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Freedom From Guilt

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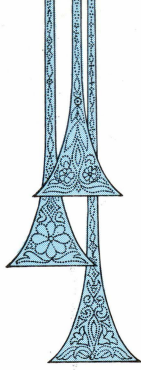
Freedom From Guilt

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Freedom From Guilt

He was found in a North-country trapper's station, dead, with a dishpan for a desk turned across his knees. In his skeleton hand was found a letter he had been writing at the time he died. "The sun is shining, Mother, but I feel so cold. I can still walk a little, but that's about all. There is no blood in me; I have not eaten for so long. I haven't seen another human being in forty days now. There are some magazines here, but the stories are so silly. The only thing I worry about is if God will forgive my sins."

Thus a final agony, the haunting fear of guilt, racked the soul of a young explorer in Canada years ago. But this canker of the soul is not restricted to lonely outposts hundreds of miles from civilization. Guilt is one of our most prevalent problems. Sensitive men and women have always experienced deep guilt created by real sin in their lives. When God's Old Testament people would not separate themselves from unbelievers with whom they lived, Ezra prayed, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God; for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our guiltiness is grown up into

the heavens" (Ezra 9:5, 6). David's prayer of "the suffering penitent" said, "There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine indignation; neither is there any health in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over my head: as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me" (Psalm 40:3, 4). Sound like the song of your burdened soul today?

The Psalms also record this guilty moan: "For innumerable evils have compassed me about; mine iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of my head; and my heart hath failed me" (Psalm 40:12). When David begins his famous plea for forgiveness recorded in Psalm 51, he openly confesses, "For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3). "My sin is ever before me" may summarize the very sorrow of many of our hearts this hour.

Wherever there is sin, there is guilt, either recognized by those aware of God and His way for men or unrecognized by those who blindly grope for themselves. But, obvious or hidden, guilt reaches into every life. I'll never forget a deeply religious woman whose record of church service was unsurpassed and whose quality of life was above suspicion. She had carried the burden of pre-marital sexual misconduct with the man that she later married through more than ten years of an apparently happy marriage. She, and God, knew the burden of guilt.

Then there was the unwed mother bearing the double burden of her recognition of personal sin as well as the unforgiving attitudes of her family and friends. (I have also wondered about what kind of thoughts well up within the heart and mind of an unwed father as he goes his own way through life.) How many alcoholics have I counseled with, who had either successfully quit drinking but could not quit punishing themselves, or were only partially successful with this ruinous habit and bore the guilt of their own failures as well as the knowledge of burdens created for those who loved them. Of course, there is the young businessman who cannot forgive himself the mistakes he has made in business, and it's slowly wearing him down. Then there is the aged Christian man I talked with many times in an Ohio city. He had become a Christian only late in life. His new joy, however, never seemed to measure up to his bitter remembrance of a wasted youth and manhood. The poet spoke the hard truth in describing guilt as "the worm that will not sleep, and never dies."

The Old Testament speaks plainly about this matter of guilt. During Isaac's residence in Gerar among the Philistines, he represented his wife, Rebekah, as his sister lest the men of the land kill him for her. When Abimelech,

king of the Philistines, learned about this subterfuge, he rebuked Isaac for allowing the possibility of guilt through immorality to arise among his people (Genesis 26:10).

The Levitical code was emphatic about the kind of actions and attitudes that produced guilt. The Third Commandment specified as guilty all who used God's name in vain, in cursing (Exodus 20:7). The two tribes, Reuben and Gad, made a covenant with the remaining ten tribes of Israel about their participation in the liberation of Canaan. Moses warned the leaders of these two tribes that a breaker of covenants would be counted guilty before God (Numbers 32:22). Any kind of false oath created guilt in the swearer's life (Joshua 2:17). The violation of God's law on any count (Leviticus 4:13; 5:2) and the violation of others' rights (Leviticus 6:4-6) caused the offending individual to become guilty. Jehovah instructed Moses to say to the people, "When a man or woman shall commit any sin that men commit, so as to trespass against Jehovah, and that soul shall be guilty; then he shall confess his sin which he hath done; and he shall make restitution for his guilt in full, and add unto it the fifth part thereof, and give it unto him in respect of whom he hath been guilty" (Numbers 5:5-7).

To simplify such an involved and complex matter as human guilt, we can say that basically there are two kinds of guilt: healthy, constructive guilt, and unhealthy, destructive guilt. Those who experience a healthy kind of guilt come to a recognition of sin in their lives proceeding on the basis of that realization to do something about the condition. Unhealthy guilt, on the other hand, creates remorse and selfish sorrow, but usually nothing more. Such persons, even if they recognize sin in their lives, make themselves believe that their guilt is gone, simply because they will not permit themselves to think about it or realistically face it. Such an attitude is the source of much physical, mental, and spiritual sorrow as this internalized guilt, that is, guilt turned loose within one's mind, slowly eats away at one's moral and spiritual self. Ultimately, a kind of self-hate arises so strongly that suicide or some other equally destructive pattern of life erupts to blight the soul.

Someone has said that "Guilt in its healthy use becomes somewhat analogous to fever in the organism, an inner signal that something is wrong and needs to be corrected" (p. 115, Carroll A. Wise, *The Meaning of Pastoral Care*). Moses' law recognized the necessity of constructive guilt and so gave the wrongdoer these instructions. "And it shall be, when he shall be guilty in one of these things, that he shall confess that wherein he hath sinned: and he

shall bring his trespass-offering unto Jehovah for his sin which he hath sinned, . . . and the priest shall make atonement for him as concerning his sin" (Leviticus 5:5, 6).

Nowhere is the result of healthy guilt seen more clearly than in Jesus' story of the prodigal son. In the midst of the swine that he herded — the result of a life of wasteful, sensual activity — Luke tells us "he came to himself." Whereupon he reasoned of home, the object of his rebellion. He made a decision, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15:17-19). The healthiness of his guilt is revealed in the next verse when we read that "he arose, and came to his father" making the very confession that he had made to himself and God among the hogs (Luke 15:20, 21)!

The real lesson for each one of us is the marvelous and immediate reception that his forgiving father, who stands for our heavenly Father, gave the returning prodigal. This is the picture of healthy, constructive guilt.

But millions of people, in and out of our churches, find themselves today the slaves of an unhealthy, destructive guilt. Psychiatry knows a state or condition known as "guilt-illness." Its symptoms include severe and prolonged periods of depression, self-persecution, self-punishment, and other manifestations of a morbid selfishness. Paul's cry in Romans is one of guilt, "Wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" The big difference between Paul and many of us comes in the next verse. Hear his exclamation of victory over guilt. "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:25). Paul's guilt prompted his surrender to God through Christ and kept him in surrender, and thus in a state of guiltlessness for the remainder of his life. Destructive guilt, on the other hand, is what Paul refers to as "the sorrow of the world" in II Corinthians 7. Listen, "For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which bringeth no regret: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (II Corinthians 7:10).

The mentally healthy person, and especially the individual responsive to God's Word, will react in the following ways to guilt. First, one will criticize objectively his behavior. Second, this kind of person will experience genuine grief at his or her wrong. Third, the person experiencing healthy guilt will reach a decision about the sin in his or her life. Fourth, this kind of person will seek to "put it right," this wrong that exists or the sin that has arisen. This is the kind of approach the Bible teaches.

At this point, I want you to know that Christ is God's answer to guilt in our lives. The alarming increase in drug usage, the fantastic sums being spent on psychiatric care, and the many self-help groups now arising testifies to modern man's quest for an answer to guilt. Again, I repeat, Christ is God's answer to our guilt.

God made "his soul an offering for our sin," Isaiah predicted hundreds of years before Christ (Isaiah 53:10). As the prophet also pictured, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and Jehovah hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). Christ was "made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (II Corinthians 5:21). His life purchased us from our bondage to sin (Matthew 20:28; Galatians 4:4, 5). By God's design and good pleasure, Christ made peace for us with all creation (Colossians 1:19, 20). Christ, by His death, removed the barriers that kept men alienated for centuries (Colossians 1:21, 22; Ephesians 2:11-18). He actually made available to man the righteousness of God, that is, to all believers in Him as God's Son (Romans 3:21-25). As opposed to the weak and ineffective animal sacrifices involved in the Old Testament approach to guilt, Christ's blood cleanses one's "conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:13, 14). My guilt-ridden friend, God does not watch for your slightest slip or smallest error. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him" (John 3:16, 17). "There (at the cross, jac) we can face guilt without being destroyed by anxiety. There we can afford to know ourselves as God knows us" (p. 139, Robert J. St. Clair, *Neurotics In The Church*).

This matchless gift of freedom from guilt one can know only in Christ. And it is just that, a gift of God. God hereby secured for sinful, confused humanity lasting relief from this burden. But a gift, even God's gift to each of us, must be accepted and made our own possession. This explains why Jesus was so explicit about how one surrenders to Him and how one follows Him. The New Testament provides an inspired explanation of how God's gift of freedom from guilt in Christ can be mine!

Jesus says that I have to die to myself. "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39). This means that we so completely let Him take control of our lives that, in Paul's words, we can say, "I have been crucified with

Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Not just a rational belief but a faith so strong that repentance, godly sorrow that works a complete turn in my life, occurs (II Corinthians 7:10; Acts 2:38). At this point comes my public declaration of allegiance to Jesus as my Lord or Master. "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Romans 10:9). These acts or conditions of heart prepare me for union with Christ in baptism. Jesus taught the necessity of faith as a condition prior to one's baptism (Mark 16:16). Peter, in the first gospel sermon preached after the ascension, required repentance prior to baptizing the three thousand that day in Jerusalem (Acts 2:38). And Philip, prior to fulfilling the request for baptism made by an Ethiopian statesman, asked him to confess his faith in Jesus as the Son of God (Acts 8:36-38). Nowhere is the real significance of baptism as part of God's method for our release from guilt made more meaningful than in Paul's sixth chapter of Romans. Listen carefully as I read: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein? Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin" (Romans 6:1-6).

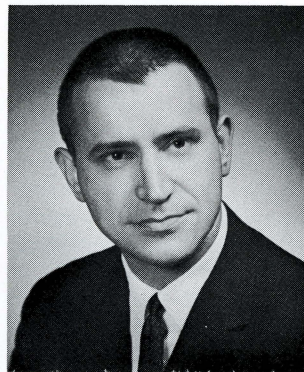
That's how simple God's pardon, your freedom from guilt, really is. Why guess at forgiveness? Why stake your life, here and hereafter, on the human assurances of either doctor or priest? God's gift of salvation in Christ is man's freedom from sin and guilt. But if God gives the gift, why not let Him specify the manner by which we accept this wonderful salvation? And that is what He has done in His Word we have studied today.

The pardon, liberty, and freedom about which I speak not only occurs once in a lifetime at one's decision to obey God, but also becomes, from that point forward, a continuing reality in the Christian's life. In other words, the Christian neither fears nor harbors guilt. John assures us, "But if we really are living in the same light in which

he eternally exists, then we have true fellowship with each other, and the blood which his Son shed for us keeps us clean from all sin" (I John 1:7; J. B. Phillips).

Let me ask you this question, "Have you underestimated God's power to forgive you?" An Old Testament prophet declares, "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth over the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger forever, because he delighteth in lovingkindness. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18, 19). I'm told that the oceans cover seventy-two per cent of the earth's surface to an average depth of 11,500 feet with the Nero Deep off Guam Island more than 31,000 feet deep. If Mt. Everest were dropped into the Nero Deep, the sea would still cover it by half a mile. Again let me ask, "Have you underestimated God's power to forgive you?"

Why persist in sin and the guilt sin produces? Someone has said, "Every guilty person is his own hangman." Jesus came to secure for you and me release from the certain destruction of sin and guilt. And so today He becomes "unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation" (Hebrews 5:8, 9).



John Allen Chalk, dynamic evangelist and long-time radio speaker, is the first full-time speaker on the Herald of Truth radio program.

He began his work with the Herald of Truth on January 1, 1966. Previously, Chalk was the featured personality in a 13 week Herald of Truth television series.

A native of Lexington, Tennessee, he began preaching at 15. Chalk and his wife and two children now live in Abilene, Texas where he spends full time working with the Herald of Truth.

He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, "The Praying Christ and Other Sermons" and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville's Young Man of the Year in 1963.