

FREEDOM FROM GUILT



A BIBLICAL LOOK
AT GUILT AND
HOW TO BE SET
FREE FROM IT

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INTRODUCTION:

The Power of Guilt

Guilt is a powerful thing.

You might have heard a person describe guilt as “eating me up inside” or being “racked by guilt.” Perhaps you have used these sayings yourself.

Maybe you’re experiencing guilt right now, a guilt that feels like it is wrecking you, or eating away at you from the inside out. Maybe that’s why you are embarking on this study today. You’re feeling guilty, and don’t know how to handle it.

While guilt can’t literally eat away at a person’s body, it can cause negative physical effects.

Guilt has been documented to cause or aggravate symptoms such as:

- Insomnia
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Muscle Tension
- Stomach and Digestive Problems

The physical and psychological problems caused by guilt can be severe, but so can the emotional and social effects. In extreme cases, guilt can cause a person to become paralyzed facing decisions, withdrawn from loved ones, and even suicidal. Maybe you have experienced some of these symptoms yourself.

These examples are extreme, but all of us experience guilt and shame at one time or another. Even children experience guilt without ever even hearing the word. A child barely able to walk will run and hide from a parent after stealing a cookie from the jar or breaking something they were instructed not to touch.

A child seems to be born with a guilty conscience, but what is guilt in the first place, and how can it be such a powerful force upon the human psyche from the youngest age? How can a feeling be so strong as to cause such severe physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms in the life of a person?

Merriam-Webster defines guilt as, “A feeling of deserving blame for offenses,” and it is nothing new at all. In fact, it can be argued that guilt is one of the first emotions documented in the Bible.

All the way back in the Garden of Eden, we find two people racked by guilt and shame, and they had every reason to be. Adam and Eve lived in paradise with everything they could ever want or need, including communion with God himself.

They had complete freedom, with only one single rule they were told to abide by. God forbade them to eat the fruit from a certain tree in the middle of the garden. The garden was full of delicious fruit for the taking, so this simple command should not have been a problem. Yet Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent, and they ate.

Genesis 3:7-8 describes the guilt that immediately followed their disobedient act. Suddenly, Adam and Eve felt shame and guilt. It says:

Their eyes were opened, and they both knew that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together, and made coverings for themselves. They heard Yahweh God's voice walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Yahweh God among the trees of the garden.

They knew they had disobeyed God, and were ashamed.

They had broken the only commandment God had given them. They had committed the first sin, and they knew it. Shame and guilt came immediately and caused them to hide their nakedness. It caused them to hide from God himself, as if that were even possible.

Yes, guilt is as old as Adam and Eve, and its power is indisputable.

Because sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, we all experience guilt, even if we don't admit it. It's innate, unavoidable, and common to every human being. It is rooted in our knowledge of good and evil, regardless of our faith or lack thereof. We instinctively know that some things are right and some things are wrong.

There are many reasons why a person feels guilt and shame. Some of these reasons are valid, and some are not. Shame may come after:

- Committing a sin
- Being sinned against
- Failing in some way
- Disappointing a loved one
- Surviving when another person does not
- Losing control of a situation
- Eating or drinking too much

- Suffering a financial loss
- Unintentionally causing an accident
- Watching your child go astray

The causes of guilt and shame are countless, yet not all are valid. Adam and Eve had good reason to hide in their guilt, but that is not always the case. Sometimes we suffer from guilt and have no reason for doing so.

In this study, we'll decipher the difference between valid and invalid guilt. We'll identify illegitimate and legitimate reasons we might feel guilty, where those feelings come from, and how to deal with them.

There are also many different ways to deal with our guilt, and some of those ways are just as destructive as the sin that causes us to feel shame in the first place.

People often deal with shame by trying to escape it through:

- Abusing drugs or alcohol
- Seeking secular psychiatric care
- Denying the feelings of guilt
- Excessively working
- Controlling every situation

- Withdrawing from people
- Trying to make it right

In this study, we'll look at what the Bible says about guilt and how we can be free of its crushing burden.

The Bible will be our source of information on the topic of guilt, and it has no shortage of help for us on the subject. There are countless people described in God's word who suffered from a guilty conscience, or a lack of one, and we can learn from many of them.

David raped, manipulated, and murdered. A woman was caught in the act of adultery. Paul persecuted Christians. A son squandered his father's wealth. All had reason to feel guilty, stand condemned, and receive punishment. And while they no doubt faced the consequences of their sin, they also received the grace of God.

We'll look to all of them as we explore the topic of guilt. Each chapter contains scriptures, reflections, and prayers. Let's get started!



CHAPTER 1:

We Are All Guilty

Verse for Today

“But when they continued asking him, he looked up and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone at her.’...They, when they heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning from the oldest, even to the last.”

John 8:7, 9 (World English Bible)

Reflection

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes of Jesus' day were constantly trying to trap him into contradicting the scriptures with their questions. Jesus was the fulfillment of those very scriptures, and he consistently answered them in ways that confounded them, revealing himself to those who would listen.

One such story occurs in John chapter eight, when a group of conniving religious leaders bring a woman to Jesus. She had been caught in the act of adultery, and there was no doubt of her guilt. The law of Moses commanded that she be stoned to death for her sin, but they wanted to know what Jesus would have to say on the subject.

Instead of contradicting the law and falling into their scheme, or confirming their conclusion and condemning the woman, Jesus makes a remarkable statement that leaves them all dumbfounded.

As always, Jesus turns their question back on them with his answer. “He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her,” Jesus says, and then stands in silence as one by one they drop their rocks and walk away.

John tells us quite clearly what is happening.

These religious leaders, bent on entrapping Jesus, have instead been “convicted by their conscience.” The guilt and shame they were moments earlier heaping on the woman had been turned upon them. They were as guilty as

she was, and Jesus called them out on it. None of them could throw a single rock at her.

At this mic-drop moment, Jesus could have walked away, satisfied that he once again silenced his accusers and showed them who was boss. Yet the story doesn't stop there. Silencing his adversaries was never Jesus' point. His point was the Gospel of grace.

Jesus turns to the terrified and bewildered woman, and shows her such grace.

Not one of her accusers remains. No one is left to convict her of her sin. And Jesus says to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way. From now on, sin no more."

The truth is, we're all as guilty as she. The guilt and shame we feel as a result of our sin is completely justified. We may not be an adulterer or a religious hypocrite trying to entrap God's only son, but we are sinners nonetheless. Paul tells us clearly in Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Yet, Jesus didn't come to condemn us in our sin, just like he didn't condemn that woman. He

challenges her to turn from her sin, yes, but he doesn't condemn her for it. He doesn't heap guilt and shame upon her as the Pharisees did. Instead, he heaps love, grace, and forgiveness.

Jesus treats us the same way.

When we feel guilt, we may be convicted by our conscience just as the Pharisees were, but they should have stuck around to hear the good news. Jesus would forgive them just as he did that woman. That is the gospel, that God sent his son to the world not to declare us guilty. We already know that we are.

He came to the world not to convict but to forgive. That is the truth we can stand on as we face the guilt and shame in our hearts.

Prayer

Father God, I am a sinner in need of your grace. Just like the Pharisees, I stand in judgment of others. Just like that woman, I have sinned and fallen short of your glory.

Thank you for forgiving me and showing me your grace.

I carry guilt and shame for the things I have done. My sin haunts me, condemns me, and burdens me. Help me to cast that burden upon you once and for all.

Thank you Jesus for not coming here to condemn the world, but to save it. I deserve your condemnation but instead you show me love, grace, forgiveness, mercy, and kindness. I don't deserve any of that, and it overwhelms me. Thank you.

Lord, help me to receive your grace and let go of the guilt and shame I carry. Like the woman in that story, help me walk free of condemnation and full of your love. In the name of Jesus, my savior, I pray. Amen.



CHAPTER 2:

False Guilt

Verse for Today

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

Reflection

Feelings of guilt come after we sin. Just like Adam and Eve, we break God's law and immediately realize our nakedness, our failure, and our shame. All people are sinners in need of God's grace. Guilt can be justified, and God uses it to draw us to himself.

We'll dig into this kind of authentic, justified guilt in the remaining chapters, but let's first take a look at false guilt, and how to distinguish it from authentic guilt.

False guilt is guilt and shame based not on our own sin which we have confessed to God and received his forgiveness for.

False guilt is based on the lies of the Devil, who the Bible calls:

- Our adversary
- The father of lies
- Our accuser
- The deceiver
- Our enemy

Recall the classic Disney movie, *The Lion King*. In the movie, Simba is the young son of Mufasa, heir to his kingdom being raised up to take his father's place on the throne. His evil uncle, Scar, is jealous of the young prince and his position in the kingdom. Scar is an adversary who seeks to take the throne for himself.

A series of dramatic events lead to the death of King Mufasa. Simba is devastated by his father's death, but even more devastated by the

lies of his uncle Scar. His accuser tells him, like our accuser often tells us:

- This is all your fault
- You did this
- You are not worthy
- You can never be forgiven of this
- There is nothing you can do to make this right

The Devil lies to us just like Scar lies to Simba, unjustly heaping the burden of guilt and shame upon us every chance he gets. The consequences can have devastating effects.

This kind of false shame accuses us not just about what we have done, but about who we are. It creates a false narrative that we are unworthy, unloved, and unforgiven. These lies are not based on the truth of the Gospel and who we are in Christ, but on the lies of the enemy who seeks to “steak, kill and destroy” (John 10:10).

The enemy seeks to destroy us by heaping guilt and shame upon us which is unjustified. He blames us for:

- Things we didn't do
- Sins committed against us
- Failures beyond our control
- Surviving when another did not
- Sins that God has already forgiven us of

The burden of false guilt and shame is not from Jesus. In fact, he came to take those burdens upon himself. He tells us in Matthew 11 to cast our burdens upon him, and that includes the false narratives of condemnation that have been haunting us, hurting us, and hindering us.

He calls us to take his burden upon us instead, a burden that is easy and light. He is our gentle, humble savior who came to give us life abundantly, free from the lies of the enemy. It's time to cast your burden of guilt upon Jesus and replace it with his love, grace, and forgiveness.

Prayer

Father God, I have listened to the lies of my enemy for too long. He has heaped guilt,

shame, and condemnation upon me for things I cannot control. He has stolen my peace and robbed me of joy. Forgive me for allowing this to go on far too long.

I am ready to cast this false guilt and shame upon you. Thank you for the open invitation to do so. Help me to do this and listen to your truth rather than the lies that attack me. Relieve me of this burden and help me enjoy your light, easy yoke.

Lord, I stand free of the guilt and shame that has hurt me. Help me to believe this and live in this truth. Help me enjoy this freedom and glorify you in it.

God I praise you for saving me from my sin and cleansing me of my guilt and shame. Thank you for Jesus my savior, in his name I pray. Amen.



CHAPTER 3: Hiding Our Shame

Verse for Today

“When I kept silence, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me. My strength was sapped in the heat of summer.”

Psalm 32:3-4

Reflection

King David can be called many things:

- A man after God's own heart
- Conqueror of Goliath
- God's anointed King
- Defender of the one true God
- Poet and songwriter
- Forerunner of Jesus

Yes, all of these positive accolades describe King David, but so do:

- Rapist
- Liar
- Murderer
- Manipulator
- Thief

In 2 Samuel 11, we learn about the depths of David's sin. From his palace, he spots a beautiful woman, Bathsheba. He is taken by her beauty and lusts after her. He sends his men to get her, and despite the fact that she is married to one of his soldiers, he takes her to his bed. At the very least, it's an abuse of power. At the very worst, it's rape.

Bathsheba becomes pregnant, and David is faced with his sin. He attempts to hide it by bringing her husband home for a night, but Uriah is a more righteous man than David and refuses to take comfort from his wife while his men remain in battle.

In a desperate attempt to hide his shame, David sends Uriah to the front lines where he is inevitably killed in battle. David takes the pregnant Bathsheba as his wife to legitimize

her pregnancy, completing his deception and hiding his shame.

Yet, our omniscient God knows everything that we do and think. He saw David's sin and was grieved by it. He sent the prophet Nathan to confront David.

David sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, but ultimately his sin was against the Lord and he knew it. His sin was great, but his deception in a vain attempt to hide his guilt and shame was even greater. We get the sense that David was eaten by guilt when we read Psalm 32. He speaks of the effects of keeping silent in his sin. He describes it as:

- His bones wasting away
- Groaning all day long
- God's heavy hand upon him 24/7
- Exhaustion like in the heat of the summer

He's feeling physical and emotional symptoms as a result of his silence. He is racked by guilt, and it's eating away at him. No attempts to cover his shame and make things right will bring him relief. There's only one way to be free of this burden, and that way is through confession.

Psalm 32:5 tells us exactly how David found freedom from his guilt. He says, “I acknowledged my sin to you. I didn’t hide my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to Yahweh, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.’”

David couldn’t hide his sin from God any more than Adam and Eve could. The only way he could be free of sin’s burden was to confess it. Nathan confronting David in his sin was a grace to him. It led him to confession, forgiveness, and freedom. While the consequences of his sin continued to follow him in his life, guilt and shame did not.

If we are burdened by our sin and racked with guilt and shame, the only way to be free of it is to confess it to God. Forgiveness and freedom await us there.

Prayer

Father God, I have attempted to hide my guilt and shame from you. What a futile effort! I know you see my every thought and know my

sins better than I do. Forgive me for this vain attempt at hiding from you.

Help me resist the urge to hide my sin from you and the people who love me. Help me be free of this burden through confession, repentance, and change. Help me to run to you when I am tempted to run and hide.

You are faithful to forgive me and cleanse me of my sins. Help me to remember and trust this truth when I'm tempted to run and hide. Free me of this burdensome feeling of guilt and shame.

Thank you Jesus for dying for my sins. You took my burden upon yourself on the cross and replaced it with your easy, light burden. Forgive me for trying to hide from such beautiful, complete grace.

Father, I am weary from hiding my shame. Thank you for helping me bring it out into the light once and for all. Thank you for forgiving me and giving me your peace. In the name of Jesus, my savior, I pray. Amen.



CHAPTER 4:

No Condemnation

Verse for Today

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don’t walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death.”

Romans 8:1-2

Reflection

If anyone deserved the condemnation of God it would be the Apostle Paul, and he tells us all about it himself in Acts 22.

An educated Pharisee, he was a respected leader among the Jews with great power and

influence. He followed the letter of the law and had impeccable credentials. If Paul had been with Jesus in John Chapter 8, he might very well have taken Jesus up on his challenge, picked up a stone, and hurled it at the adulteress.

He was zealous in his faith, but more zealous against a new movement gaining momentum among the Jews.

Jesus of Nazareth had created a firestorm while he lived, but it was nothing compared to what happened after his death and supposed resurrection. His band of followers grew by the minute, and their influence could not be ignored.

Paul began persecuting the followers of Jesus. He dragged men and women from their homes, threw them in prison and delivered them to their deaths. He actually witnessed and approved the stoning of Stephen, an early church leader, for sharing the gospel unashamedly. He held the cloaks of the men throwing the stones at an innocent man.

God had other plans for Paul, however, and changed his life dramatically on that famous

road to Damascus. His radical conversion turned this evil persecutor into a powerful voice for the gospel. He shared the truth of Jesus and his work on the cross with Jews and Gentiles, planting churches and teaching until he himself was martyred.

Paul didn't receive the condemnation he deserved. Instead, he received the love of God. He received forgiveness, mercy, and grace. He met Jesus on that road, and he would never be the same. He now belonged to Jesus and became a part of the faith that he once tried to destroy.

It was this new Paul who could say with all authority, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Those of us who are in Christ, like Paul, are no longer under bondage to the law. We could never live up to the law anyway, and it will inevitably lead us to death.

It's through faith in Jesus that we are set free from the condemnation we deserve. We no longer have to live under guilt and shame. Jesus took that burden upon himself on the cross, setting us free from the law of sin and death. We now live by the Spirit.

God imparts to us the Holy Spirit, not to condemn us, but to convict our hearts. Paul tells the Corinthian church, “For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, which brings no regret. But the sorrow of the world produces death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10) We see our sin, repent of it, and receive God’s forgiveness.

Some of us continue to live under guilt and shame for things we have done because:

- We don’t fully understand the gospel
- We are believing the lies of the enemy
- We haven’t confessed our sins to God
- We are holding ourselves to an impossible standard
- We are letting others condemn us

If we live under this kind of self-inflicted condemnation, then we belittle Jesus’ work on the cross, reject his forgiveness, and burden ourselves unnecessarily. Because of Jesus, God no longer condemns us, nor should we condemn ourselves.

Prayer

Father God, You did not send Jesus to condemn me, but to save me. Yet I still experience guilt and shame. I still condemn myself and listen to the lies of the enemy. Forgive me for living under this self-inflicted burden.

Thank you, Jesus, for your work on the cross on my behalf. It thoroughly and completely paid the price for my sins that I could never pay. Forgive me for ever thinking that it wasn't enough or that I'm not worthy of this gift.

Father I have too long lived under my own condemnation. Free me from it once and for all. Bring to mind any sins I have yet to acknowledge, confess, and repent of. I know forgiveness is waiting for me, so help me embrace it and be free of shame and guilt.

You have been so good to me, Lord. Thank you from freeing me from the law of sin and death and giving me life and freedom through Jesus. In his name I pray. Amen.



CHAPTER 5:

The Power of Forgiveness

Verse for Today

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

1 John 1:8-9

Reflection

Jesus told his followers a poignant parable in Luke 15 that perfectly depicts the power of forgiveness.

A father had two sons, one who followed the letter of the law and the other who most definitely did not. The rebellious son came of

age and demanded his inheritance from his father. He was given the money and promptly left home without so much as a thank you, leaving his father and obedient brother behind.

The son traveled far and wide, squandering his father's money on wild living. He wasted every penny, ending up broke and desperate in a foreign land stricken by famine. He hits rock bottom while working in a pig pen, jealous that the pigs had food while he was starving. He finally came to his senses.

He says, "How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough to spare, and I'm dying with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will tell him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants'" (Luke 15:17-19).

He returns to his father's home, destitute and hungry with his proverbial tail between his legs. He knows that he deserves his father's condemnation, wrath, and anger.

He can only hope for mercy, but instead he receives lavish, extravagant grace. His father sees him coming, almost as if he had been

waiting by the door in the hope that his lost son would return. He runs to him, throws his arms around him, and receives him home without hesitation. He plans a celebration, and invites everyone to join him.

The father exclaims, "...for this, my son was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24). There is no guilt, only forgiveness. There is no shame, only compassion. There is no condemnation, only love. There is no anger, only joy. There is no punishment, only freedom.

This is a picture of the lavish love our heavenly father has for us.

We are all prodigal sons and daughters, who have sinfully rebelled in our own unique ways and deserve the wrath of God. The guilt and shame we feel as a result of that sin is warranted, but we shouldn't wallow in that "pig-pen" for long.

When we come to our father broken, contrite, and repentant, he runs to us with love, forgiveness, and mercy.

The Apostle John tells us in his first letter that if we confess our sins, our faithful and just God will forgive us of our sins and cleanse us of our unrighteousness. We don't have to clean ourselves up first. We don't have to make it right. We don't have to earn his favor. We don't have to explain ourselves. We don't have to offer a single thing.

David reminds us in Psalm 51 that God does not despise a broken and contrite spirit. He will never reject us when we come to him in our brokenness and need. He promises to forgive our sins and cleanse us of them when we come to him with a spirit of contrition, humility, and repentance.

God sent Jesus, his only son, to die on the cross for our sins. We are forgiven through him, and only need to come to him broken and contrite to receive his forgiveness. Yes, guilt is powerful, but forgiveness is life-giving and it's free to us through Jesus.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, the picture of your lavish grace told in the prodigal son parable overwhelms me. I have been that rebellious son, wallowing in a pig-pen of my own design and deserving nothing but your wrath. Yet you have greeted me with open arms and lavished me with your love. I do not deserve it.

Your word says that you will forgive me of my sins and cleanse me of my unrighteousness when I confess them to you. I stand on that promise and confess my sins to you here and now.

Thank you for forgiving me, loving me, and calling me your child. I do not deserve it but I receive it with thanksgiving. Help me to stand in this truth and reject the guilt that the enemy tries to burden me with. Help me reject the shame that I heap upon myself. Help me forgive myself as you have forgiven me.

Father, you have been so very good to me. Thank you for saving me, loving me, and forgiving me. Thank you Jesus, and it's in his name I pray. Amen.



CONCLUSION: Set Free

Verse for Today

"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor repaid us for our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his loving kindness toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

Psalm 103:10-12

Reflection

Guilt and shame are powerful emotions.

Whether we feel legitimate guilt over a sin we have committed or false guilt based on something out of our control, guilt can paralyze us, condemn us, and destroy us.

We often try to hide our shame, blame others for our sin, or fix everything so it all just goes away. We fail every time in these efforts, heaping more guilt and shame upon ourselves.

The Bible tells us that we've all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. We're all sheep that have gone astray. Not one of us is righteous no matter how hard we try. Even King David, a man after God's own heart, committed heinous sins that most of us wouldn't even dream of doing. None of us will live a righteous life.

Yet God doesn't leave us to our own devices. He knows we're sinners in need of his grace, and he gives it to us in abundance. David knew this, and sings of it in so many of his Psalms in words that should give us great hope.

Psalm 103 is one of those Psalms. In Psalm 103, David reveals that God doesn't deal with us as we deserve. David knew this truth better than anyone. He deserved God's wrath, but he got God's forgiveness.

God doesn't repay us for our iniquities, a punishment we could never bear.

Instead, he loves us with a love that is as high as the heavens are above the earth. He removes our sins as far as the east is from the west. He shows us the compassion of a father who recognizes the frailty of his beloved child and showers them with love, mercy, and grace.

God's love is lavish. His forgiveness is complete. His grace is sufficient and his mercies are new every morning. Thanks be to him for removing the burden of our shame and guilt and replacing it with his easy, light yoke of forgiveness, love, and grace.

Prayer

Father God, guilt and shame have been powerful forces in my life, but those days are over. You have set me free of these burdens and forgiven my sin. You've replaced them with grace and mercy, a yoke that is easy and light. I am free.

You have not dealt with me according to my sins or treated me as I deserve. Instead, you've shown me loving kindness as high as the

heavens are above the earth. You've removed my sins as far as the east is from the west. You've shown me the compassion of a father, and I don't deserve any of this.

Thank you for being so good to me. Thank you for forgiving my sins and freeing me from its burdens. Thank you for sending Jesus to take the punishment that I should have taken. Thank you for giving me life, love, and hope.

Help me to believe these truths that you have taught me when the lies of the enemy seek to steal, kill, and destroy. Help me to trust you and your word and not fall back into my old patterns of guilt and shame. I am a new creation in you, help me to live like it.

You have begun a new work in me through this study and I know you will complete it. Thank you for this and help me continue to glorify you in my life. In the name of Jesus my savior I pray. Amen.