

Are You Feeling Guilty Of Past Sins?

God's Mercy And Forgiveness

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Have you ever noticed how a child will pick at and aggravate and become obsessed with an injury? Even though it is in the process of healing, whether it is a cut or a sore or a scab, a child will worry a Band-Aid off to look at and fixate on the wound. Because it is not left alone to heal, a child's interference will prolong the healing process and sometimes will make it worse by tearing it open, or by introducing bacteria into it causing an infection.

Sometimes Christians do a similar thing with their past sins which are already forgiven. Obsessing over past sins may cause unnecessary imbalance and damage to a person's physical and spiritual condition. Are you feeling guilty of a past sin?

A Christian must learn to maintain a balance between mind and heart and will. This requires a good conscience. In his first epistle to Timothy, Paul speaks of this.

I Timothy 1:19-20 Having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

Faith and a good conscience prevent us from having a spiritual breakdown—a mental shipwreck.

Lack of balance is one of the great causes not only of unhappiness, but of failure and of stumbling in a Christian's life. Experience and the history of the church show that very clearly.

The fact is that there are always Christians who are in difficulties for various reasons. If simply to believe and to accept salvation is everything, then the New Testament epistles would never have been needed. People would just

be saved and go on happily for the rest of their lives as Christians. But there is abundant evidence that this is not the case.

These people to whom Paul is referring to were called into the early church, had believed, and had become Christian; and yet it was necessary for Paul, Peter, and John and others to write letters to them because they were in trouble in one way or another. They were unhappy for various reasons; they were not enjoying their Christian life. Some were longingly looking back at their pre-conversion life in the world; others were severely tempted, and others cruelly persecuted.

Thus the very existence of the New Testament epistles shows us that unhappiness is a condition that does afflict members of God's church. Just because a Christian is unhappy or troubled is not necessarily an indication that he is not a Christian. Actually, if a person has never had any trouble in his Christian life, he probably is not a true Christian. There is such a thing as false peace; there is such a thing as believing delusions.

All of the New Testament and the history of the church throughout the centuries bear eloquent testimony to the fact that this is a demanding 'fight of faith,' and not to have any troubles is not necessarily a good sign. Because from the moment we become Christians we become the special objects of the attention of Satan, that is no surprise, and we battle him on a daily basis. As he harassed and attacked Jesus Christ, so does he hassle and assault all of God's people. The apostle James says, 'Count it all joy' when you fall into various trials.

That is the way our faith is proven, because not only is it a test of our faith, in a sense, it is a proof that we have faith. It is because we belong to Christ that Satan will do his utmost to disturb and upset us. He cannot rob us of our salvation, but while he cannot rob us of that, he can make us miserable at times.

He can, if we are foolish enough to listen to him, seriously limit our enjoyment of our conversion. That is precisely what he tries to do constantly, and that in turn is why we have this teaching and instruction in the New Testament epistles.

In chapter 1 of I Timothy, we are going to consider one very common way that Satan attacks along this line.

It is the one suggested (not only by I Timothy 1:16), where Paul says, "However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life." You see this in the entire chapter all the way to the end.

The problem here is the case of those who are 'miserable' Christians and are suffering from spiritual depression because of their past—either because of some particular sin in their past, or because of the particular form that sin happened to take place in their case. As a rule their focus is some action, some exploit that may or may not have involved other people, sometimes it is some wrong committed by them.

Generally, it is one thing, some significant thing; and that is the thing they constantly look back to focus on. They harp on it and they cannot leave it alone. They are always analyzing it, scrutinizing it, and condemning themselves because of it. And the result is that they are miserable. Sometimes it is something that they said, some word that they once spoke.

Most people have something they have said or done in their past that haunts them. Even people in God's church suffer from this guilty feeling because of past wrongs. And it makes for a miserable memory, and it is a wretched feeling.

In other cases the trouble may be the bondage of some promise that was made but never kept. Sometimes during illnesses people make promises to God that if only He would heal them, they would do such and such. But they do not keep their promises and now it may be too late, so the guilt hangs over their head like a wet blanket. They are miserable and held in the grip of this one thing.

People in the church who are in this kind of condition may seem quite clear about how salvation works, except that they feel that in their case their sin is unique and exceptional.

What is the real trouble? Well, first and foremost, of course, is that Satan the Devil walks around seeking who he may devour. It is Satan who, though he cannot rob us of our salvation, can definitely rob us of our joy.

I Peter 5:8-10 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

Satan's great concern is to prevent anyone from becoming a Christian, as we well know. When that fails, his one objective is to make them miserable Christians, so that he can deceive people who are under a guilty feeling and say: 'That's Christianity; look at him or her; look at the misery. Why would you want to be like that? Why would you want to follow something that causes such misery?' No doubt the essential cause of many of these conditions is Satan himself.

Satan attacks the righteous with more zeal than he does the wicked, because he already owns the wicked, therefore it is not necessary for him to target them. You remember that Job was the most righteous human on earth and God allowed Satan to put him through terrible trials.

Job 1:8-12 Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?" So Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!" And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

Satan, our adversary, is a creature of evil habits and deceptions, and he has always gone after God's people with a vengeance, especially here in these last days. Because he knows he has only a short time before he receives his due, Satan will again lead a rebellion against God with the same results.

Revelation 12:17 And the dragon [Satan] was enraged with the woman [the church], and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

A great deal of spiritual depression is caused by our adversary the Devil, and he is after us!

But there is an additional cause. This condition is greatly due to an ignorance of how salvation works—a failure to understand and believe the promises that we have been given.

In the Old Testament, 'salvation' is depicted as liberation. The God of Israel is a Savior God, because He is a God who delivers. Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ was sent 'to set at liberty those who are oppressed.' And Paul urges the Galatians:

Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

So, there are certain things we must do in conjunction with God's gift of salvation. We must stand fast in God's truth because the truth will make us free; and we must not get entangled again in the same sins that we had before.

If a person in this depressed state of mind—because of past sins—merely prays as he always does for deliverance from the problem, without stopping to think about the problem and its consequences, then he will not solve the problem. He must meditate on it and realize what must be done to work it out himself in conjunction with God's help.

Obviously, he must always pray, he must 'pray without ceasing,' but this is one of those situations when he must stop praying for a moment to think and to meditate.

There comes a time when you must stop repeatedly praying about your condition because your prayer may just be reminding you of the problem and keeping your mind fixed on it to the point of it being an obsession. The result is that you become overly depressed about it. If we have committed a sin in the past and we have been forgiven for it, but we continually dwell on it and feel guilty about it, and beat ourselves up about it, it is going to become an obsession that is going to be a distraction from actually continuing to overcome that problem and similar problems. God has forgiven us if we have repented genuinely for that sin.

You seek salvation from the very thing you are keeping alive in your mind. It is like a wound that is healing but you keep fiddling with it and agonizing over how you carelessly caused it, to the point where you can think of nothing else. It keeps you from carrying out your duties and interferes with your work. Learn from it, repent of the carelessness that caused it, and move on.

Sometimes in Scripture the blessing of salvation is depicted in terms of health and wholeness. The most common New Testament term for salvation carries connotations of health, wholeness, and soundness, both physically and spiritually.

Mark 2:17 describes Jesus as a physician. Jesus' ministry was to make people well. In Jesus' ministry, the physical and spiritual aspects of healing miracles are linked together: when Jesus heals, there are transforming physical and spiritual effects. Jesus' healings are signs both of God's saving power, and of the nature of salvation.

A person cannot receive the joy connected with salvation if he is dwelling on the negative. The negative in this case is past sins, even though they were already forgiven.

So there are times when you have to stop praying about it; and think, and work out your own salvation while God works behind the scenes. Remember what the apostle Paul said to the Philippian church about this:

Philippians 2:12-15 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,

We need to demonstrate our faith day by day as we cultivate our relationship with God. But while God's justice is a cause for sober living with "fear and trembling," we should not be obsessively anxious that we can never be good enough to merit God's favor. However, James 4:6-7 says, "But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

So, it is God's love and enabling grace that will see you through, and it is God who works in you. We can rejoice in God's empowering presence while we work hard at living responsible Christian lives.

In verse 12 (of Philippians 2), Paul means "salvation" in terms of progressively coming to experience all of the aspects and blessings of the gift of salvation, and this certainly includes joy. Our continued obedience is an inherent part of "working out" our salvation in this sense.

But, as verse 13 demonstrates, these works are the result of God's work within His people: 'both to will and to work for His good pleasure.' Even the desire—the will—to do what is good comes from God; but He also works in us to generate actual choices of the good, so that the desires result in actions.

In verses 14 and 15, Paul continues the theme of "working out" one's salvation. We should shine as lights amid a crooked and twisted generation.

Paul's choice of words recalls the wilderness generation of Israel, who in Deuteronomy 32:5, are described by these same words "crooked and twisted generation (ESV)" and whose spiritual progress was thwarted by grumbling and questioning.

In working out your own salvation, what are you to think of? Well, think of this case of the apostle Paul, and of what he says, in I Timothy 1:

I Timothy 1:12-16 And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

The apostle Paul recognizes that, in one sense, Jesus Christ saved him in order to set him up as a pattern, or a model; but, a model in what respect? A model for those people who feel that their particular sin somehow or another passes the limit of the grace and the mercy of God. A past sin that they just cannot let go of, and deep down do not believe that they were truly forgiven of that sin.

Paul's point is that his case alone is sufficient proof that we must never reason along that line. In other words, here are people who believe that sins can be graded, and they draw distinctions between particular sins, as to which God will forgive and which He will not. Does God's inspired written Word distinguish between greater and lesser sins?

Yes, it does, but not with regard to how hard it is for Him to forgive a sin. All sins are forgivable! Except for "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"—which I may get into later. That type of blasphemy is unrepentant and willful.

Paul says that his own case is more than sufficient to deal with the argument. In other words, Paul says, 'Whatever you may think, whatever you may have done, think of me, think of what I was, a blasphemer, persecutor, torturer, and murderer.' He hated the very name of Jesus Christ, he zealously exterminated Christ's followers, he went down to Damascus 'breathing out threatenings and slaughter (KJV)' against them. He was in that wicked condition.

Now, says Paul, 'I'm a test case, and whatever you may think about yourself, put it up against my case and see where you stand.' You think of his case and say to yourself: 'If he obtained mercy, if he could be forgiven, I must rethink my past sins that are forgiven.'

The nearer a person gets to God the more obvious our shortcomings become—the more obvious and disgusting they appear to us. So when a person sees his own spiritual failures, his own secret sins, he feels like he is the worst sinner; but only a Christian can say that with sincerity and truth. The person of the world will never sincerely and truthfully make such a statement, because he is always trying to prove what a good man he is, or what he thinks that he is.

But Paul is saying more than that; he is indicating that these sins against Jesus Christ are the sins of sins. But he makes his meaning plain when he puts it like this, in other words: 'I did it ignorantly, in unbelief.'

The qualifier, the distinction is that there are no different grades of 'forgiven sins' when it comes to what God can and will forgive; but there are distinctions between greater and lesser sins regarding punishments and curses.

For clarity I would like to insert a twenty minute explanation of greater and lesser sins regarding punishments and curses.

Which is worse: idolatry, kidnapping, or stealing livestock? What distinctions does God make between different types of sin?

Romans 6:23 tells us that death is the penalty for sin, therefore, we could conclude, in one sense, that there is no difference in sin, all sin leads to death if not repented of. But, God also reveals that some sins are worse than others.

Let us take a look at a couple of Old Testament examples:

The first is Israel's sin of idolatry. After Israel made the golden calf at Mount Sinai, Moses said that they had sinned a great sin.

Exodus 32:21-33 And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?" So Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, 'Make us gods that shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' And I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.' So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out." Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies), then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, "Whoever is on the Lord's side—come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him.

And he said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.'" So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. Then Moses said, "Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, that He may bestow on you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother." Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. So now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me

out of Your book which You have written." And the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book."

It is interesting that this great sin directly broke the first two commandments:

1. "You shall have no other gods before Me."
2. "You shall not make for yourself any carved image, . . . you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. . . visiting the iniquity [sin] of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me."

And, in principle this great sin broke the third and fourth commandments as well.

3. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," [They referred to God as the "golden calf."]
4. "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." [Aaron proclaimed a feast day on which to worship the golden calf. If it was the Sabbath day, they broke it by worshipping another God on it. If it was not the Sabbath day, they broke it by establishing a day of their own on which to worship their god.]

Of course, as we see a little later, if you break one commandment, you break them all. We know that if one commandment of the law of God is broken, they all have been broken. He who is guilty of breaking one is guilty of all.

James 2:8-13 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

The royal law includes both the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. There is no distinction here between partiality, adultery, and murder with regard to breaking the law being a sin. If we break one sin or all, according to the law we are guilty of breaking the law.

When we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, repent of our sins which are the breaking of God's law, and are baptized having our sins washed away, we are forgiven for all greater and lesser sins. There is no distinction when it comes to forgiveness.

However, there is a distinction between greater and lesser sins when it comes to inflicting punishment and curse on a sinner.

Notice David's sin of faithlessness for the numbering of Israel for the census. Even though David is listed in Hebrews 11 as one of the faithful, he still had his moments of faithlessness.

II Samuel 24:10-17 And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O Lord, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly." Now when David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, "Go and tell David, 'Thus says the Lord: "I offer you three things; choose one of them for yourself, that I may do it to you.'"" So Gad came to David and told him; and he said to him, "Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or shall you flee three months before your enemies, while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' plague in your land? Now consider and see what answer I should take back to Him who sent me." And David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man."

So the Lord sent a plague upon Israel from the morning till the appointed time. From Dan to Beersheba seventy thousand men of the people died. And when the angel stretched out His hand over Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the destruction, and

said to the angel who was destroying the people, "It is enough; now restrain your hand." And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking the people, and said, "Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house."

This sin cost the lives of 70,000 men from the plague that God sent, because David numbered Israel showing a distrust and lack of faith in God that He would protect Israel regardless of how many men David had in his army. David was counting on his own resources for protection. The sin and its punishment were so great that it affected the whole nation of Israel, including Judah.

Since there are great sins, there must be lesser sins.

John 19:11 Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

Caiaphas and the Jewish hierarchy had initiated the trial of Jesus. Jesus' statement to Pilate shows that there are lesser sins. It is interesting that the Bible spends very little time, if any, portraying lesser sins as not as important as greater sins.

The principle of proportionate punishment deals with the law; the principle means the more serious the sin, the worse the punishment. Consider the system for punishment for broken laws in ancient Israel. All the punishments were not equal.

For example, the punishment for kidnapping was death (Exodus 21:16), whereas the punishment for stealing livestock was their restoration (Exodus 22:1).

God's underlying basis for dealing with sin is by the principle of proportionate punishment, in which the punishment fits the crime:

Exodus 21:23-27 But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth.

The principle here was that the punishment must match, but not exceed, the damage done. There was a strict limit on the amount of damages anyone could collect. In modern terms it might read: car bumper for car bumper or window for window. No one was to try to get rich off such situations.

Also, this was to be a rule of thumb for the judges, not an authorization of personal vendetta or private retaliation. So there are greater and lesser punishments for greater and lesser sins.

Now let us look at some New Testament examples. Christ was explicit that certain things are more important.

Matthew 22:35-40 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Israel broke the first four commandments when they made the golden calf; but they were guilty of breaking the whole law. Theirs was a great sin because they broke the first and great commandment: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

The scribes and Pharisees were infamous for keeping picky parts that they had added to God's law, but they neglected the weightier and more important things.

Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

Remember it was a lack of faith that caused David's great sin and the ultimate effect was that it affected his relationship to God.

Greater sins do more damage to our character and the well-being of others. We should put the highest priority on overcoming the worst ones. But keep in mind that lesser sins should not be overlooked. Jesus was emphatic that breaking a lesser commandment still affects our standing in the Kingdom.

Matthew 5:19 "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Even if we only break a lesser commandment, it still affects our reward in the Kingdom. Obviously, it is important that we not sin at all.

There are two broad types of sin.

I John 5:16-17 If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He [God] will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.

The first type of sin is not leading to death. This is any sin that is truly repented of and for which forgiveness is available. Both greater and lesser sins fall under this category.

I John 1:8-9 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 just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This is a wonderfully encouraging statement; God is reliable and truthful not only to forgive us, but to cleanse us as well. Not only are we forgiven but we are washed clean on the inside of any spiritual filthy residue.

The second type of sin is what John refers to as a sin leading to death. This is the unpardonable sin. Both greater and lesser sins can lead to the attitude that causes someone to commit the unforgivable sin.

Mark 3:28-30 "Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation"—because they said, "He has an unclean spirit."

This is the person who allows himself to be so thoroughly influenced by Satan that he does not want to submit to God—ever! Even though he knows who and what God is, he rejects the power of God's Holy Spirit, rejects Christ as Savior, and defiantly shakes his fist at God—this is active defiance!

If we were to blaspheme the Spirit of God, which is God's power and the agency by which He works, we would be determining that God has no power. If we deny God's power, we are denying God Himself. A person may blaspheme the Son of God, but if he blasphemes God's power, it is an attempt to change His nature and that is unforgivable.

Also, in a passive way, sin can be "leading to death" by continued neglect and apathy. The sinner knows he must repent of sin, but because of lethargy he does not bother to overcome sin. The Laodicean attitude comes dangerously close to this and if not repented of may lead to the unpardonable sin.

We know that there are greater and lesser sins with varying degrees of punishment. Some sins do more spiritual harm than others. And, we must never forget that ALL sin separates us from a relationship to God!

Isaiah was inspired to write:

Isaiah 59:2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.

If sins are not repented of separation from God becomes permanent, and eventually God's judgment is the final death. We cannot ignore the lesser sins for the greater sins or vice versa. *All* sins must be overcome. But the highest priority should be placed on the greater sins.

God inspired the apostle Paul to record this encouragement:

Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

It is God's law, not any particular sin, that reveals God's standard of righteousness and it is our responsibility to work to improve our relationship to God. The thing that people who obsess over forgiven past sins have to comprehend is that they must not think only in terms of forgiven past sins, but always primarily in terms of our relationship to God.

All the sins of those who are faithful—those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, confessed their sins and repented of them, been baptized and are overcoming—are cleansed from sin through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Our justification means not only that our sins are forgiven and that we have been declared by God Himself to be acceptable to Him. Justification is also God's declaration that the demands of His law have been fulfilled in the righteousness of His Son.

The basis for this justification is the death of Christ. The apostle Paul tells us that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their

trespasses to them." This reconciliation covers all sin: "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." Justification then, is based on the work of Christ, accomplished through His blood and brought to His people through His resurrection.

Romans 3:21-26 But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

When God justifies, He charges the sin of man to Christ and credits the righteousness of Christ to the faithful believer. Thus, "through one Man's righteous act, the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life." Because this righteousness is "the righteousness of God" which is "apart from the law", it is thorough; a faithful member of God's church is "justified from all things."

God is "just" because His holy standard of perfect righteousness has been fulfilled in Christ, and He is the "justifier," because this righteousness is freely given to the faithful believer. It means that God clothes us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. God sees us in Christ covered by His holiness and righteousness. In this condition God sees the righteousness of Christ upon us.

We know that 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' Nothing but the grace of God can save anyone, and it takes the same grace to save all. It all comes back to our relationship to God; on our part it is a matter of belief or unbelief.

There are many striking examples of this in the Scriptures. The point at which a man like Joseph showed his spiritual insight and understanding

supremely was this: When tempted by Potiphar's wife, he said: 'How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?'

What troubled Joseph was not merely the possibility of sinning against the woman but against God Himself. Now that is true spiritual thinking! We should be concerned about committing the sin against other people, of course. But the fact of sinning against God is the real issue because it separates us from God which affects our relationship to Him.

Most people, however, tend to dwell on the sin itself; and there should be some serious thought and contemplation and repentance about that. What constituted sin for Joseph was the fact that it involved his relationship to God.

It takes the same grace of God to save the most "respectable" person in the world as the most "lawless" person in the world who repents.

David saw the same thing. Murderer and adulterer that he had been, here was what troubled him:

Psalm 51:1-4 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge.

David was not minimizing the wrong he had done to others; he knew all about that; but that was not the worst thing. It was being separated from God—his relationship to God was of the utmost importance. The moment you think of it like that you are not dwelling on forgiven past sins, and you do not worry that one was worse than another as far as forgiveness and grace are concerned. It is our relationship to God that matters.

The New Testament has some outstanding teaching about this. You are familiar with the works of the flesh that Paul lists in Galatians 5:

Galatians 5:19-21 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

We are all clear about them—they are horrible! Adultery, witchcraft, murders. But the world would never put 'hatred' in that list. Notice how Paul mixes up the list with envy, murders. Paul's point is that there are not only actual sinful actions, but sins in the heart. Drunkenness, revelries, and such like. That is some list!

Jesus Christ said the same thing when He reminded us about things that proceed from the heart.

Matthew 15:17-19 "Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies."

Christ puts together, not only certain great sins but every sin, any sin, anything that suggests a wrong relationship to God—lawlessness, breaking the law. Remember what James said: "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all." So you see—we are *all* being judged by the same righteous standards.

Wise King Solomon discovered a simple truth that sheds light on this subject:

Ecclesiastes 1:8-11 All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there

anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after.

So 'there is nothing new under the sun'; if it looks or sounds "new," it has already been done in ancient times before us. Both God and Satan have seen humans repeatedly make the same stupid mistakes over and over again for almost 6,000 years.

Another trouble with people who do not ever move on beyond a past forgiven sin is they do not seem to fully realize what Jesus Christ did by willingly offering Himself up to be beaten, humiliated, and crucified.

People who cannot move beyond some past wrong may believe in Christ's sacrificial, atoning death, but they do not work out its implications. They forget that the angel announced to Joseph at the beginning that He would 'save His people from their sins.' The angel did not say that He would save us from all our sins *except* this one sin that you have committed.

The apostle Peter said basically the same thing:

I Peter 2:24 Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.

All sins were dealt with there—finally and completely. Nothing was left undone!

What we are reminded of as we take the bread and wine on Passover is that completed finished work. There is nothing left undone, in the sense that there is no distinction between greater and lesser sins as far as forgiveness is concerned.

Initially, we are delivered when our sins are forgiven, but that is only the beginning, that is just one aspect of it. Essentially salvation means union with Christ, being one with Christ. We have been crucified with Christ. And so, we must view things as Paul did:

I Timothy 1:12-16 And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

When Paul looked at his past and saw his sins he did not stay in a corner and say: 'I'm not fit to be a Christian, I've done such terrible things.' What it does to him, its effect upon him, is to make him praise God for the forgiveness and mercy he received. He learned to greatly appreciate what God had done for him. Paul recognized God's trustworthiness in keeping His promises. And he learned to love God because God first loved him. He says in verse 14, "And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus."

That is the way to look at your past. So, if you look at your past and are depressed, it means that you are listening to Satan's influence.

But if you look at the past and say: 'Sadly, it's true that I was blinded by the god of this world, but thank God His grace was more abundant, He was more than sufficient, and His love and mercy came upon me in such a way that all my sin is forgiven when repented of.'

We can rejoice in God's extraordinary mercy and forgiveness which has blotted out our sins, cleansed us, and made us His children.