

Guilt and an Unforgiven Conscience

The Bible declares that “*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). Because of that, guilt is real and manifests itself in our lives as the result of sin and conviction by God's Spirit (see John 16:8-11).

Perhaps the clearest illustration of guilt and forgiveness in the Scripture is King David's adultery with Bathsheba and his attempt to cover up his sin by having her husband Uriah set up to lose his life on the battlefield.

The story is recorded in 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12. David's descent starts small enough:

2 Samuel 11:1 *In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. (NIV)*

Where should David have been? Why do you think he stayed at home?

However, his situation soon began to escalate. Read and record what happened.

2 Samuel 11:2-4 ² *One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful,³ and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?"⁴ Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (She had purified herself from her uncleanness.) Then she went back home. (NIV)*

Finally, it all mushroomed out of control. Read verses 5-27 and summarize the events.

⁵ *The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant."⁶ So David sent this word to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent him to David.⁷ When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going.⁸ Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him.⁹ But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house.*

When David was told, "Uriah did not go home," he asked him, "Haven't you just come from a distance? Why didn't you go home?" ¹¹ Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!" ¹² Then David said to him, "Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. ¹³ At David's invitation, he ate and drank with him, and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master's servants; he did not go home.

¹⁴ In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. ¹⁵ In it he wrote, "Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die." ¹⁶ So while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were. ¹⁷ When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David's army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died.

¹⁸ Joab sent David a full account of the battle. ¹⁹ He instructed the messenger: "When you have finished giving the king this account of the battle, ²⁰ the king's anger may flare up, and he may ask you, 'Why did you get so close to the city to fight? Didn't you know they would shoot arrows from the wall?' ²¹ Who killed Abimelech son of Jerub-Besheth? Didn't a woman throw an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died in Thebez? Why did you get so close to the wall?' If he asks you this, then say to him, 'Also, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead.'"

²² The messenger set out, and when he arrived he told David everything Joab had sent him to say. ²³ The messenger said to David, "The men overpowered us and came out against us in the open, but we drove them back to the entrance to the city gate. ²⁴ Then the archers shot arrows at your servants from the wall, and some of the king's men died. Moreover, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead."

²⁵ David told the messenger, "Say this to Joab: 'Don't let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another. Press the attack against the city and destroy it.' Say this to encourage Joab."

²⁶ When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. ²⁷ After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD. (NIV)

Finally, in chapter 12, one year later, the prophet Nathan comes and rebukes David, prompting the confession of his sin.

¹ The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴ "Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! (NIV)

How do you think David felt when Nathan approached him and told his parable (v.1-5) and then said, "You are the man!" (v.7).

I. Psalm 51

It was probably at this time that David penned the twin psalms of confession, numbers 51 and 32. Psalm 51 was probably first, written during the anguish of his guilt and describing the need for confession. Psalm 32 followed, written after the anguish of guilt had been resolved, and describes the blessings of forgiveness. Let's look at Psalm 51 first.

Psalm 51 can be outlined as follows:

Forgiven – v. 1-6 Restored – v. 7-12 Useful – v. 13-19

Read verses 1-6 and describe David's attitude toward his sins.

¹ When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. ⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. ⁶ Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. (NIV)

C. S. Lewis observed that the “better” a person becomes, the more sensitive he is to his sins; and the “worse” he becomes, the less he is aware of his sins. The longer we walk with the Lord, the more we become aware of the need to keep “short accounts” with God, confessing our sins to Him regularly.

Two significant references on the confession of sin are Proverbs 28:13 and 1 John 1:9. Read those verses and summarize what they say to you.

Proverbs 28:13 *He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (NIV)*

1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (NIV)*

Now read Psalm 51:7-12. How did David feel about being restored back into fellowship with God?

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (NIV)

Finally, read verses 13-19. Describe how David expected God to use him in the future.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar. (NIV)

II. Psalm 32

Psalm 32 naturally follows Psalm 51 and describes the blessings of forgiveness and exhorts others to walk with the Lord.

Referring to this outline, read the entire Psalm.

1. The Blessings of Forgiveness - 32:1-5

- a. Forgiveness of sin - v. 1, 2
- b. Conviction of sin - v. 3, 4
- c. Confession of sin - v. 5

2. The Exhortation to Others - 32:6-11

- a. Provision - v. 6-8
 - 1) Instruction - v. 6
 - 2) Protection - v. 7
 - 3) Guidance - v. 8
- b. Application - v. 9-11
 - 1) Don't be stubborn! v. 9
 - 2) Make your choice! v. 10
 - 3) Remain firm! v. 11

Psalm 32:1-11 *Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ² Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. ³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" -- and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah ⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. ⁷ You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. ⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. ¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. ¹¹ Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart! (NIV)*

Everyone has known the misery of living with a guilty conscience. Look again at verses 3-4 and call to mind a time when you experienced what those words describe. Now read verse 5 - what a magnificent relief! God frees us not only from the sin but from the guilt as well. Thank God for both!

Read verse 7. David describes the Lord in three ways. What are they?

Fix your mind on those three comforting concepts. Instead of seeing God as an angry Judge, ready to bring down his judgment, recall the safety of His “presence,” the security of His “preservation,” and His peaceful “songs of deliverance.”

Finally, look at the last verse of this psalm. What are we commanded to do?

Are you a person of contagious joy? If not, ask the Lord to restore to you “the joy of your salvation” (Psalm 51:12) and to give you the spirit of rejoicing that you once had. You are forgiven, forever free from the penalty of sin. What could be better than that?

Suggested Reading

The Sacred Romance, Brent Curtis and John Eldredge

The Grace Awakening, Charles R. Swindoll