims to have accepted Christ and yet still can’t get rid of the feelings of guilt? How can you help them?
- ❸ In Thursday’s lesson the Bible gave us a number of images to describe God’s forgiveness. Have class members come up with some of their own metaphors to describe the depth of the forgiveness that is found in Jesus for those who will accept it.
- ❹ In a world in which no God existed, could guilt exist? Discuss your answer.
- ❺ As we saw this week, God can use guilt to bring us to faith and repentance. Are there any other “benefits” to guilt? If so, what might they be?