

Freeing the Guilty Heart

Vertical: Our Relationship with God

“I am convinced that the greatest single cause of spiritual defeat is a guilty conscience.”

Erwin Lutzer

Elaine sat alone in her living room, fingered the photograph in her hand, and tried to hold back the tears. The image showed a mother and her five-year-old daughter with their arms around each other, beaming for the camera. The mother was Elaine’s niece. The five-year-old was the first granddaughter of Elaine’s sister. Elaine could see the family resemblance in the little girl’s smile. It reminded her of her sister, even a bit of Elaine herself.

I could have been a grandmother now, Elaine thought. That could be my daughter and granddaughter smiling at the camera. On holidays, I could have had a houseful of children and grandchildren gathered around the dining room table, and my husband—

Elaine couldn’t hold back any longer. The tears flowed down her cheeks. She made no attempt to wipe them away. *If only...*

It had happened forty years ago. She’d been sixteen at the time and living in Ohio. When Elaine had learned she was pregnant, she didn’t know what to do. She wasn’t ready to be a mother. Her parents were so disappointed and ashamed. Elaine herself was overwhelmed, nearly distraught. An abortion seemed the only solution. She didn’t tell her parents until after it was over, after that horrible visit to the clinic downtown.

From that point on, everything in Elaine’s life changed. Her parents still insisted she marry the father. That union lasted only a few months; Elaine had it annulled. She graduated from high school and met an older, studious boy named Steve. He wanted to

teach. They fell in love, married when Elaine was nineteen, and moved to the west coast when Steve graduated from college.

Thirty-six years later, Steve was a professor of history at an Oregon university. They'd tried without success to have children. It was a deep and mostly unspoken disappointment for both of them. An even greater strain on their marriage was the guilt Elaine carried with her over the abortion. Night after night, the terrible conversation with her conscience continued. *What was I thinking? I killed my child. I threw away the only chance I'll ever have for a son or daughter. How could I have been so blind? What will I tell my precious boy or girl when we meet in heaven? How can I ever explain or justify what I've done?*

Elaine confessed her mistake repeatedly to God. She knew from her Bible that the Lord forgives and forgets. Yet she never allowed *herself* to forget.

Then came the day when Steve gently confronted her. Their relationship had no life to it, he'd said. They'd grown apart. He'd found someone else, a woman who worked at the university. The marriage was over. He was moving out.

For Elaine, Steve's departure simply added another layer of guilt. She believed her constant brooding over the years had poisoned their marriage. She had driven Steve into the arms of another woman. Elaine lost all hope of happiness. She was drowning in guilt. She rarely went out and hardly spoke to her friends. She didn't try to find a job. She no longer went to church. What was the point?

Seven Traps

For more than four decades, Elaine carried a heavy burden of guilt. It affected her marriage, her spiritual walk, and every other aspect of her life. She had confessed her sin and been forgiven of her sin by God, yet she was living in defeat.

You may be thinking, *It's not supposed to work like that*—and you're right. The Lord does not want us to live with guilt. It is one of the most painful emotions in human experience. It is a plague on our soul that poisons everything we think and do. Guilt is

like a tiny weed that, if allowed to grow unchecked, can take over your heart and your life.

Pastor and bestselling author Rick Warren has written, “Many people are driven by guilt. They spend their entire lives running from regrets and hiding their shame. Guilt-driven people are manipulated by memories. They allow their past to control their future. They often unconsciously punish themselves by sabotaging their own success.”¹

Elaine was a person who continually punished herself. She allowed her past mistakes to limit her future. Her heart was trapped by guilt. How did it happen to her? How does the same thing happen to so many of us? Are you trapped by guilt right now?

I believe there are seven traps that most often ensnare us. Let’s look at each of the seven.

1) Confession is not complete. One reason for guilt is a partial confession. We may have admitted to borrowing the car without permission, but neglected to mention the huge dent in the back fender. We feel guilty because we *are* guilty. We haven’t owned our own stuff.

The Bible says, “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Proverbs 28:13). It also says, “But if we freely admit that we have sinned, we find him reliable and just—he forgives our sins and makes us thoroughly clean from all that is evil” (1 John 1:9 PHILLIPS).

An incomplete confession is a black stain on our hearts. God will wipe it clean only when we reveal our hearts and all of our sins. Excuses and rationalizations only prolong the pain.

2) Repentance is not genuine. It is possible to say the words and not mean any of them. When a husband tells his wife, “I’m sorry I gambled away our paycheck. I blew it. Please forgive me,” and then does the same thing two weeks later, his repentance may not be real.

In the book of Jeremiah, God says, “Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense” (Jeremiah 3:10). Confession without genuine repentance is meaningless. The apostle Paul wrote, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to

salvation and leaves no regret” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Repentance must include a heartfelt sorrow for sin and a decisive turning away from evil.

3) Restitution is lacking. Maybe we have confessed our mistakes, owned and turned from our sin, and still there is guilt. If we have taken advantage of someone, we must go to them and make things right. In the Old Testament, we see that if a man steals livestock, he is expected to pay back four or five times what he took. If a man allows his livestock to graze in another man’s field, restitution is expected. If a man starts a fire, he must pay for the damages (Exodus 22:1–6).

Guilt will continue to reside in our hearts until we settle with those we have harmed. As the theologian Augustine once said, “Without restitution, no remission.”

4) Satan is accusing. The devil does not want us to forget the terrible things we’ve done. He uses our mistakes to accuse us of being evil and undeserving of God’s love. For forty years after her abortion, Elaine heard those accusations. Even when she made a conscious effort to put the abortion out of her mind, she was haunted by thoughts of unworthiness.

A man named Joe is one of my longtime friends. I was the best man at his wedding. But that marriage blew apart after twenty-plus years. The next one didn’t last either. Joe blames himself for both divorces. He says he was harsh and insensitive with both wives, and that as a pastor, he put his ministry ahead of his family. He eventually gave up his ministry and grew distant from God. Recently, after Joe had restored his relationship with the Lord, I encouraged him to get back into the game. “I can’t do it, Dennis,” he said. “I’ve blown it and I can’t forget it.”

I believe both Elaine and Joe were under spiritual attack. Satan was doing his best to keep them trapped in the dark world of guilt. Scripture describes the devil as an accuser: “For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down” (Revelation 12:10). He uses accusations as a weapon to sustain our guilt.

5) Others are unforgiving. It isn’t easy to move past the guilt when a spouse, friend, son, or daughter keeps bringing up your past mistakes. When a husband tells his

wife, “I’ll stay married to you, but I’ll never forgive you for your affair,” the pain of guilt can feel like repeated stabs with a knife.

David once said, “I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men” (2 Samuel 24:14). David understood that men and women have a desire for revenge. When someone is hurt, so often the response is to hurt back. Without forgiveness, it may continue day after day, year after year.

6) Circumstances keep reminding. When we’re constantly faced with the result of our sin, it’s harder to put it behind us. Elaine connected her abortion to the breakup of her marriage. For her, Steve’s absence was a continuing reminder of her mistakes.

Sometimes the past can’t be restored: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me” (Psalm 51:3). Divorce leads to an empty house. Careless driving leaves a family member confined to a wheelchair. Murder leads to a lifelong prison term. When circumstances continually confront us with our sin, guilt often follows.

7) We are continually rehearsing. We have a great ability to forget what we want to remember—where we left our car keys, the password to our Internet account—and to remember what we want to forget. Elaine could not seem to forget about her abortion. She had trained her mind to focus almost daily on what had happened, and nearly let it destroy her life. I have had similar struggles. It’s so easy to rehash the past and beat ourselves up over what we’ve done.

David could easily have been thinking of Elaine or me when he wrote, “For I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me. I confess my iniquity, I am troubled by my sin” (Psalm 38:17–18).

If we repeat thoughts and internal accusations such as *What a jerk I am*, *How stupid of me*, *I blew it*, and *I’m no good* often enough, we’ll eventually believe them. That’s not where God wants us to go.

I urge you to carefully consider right now the causes of guilt we’ve just discussed. Is Satan using any of these to keep you from God’s peace? Are you feeling guilty without

even realizing it? Have you, like Elaine, needlessly endured years of suffering for a mistake that's already been forgotten by God?

It's not supposed to work like that. The Lord has another plan.

Powerful Resolutions

Let's say that you *have* identified a mistake—a sin—that continues to bring guilt into your life. Maybe, like Elaine, it was an abortion. Maybe you blew your family's savings account on a drunken binge. Or you invented a lie that ruined a reputation. Or you stole from your employer. Or the last time you saw your father, you had a vicious argument that ended with hurtful words.

Whatever it is, you *can* free your heart of this burden. The place to start is to ask yourself these questions and answer each one honestly:

Have I confessed all of my sin to God?

Have I asked for His forgiveness?

Is my repentance genuine?

Have I gone to everyone my sin has harmed and tried to make things right?

If the answer to any of these questions is “No,” then you have work to do! You cannot expect to break free of guilt unless you are willing to make the effort to throw off the shackles. God will guide you on the correct path, but you must take the steps. Don't put it off—your happiness depends on dealing with this issue today.

I tell people who have completely confessed their sin to the Lord, genuinely repented, and made restitution that they should never confess that sin again. God does not reintroduce forgiven sin. Repeated confessions are proof that we are relying on our feelings instead of our faith. We must take God at His Word—we are free to forget what He has freely and fully forgiven.

W. M. Czamanske once wrote, “In response to the question, ‘Do you feel that you have been forgiven?’ Martin Luther answered, ‘No, but I'm as sure as there's a God in heaven. For feelings come and feelings go, and feelings are deceiving; my warranty is the Word of God—nothing else is worth believing. Though all my heart should feel

condemned for want of some sweet token, there is One greater than my heart whose Word cannot be broken. I'll trust in God's unchanging Word till soul and body sever; for though all things shall pass away, His Word shall stand forever!"

As you move through these powerful resolutions to feelings of guilt, keep in mind three spiritual truths. They will give you the confidence you need as you speak with God and those you have hurt. They will help you drop your burden of guilt on the side of the road and leave it there as you journey into the future He has planned for you.

1) All my sins are out of God's sight. When King Hezekiah offered a prayer of gratitude to the Lord for restoring his health, he said, "You have put all my sins behind your back" (Isaiah 38:17). This is what theologians call an anthropomorphic statement—using human terms to describe something that is hard to grasp. If something is behind your back, you don't see it. All of our forgiven sins are behind His back.

Put another way, God has "swept away your sins like the morning mists. I have scattered your offenses like the clouds" (Isaiah 44:22 NLT). The Lord takes the deepest, darkest stain and totally and permanently removes it. All of our forgiven sins are removed from His sight.

2) All my sins are out of God's reach. Just how far away are our forgiven sins? According to David, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). The most powerful telescope cannot bring our sins into focus.

Jerry Bridges, in his book *Transforming Grace*, explains further: "If you start due north at any point on earth, you would eventually cross over the North Pole and start going south, but that is not true when you go east or west. If you start west and continue in that direction, you will always be going west. North and south meet at the North Pole, but east and west never meet. In a sense, they are an infinite distance apart. So when God says He removes our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west, He is saying they have been removed an infinite distance from us. But how can we get a 'handle' on this rather abstract truth in such a way that it becomes meaningful in our lives?

“When God uses this expression to describe the extent of His forgiveness, He is saying His forgiveness is total, complete, and unconditional. He is saying He is not keeping score with regard to our sins...How can God possibly do this? The answer is by His grace through Jesus Christ.”²

3) All my sins are out of God’s mind. What God forgives, He forgets: “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). When we bring to the Lord sins that have been confessed and forgiven, He says to us, “If you want to remember what I forgot, that is your privilege. But I would suggest you learn to forget what I have forgotten!”

It takes a mature faith to accept God’s forgiveness and forgive ourselves. David Allen describes it this way: “Mature spirituality requires the dethronement of guilt and bitter feelings as we recognize the total forgiveness provided through God’s love. That means emptying our negative feelings daily at the cross and allowing the grace of God to fill the gap between the real and ideal levels of our life.”³

Trading guilt for grace is a daily process. You may find it difficult, especially at first. The more you nourish your faith, the easier it will be.

Purposeful Responses

A boy named Johnny was staying with his grandparents on their farm. They gave him a slingshot to play with. He practiced with a target in the woods but could never seem to hit it. One day, after a particularly discouraging day in the woods, he headed back to the farmhouse for dinner. On the way he spied his grandmother’s pet duck. On impulse, Johnny armed his slingshot, aimed at the duck, and let fly. To Johnny’s amazement, the rock hit the duck square on the head, killing it.

Johnny couldn’t believe it. In a panic, he hid the duck in a pile of wood. When he turned around, there stood his sister, Sally. She had seen it all but said nothing.

After the children’s lunch the next day, their grandmother said, “Sally, let’s wash the dishes.”

Sally said, “Grandma, Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen.” She whispered to Johnny, “Remember the duck?” So Johnny did the dishes.

Later that day, Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, “I’m sorry, but Sally will have to stay. I need her help to make supper.”

Sally smiled. “Maybe I can go, because Johnny told me he wanted to help with supper.” Johnny again heard his sister’s whisper: “Remember the duck?” So Sally went fishing and Johnny stayed behind to help.

For the next several days, Johnny did his own chores and Sally’s. Finally, he couldn’t stand it any longer. He walked up to his grandmother and with tears in his eyes confessed that he had killed the duck.

His grandmother knelt down, gave Johnny a hug, and said, “Sweetheart, I know. You see, I was standing at the window and I saw the whole thing. But because I love you, I forgave you. I was just wondering how long you would let Sally make a slave of you.”

Sooner or later, we all mess up. We make mistakes that offend God and hurt others. The devil will use those mistakes to make us his slaves.

The question becomes, how do we respond to our mistakes? Do we hang onto our guilt and allow the devil to use it against us? Or do we give our mistakes and our guilt to God and ask Him to forgive us? Remember, the Lord already knows about it. He was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. He loves us and is ready to forgive us.

As you consider your response to your sin and feelings of guilt, I recommend you run through the following checklist. It may help you to put guilt in its place.

- ✓ **Recognize** the author of recurring bad memories. Satan loves to bring up your past and destroy your future. As someone has said, “When Satan reminds you of your past, you remind him of his future!”
- ✓ **Resist** the devil’s accusations. Don’t let him set the agenda. Keep turning to the Lord and eventually the enemy will quit hassling you: “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

How did Jesus respond to the devil’s temptations in the desert? He repeatedly turned to God’s Word, the sword of the Spirit: “It is written...” (Matthew 4:4); “It is

also written... (Matthew 4:7); “Away from me, Satan! For it is written... (Matthew 4:10). Memorize those statements and use them to fight back. Tell the enemy, “I won’t go there!”

- ✓ **Remember** that the cross is the only way to deal with your past. Jesus died for *all* our sins—past, present, and future. The cross and the empty tomb stand between us and the haunting memories of the past. Let Paul’s words encourage you: “God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:13–15).
- ✓ **Refuse** to punish yourself by remembering and rehearsing past sins. Say to yourself, “I won’t do that!” Randy Alcorn has written, “Refusing to forgive ourselves is an act of pride—it’s making ourselves and our sins bigger than God and His grace.”⁴ We cannot see the way forward in our journey as Christians if we are constantly looking in the rearview mirror of our past mistakes.
- ✓ **Rejoice** in God’s complete forgiveness—sing to and praise Him. Turn your moans and groans about what you’ve done into words and songs of gratitude for God’s love and mercy. Remember the words of David: “He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along. He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God” (Psalm 40:2–3 NLT).

Commit to working through these responses to guilt feelings and you will be on your way to freedom. Leave thoughts of *if only* and *I should have* behind. You don’t have to “sell” God on your sincerity. He already knows your heart. He wants to renew it with His grace.

A Guilt-Free Life

Remember Elaine, the woman who had the abortion? She came to see me not long after the divorce from her husband, Stephen. I could see immediately how distressed she was. As she explained her story, I understood just how long and how deep her entrapment went. She had been a slave to guilt for most of her life.

As we talked, I explained to Elaine that through God's grace, no sin is too great for Him to pardon, that His forgiveness extends as far as east is from west. We talked about how the Lord wanted her to take a stand against Satan and regain control of her thoughts.

The more we discussed these things, the more I began to observe flickers of hope in Elaine's eyes. I could see relief, even a hint of joy. Her journey out of the trap of guilt was only just beginning, but for the first time in perhaps many years, Elaine was picturing the guilt-free path God wanted for her life.

He wants that same path for you too. He desires to have a relationship with you that is unobstructed by guilt. He wants your heart to be free. If guilt is holding you back, I urge you to read this chapter again and put these principles into practice. I can guarantee that they work, because they don't come from me—they come from the Lord. They are your keys to a guilt-free life.

And if you've determined that guilt isn't your problem...please keep reading.
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A Thought to Remember

The cross and the empty tomb stand between us and the haunting memories of the past.

A Verse to Review

"As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

Psalms 103:12

A Question for Reflection

Do you really believe God has fully forgiven and forgotten *all* of your sins?