

## **Fighting Guilt like Micah**

By David de Bruyn

There is a condition inside every human being which Satan seeks to exploit for that human's destruction, and which the Lord seeks to use for that human's salvation. That thing is guilt.

It is amazing that guilt can be the thing that destroys one man and saves another. Guilt really is man's God-given conscience sounding the alarm that we have broken God's Law. That conscience has been negatively affected by The Fall, and is by no means a perfect guide. But according to Romans 2, all men have this conscience, either excusing or accusing them as to their deeds. This sense of guilt, of shame over failure, of being convicted for wrongdoing, is found in all people to some degree.

But sadly, many people deal with their guilt in a self-destructive way.

Some try to minimise their guilt. They compare their sins to those of others and in that way, try to make out that they are really not very guilty at all. But this does not work especially well, because comparing my crime to another man's bigger crime does not acquit me, it only makes me feel like a slightly better criminal.

Others try to excuse their guilt. They have all sorts of reasons as to why they are not responsible for what they did. They blame someone else – their parents, the government, the system, their education, their poverty. They blame it on their psychological state, they say it was their lack of self-esteem, their un-parented inner-child, their ego.

In short, they are trying to say that the blame must be laid at someone else's door. Personal responsibility for their guilt is shunned. But as they try to believe this lie, their consciences become seared even further, and the guilt piles up.

Others try to ignore their guilt. They work longer hours, try to earn more money, party harder, buy the things they want, go on nicer vacations, fill their days and hours with work, hobbies, entertainment, leisure and more of the same. Their way of dealing with guilt is to not stop long enough to be silent and hear the voice of conscience.

Others try to overwhelm their guilt. That is, they try to sin more so that the guilt they feel is essentially swallowed up in a sea of similar sin, done in the context of others doing the same. That way, they hope that the guilt will not feel so acute, but rather be a chronic, dull ache at the back of their minds. But as they do this, they add insult to injury, and instead give themselves even more reason to feel guilty.

Others try to internalise their guilt. They focus on their guilt and punish themselves, writhing in inner agony with self-disgust, self-hatred and eventually depression. Wanting to be better, wanting to be sinless, they essentially remain in mourning over their lost purity, over their sins, and brood over their failures again and again. Over a period of time, these people end up with profound mental and emotional problems.

Others try to whitewash their guilt. They figure life is about checks and balances, so they hope that doing some good will cancel out the bad. They try to give to charitable causes, give themselves to self-sacrificial service of others, seek to be kind and generous to others, and seek to be morally better.

But all this ends up underlining the fact that it seems to be easier for us to be evil than it is for us to be good, which only adds to our guilt. Furthermore, no longer borrowing from someone does not help pay off my former debts. In the same way, being good does not take care of my former sins.

Actually, most people use a combination of these strategies – minimising, excusing, ignoring, overwhelming, internalising, whitewashing. Yet, each of these strategies actually causes the person to intensify their problem. Satan has a human just where he wants him: trying to rid himself of guilt, while indulging in the very things that cause it.

That's why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:10, *"The sorrow of the world produces death."* Merely the grim regret over what I have done will produce death as I apply unbiblical, self-destructive solutions.

The fact of the matter is this: the reason why man's efforts to overcome his guilt are doomed to failure is that they are not addressing the problem. The real problem is that we have sinned against Someone. That Someone is God. And until we come to find forgiveness in Him, our hearts will find no rest.

Bad guilt drives us away from God. Good guilt, or conviction, drives us toward God, to find mercy. That's why Paul says in the same verse: *"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted"* (2 Corinthians 7:10). The right kind of sorrow leads to a person turning to God for forgiveness.

For many a Christian, guilt remains an ongoing battle. They know that they have found forgiveness in Christ, but the spectre of guilt continues to haunt them day after day. They feel accused, condemned, unworthy, and even filthy – on an ongoing basis. They are given to working frenetically for God, doing a Christian version of whitewashing the guilt by trying to serve God more.

Sadly, some Christians even turn to the other self-destructive reactions – minimising, excusing, ignoring, overwhelming and internalising. How is a believer supposed to deal with guilt in his or her life? We find a fascinating answer in the Old Testament.

In chapter seven of Micah, we read the prophet's bold and daring reply to those who would accuse him, be they spiritual enemies, human enemies, or even his own soul. In this verse, we find three truths regarding how a believer is supposed to face and deal with guilt in his or her life.

*Do not rejoice over me, my enemy. When I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against Him, until He pleads my case and executes justice for me. He will bring me forth to the light; I will see His righteousness.*

**Micah 7:8-9**

## **1. The first key to overcoming guilt is Justification.**

Our passage says, 'He pleads my case; He executes justice *for me*' – not *against me*. The message of justification is that, in Christ, God declares me 'not guilty.' Jesus Christ took my sin and its shame on the cross, and rose again. Notice the legal terms that Micah uses here: *"Until He pleads my case, and executes justice for me."*

Consider too, these verses:

*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...*

**Romans 5:1**

*For He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*

**2 Corinthians 5:21**

It is because of this that **Romans 8:1** is true of the believer: *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus."*

Now, if God is not condemning us, then who are we to condemn ourselves? Perpetual guilt in spite of knowing the truth of God's forgiveness is a sign of pride – it's us saying, 'I refuse to accept God's forgiveness of me. God might have cleared my name, but I certainly haven't!' It's a refusal to accept God's acceptance of you.

The reason for this is that we *want* to be accepted on merit. We want to be acceptable to God on the basis of our perfect record, our clean sheet, our moral life. We cannot accept the fact that we have failed, and our pride refuses to accept God's forgiveness. We instead sit and accuse ourselves, from our proud place of self-righteousness. We ignore the standard of God, which was met perfectly by Christ, and instead focus on our own standard which we have failed to keep. This is sinful pride.

To condemn yourself when Christ was condemned for you is to consider His death ineffective. To bear shame which was borne for you is to make grace void in your life. We need to humbly accept the fact that we did soil our garments. We were hopelessly lost. But no matter how big or small the sin, Christ paid for it. As **1 John 3:20** reminds us, *"For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."*

By faith, we need to surrender our own hope of being pleasing to God or ourselves, and accept Christ's righteousness as our own. We need to believe our sin is cleansed in His blood, and our lives are now seen as being in Him.

**Isaiah 61:10** describes how believers ought to see themselves: *"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels."*

When God looks at me – He perpetually sees me in Christ, clothed in righteousness, His blood continually cleansing me of the sins I pick up along the way, continually keeping my garments spotless, as I confess them before Him. Jesus Christ is our plea before the Father. God looks at His Son, whom He loves, He looks at us in His Son, and on the merits of His Son's atonement, says – 'not guilty.' On top of that, Jesus Himself pleads for us.

*Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.*

**Romans 8:34**

*Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.*

**Hebrews 7:25**

*My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

Notice what Micah says: 'He will plead my cause! He, the One I sinned against, will plead my cause.' Then he says, 'He will execute judgement for me.' Not *against* me – but *for* me. That's justification – God tries my case, and rules in my favour. I need never stand trial again.

But what many do is refuse to accept the verdict from God's High Court, and order a re-trial of themselves in the lower court of their hearts. And since they are not receiving the 'not guilty' sentence based on Christ's blood, they will inevitably condemn themselves in the lower court of their mind.

## 2. The second key to overcoming guilt is Confession.

Notice Micah admits his guilt: '*I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against him.*' If we are to be free of ungodly, accusing, guilt, we must keep short accounts with God. The believer who does not continually agree with God about his sin will not enjoy the cleansed conscience necessary to enjoy God.

*But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin. 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. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.*

1 John 1:7-10

What are we doing when we confess our sins? Are we giving God information? Are we trying to get saved again? No, Psalm 51 tells us what we are doing:

*For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.*

Psalm 51:3-4

When we confess our sins, we are vindicating the name of God by agreeing with Him. We are saying – 'God, you are right, and I am wrong. Your commands are good, and I violated them. I claim ownership for what I did.' That honesty, repentance and confession allows the Holy Spirit to fill us and control us. As **Proverbs 28:13** puts it: "*He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.*"

## 3. The third key for overcoming guilt is Sanctification.

Here Micah says, '*When I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD shall be a light unto me.*' Micah is confident that his sinful falls will not be the end of him. He will grow in the Lord. Even when he is seemingly lost in the dark, he will have the LORD as his light – his guidance.

What is Micah speaking about here? I believe he is speaking about his spiritual progress, that is, his sanctification. As he faces his guilt, he is quite gutsy. He is bold and faces his accusers. And what he says is – 'I may be down, but I'm not out. I'm not what I ought to be, I'm not what I want to be, but by His grace, I am becoming what I am supposed to be.'

Sanctification is one of the greatest weapons against guilt. *It reminds us of our justification.* In sanctification, we are becoming what we are. It very practically says – this position in Christ, which you love, is in fact a reality. The imputed righteousness of Christ is truly yours. It's beginning to show! And the Bible says, *it cleanses our consciences.*

*Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned.*

**1 Timothy 1:5**

*Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.*

**Hebrews 10:22**

No one enjoys forgiveness if they violate that forgiveness as a pattern.

*'Go and sin no more.'* These words were spoken by Jesus to someone who had been caught in the act of adultery. As Jesus challenged her accusers to throw the first stone if they were without sin, they went away, one by one. He then asked her, *'Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?'* She said, *'No one, Lord'.* He then said, *'Neither do I condemn you – go and sin no more'* (**John 8:10-11**). These are Christ's words to us. If we find forgiveness in Him, He says, *'Neither do I condemn you – go and sin no more.'*

Returning to the sin we have been forgiven of is likened to a dog returning to its vomit, a pig returning to the mud. God tells us if we return to our sin, it will make us feel condemned again, and cause us to be sickened. A clear conscience comes from seeking to do the will of God, by the grace of God. This clean conscience comes from obedience.

When you fall, there is forgiveness. A clear conscience does not come from perfection; it comes from an earnest effort to obey God by His grace. Nothing is as useful as the blessedness of walking guilt-free with God. As **Psalms 119:1** says, *"Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD!"*

It also allows us to press forward. Paul could have wallowed in guilt. Here he was, the most prominent Christian of his day, but he had a past. He was also formerly the most prominent persecutor of Christians. He had stood by, overseeing the death of the first martyr. Was Paul continually tinged with shame, misery and anguish? Was His service of God a frenetic activity to try and escape thinking about his past?

No, he describes the contentment he had come to in **Philippians 3:13-14**: *'Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.'*

Paul had regrets. We all do. Sin brings regret. There is no way we can erase the regret, anymore than we can erase our history. But the difference between regret and shame is this. Regret feels pain from time to time when looking back, but uses it to press forward. Godly sorrow works repentance. Shame paralyses you in a state of self-disgust that makes you unwilling to press forward. The sorrow of the world brings death.

Though Paul had regrets, he saw himself through the eyes of Christ. Christ had borne his shame, and Paul humbly accepted that grace. While he regretted his past, he did not sit and mourn over it – he sought to forget about it and press forward. Perhaps one of the most useless things we do is to spend huge amounts of time thinking about the past and the future, and never the present. There is a time to simply forget the past and press forward.

This does not mean you will totally forget. But if you have confessed and forsaken the sin, and learnt from it, you need to make the habit of not calling up your sins to your remembrance. That is how God treats your sin, why should you do any differently? Refuse to remember. If you do remember, let it be a provocation unto good works – the thing which drives you to holiness, to prayer, to rejoicing in forgiveness – not to despair, depression or self-disgust.

Remember, sanctification is about growth: **Proverbs 24:16** says, *“For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief.”*

And as we have said many times, sanctification comes as we behold the glory of God in His Word, and are so changed into that image by continual exposure to it. As 2 Corinthians 3:18 tells us, *“But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”*

It is interesting that Micah adds the phrase: *‘and I shall behold his righteousness.’* I believe Micah may very well have had this progressive sanctification in mind. He knew he might be down, but he wasn’t out. The Lord was still working on him. It brings to mind verses such as:

*Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

**Philippians 1:6**

*Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.*

**Jude 1:24-25**

One of the ways we overcome guilt is by focusing on the work that God is doing in us. It might not be what we would like it to be right now, but by His grace, we are becoming more and more like Christ. This is a biblical way of approaching guilt.

Firstly, revel in the truth of justification. Hide yourself in the garment of Christ’s imputed righteousness. Accept God’s verdict as the overruling verdict, the one that must overrule even your own verdict.

Then confess your sins as God makes you aware of them. Claim ownership for them. Agree with God that what He says is sin, is sin. In this way, we justify God, and find our fellowship with the Lord continually renewed.

Thirdly, seek to grow in sanctification by His grace. Put off the old, be renewed in your mind, and put on the new. As you allow God to produce His righteousness in you, your conscience is cleansed, God’s righteousness is made manifest before your very eyes, and the sense of progress toward Christlikeness encourages your heart that your sins are forgiven, and that God is at work.