

THE **BOOKENDS**  
OF  
THE **CHRISTIAN LIFE**



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CHAPTER FOUR

**GOSPEL ENEMY #2:  
PERSISTENT GUILT**

*I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.*

GALATIANS 2:21

As we've seen, by depending on our own performance to merit God's approval and blessings, we spurn the support and security of the first bookend. If we successfully measure up to our standards, we harbor Gospel Enemy #1, self-righteousness. If we fall short, self-righteousness can give birth to Gospel Enemy #2, persistent guilt. In this case, our dependence is still on our own righteousness, though we're painfully aware of its inadequacy. We view Christ's obedient life and death for us as though it fell short of its intended purpose—removing *all* our guilt so that we bear none of it ourselves. Here, too, our ability to experience the joys of God's grace is nullified.

Living under a stronghold of guilt is a story that goes all the way back to the garden of Eden. When Adam and

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Eve sinned, they knew they'd done something wrong even before coming into the presence of God. Why? They felt *guilty*. So they covered themselves and hid from God. Later, when confronted by God, they resorted to finger-pointing (Genesis 3:7–13). And ever since, throughout human history, awareness of guilt is awakened at a very early age. How does this happen?

The Bible tells us that God has supplied every person with a conscience. It's part and parcel of all human hearts:

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires . . . they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness. (Romans 2:14–15)

The conscience is our God-given inner voice, an internal witness that testifies to the level of our personal obedience using God's perfect law as a measuring stick. Its voice is heard in both our mind and our emotions. Sometimes it whispers; sometimes it shouts.

Our conscience serves two important purposes for our good, just as pain does for our body. First, it sends off warning signals when we're about to go astray. This should remind us to renew our dependence on God's enabling strength, the second bookend (as we'll explore later). Second, when we sin, our conscience declares us guilty. This should remind us to renew our dependence on the cure for our sin-sickness, the righteousness of Christ crucified, the first bookend.

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Our conscience is a good thing. But at times it can make us extremely uncomfortable. It can exert such a powerful force that it becomes downright painful. No wonder humans have invented such a vast array of escape mechanisms—everything from the subtle misuse of entertainment such as TV, movies, sports, video games, and hobbies, to the abuse of mind-altering substances such as alcohol and drugs, or even the unwavering pursuit of career or good works. These serve to numb the pain of our conscience, or to artificially make us feel better about ourselves, or both. The same can be said of addictions and preoccupations of every kind. Escape mechanisms are sinful responses that sidestep the God-given purpose of our conscience. This can lead to big trouble because it compounds sin upon sin.

When neglected or misused, our conscience, like our body, can malfunction. It breaks down and fails when we habitually embrace lies and double standards (1 Timothy 4:2). It becomes dirty and dysfunctional when we stubbornly cling to impurity (Titus 1:15). And repeatedly rejecting the voice of our conscience can eventually result in the shipwreck of our faith (1 Timothy 1:19). Failure to respond to our conscience in a biblical way can lead to self-loathing, clinical depression, and even suicide.

As we've noted earlier, all believers often commit sin (1 John 1:8, 10). Therefore we regularly hear the voice of our conscience. But, take note: *The message of the cross is absent from the signals sent by our guilty conscience*; it knows only the law. So all we hear from it is bad news, not good news.

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In fact, embracing the nagging voice of our conscience instead of silencing it with the gospel is exactly how Gospel Enemy #2, persistent guilt, gets a stranglehold on believers. You may be there right now. And the sound may be deafening.

For others, the voice of conscience drones on like background noise. It becomes so “normal” they become unaware of being in the grip of guilt, even though it’s making them spiritually (and possibly physically) sick.

Whether the voice of your conscience is extremely loud or barely audible, remember that you don’t have to be a scandalous sinner to suffer from persistent guilt. So we should ask and answer the following questions carefully and regularly in order to identify the influence of this gospel enemy:

- 1) Are you painfully preoccupied with a particular habitual sin?
- 2) Are you discouraged or depressed by your failure to measure up?
- 3) Do you frequently experience anxiety that something’s about to go wrong?
- 4) Does it appear God can use others but not you?
- 5) Is there something in your past you just can’t seem to get over?
- 6) Do you fear that your past will come back to haunt you?
- 7) Do your difficult circumstances seem like God’s judgment for your sin?
- 8) Do you steer clear of intimate relationships or small-group discussions?

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- 9) When you sin, do you get a vague sense that somehow there’ll be a price to pay?
- 10) Do you seldom think of the cross?

Persistent guilt sometimes incapacitates a believer. Take the case of Mark (not his real name). People at his church described him as conscientious and humble. Yet he struggled with anxiety and discouragement. And he tended to disappear from church for weeks at a time. After several years of observing this pattern, his pastor finally got to the bottom of it. Mark, it turned out, binged on Internet pornography three or four times a year. Each time he would succumb to paralyzing guilt. He couldn’t face his Christian brothers and sisters until he could first “fix himself” for a few weeks.

Guilt-ridden believers often become desperate enough to seek help. A troubled believer we know went to a professional counselor and was advised, “You must learn to forgive yourself.” But there’s not a shred of biblical support for this concept. The truth is, our sin is real—we *are* guilty, just like our conscience tells us. And we have no authority or basis for making a self-declaration of forgiveness.

Instead, we must go back to the first bookend. Only the life and death of Christ offers a legitimate path to freedom from a guilty conscience—legitimate because it was a real, lived-in-the-flesh, finished righteousness, applied to us forever. It was an obedience “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8), where “Christ . . . offered himself without blemish to God, [to] purify our

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conscience" (Hebrews 9:14). What makes it legitimate *for us* is that he did it in our place as our substitute. Christ transfers (imputes, credits) his perfect righteousness to every sinner who is "in him" by faith (2 Corinthians 5:21). Yes, it's amazing and undeserved. But, as we saw earlier, when the Bible says we're just-if-ied by faith in Christ (Galatians 2:16), it means it's just-as-if *we*—like Christ himself—always obeyed. From the moment we're united to Christ by faith in the gospel, in God's own eyes we're permanently clothed in the very righteousness of Christ.

But we may not always experience this. Our awareness of our permanent standing may grow dim when we sin by embracing other treasures and dependencies. It's then we must return to our Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ *the righteous* (1 John 2:1), and stand in the present reality of our justification. With our dependence back on the first bookend, the weight of our guilt melts away and we feel lighter than air—not because of anything we do or don't do, but because of the infinite, infallible, interminable righteousness of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Whereas guilt is a curse, a healthy remembrance of our sin is a blessing. Guilt ignores the cross but remembering our sin should drive us *to* the cross. Paul never forgot his sin. He not only remembered it, but he also used it to display the gospel:

Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy . . . and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ

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Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Timothy 1:13-15)

Another example is John Newton, who never forgot his depravity as a notorious slave trader. But instead of wallowing in guilt, he took it to the cross and left it there. And he wrote the most famous Christian hymn, the one that begins, "Amazing grace / how sweet the sound! / that saved a wretch like me." To the very end, Newton remembered both his sin and the gospel. On his deathbed at age eighty-two, he said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."<sup>1</sup>

As authors, we acknowledge that we stand on the shoulders of some of the giants of the Christian faith whose works are just as relevant today as when they were written centuries ago. We have tremendous respect for their insights into the gospel, insights which have stood the test of time. One such author is a little-known seventeenth-century Puritan, Thomas Wilcox, who wrote *Honey out of the Rock*,<sup>2</sup> one of the most helpful essays we've found on dealing with persistent guilt. We've updated into modern language a series of Wilcox's instructions for dealing with persistent guilt:

- *Shift your focus away from your sin and onto Christ:* don't persist in looking upon sin; look upon Christ instead, and don't look away from him for a moment. When we see our guilt, if we don't see Christ in the scene, away with it! In all our

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storms of conscience, we must look at Christ exclusively and continually.

- *Shift your focus to Christ, our mediator.* If we're so discouraged we cannot pray, then we must see Christ praying for us (Romans 8:34), using his influence with the Father on our behalf. What better news could we ever want than to know Jesus Christ—the Son of God, co-creator of the Universe—is addressing the Father on our behalf?
- *Shift your focus to Christ crucified, risen, and ascended.* When guilt persists, remember where Jesus is and where he's been. He has been upon the cross, where he spoiled all that can ruin us. He's now upon the throne of heaven, as our advocate and mediator. His state in glory doesn't make him neglectful or scornful of the guilty sinners he died to redeem. He has the same heart now in heaven as he had upon the cross.
- *Shift your focus to the glory of Christ.* If guilt still persists, remember that he pardons for his own name's sake (Isaiah 43:25; Ezekiel 36:22; 1 John 2:12), because in pardoning us he'll make us living monuments of the glory of the grace he purchased. It's Christ's own happiness to pardon, so he does. By embracing this truth, even the most desperate sinner's conscience can rest absolutely assured.
- *Shift your focus off of self-condemnation.* When our conscience relentlessly condemns us, remember that Christ will have the last word. He is judge of the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:5) and only he can pronounce the final sentence. Christ is the judge—not us or our conscience. So never for a moment dare to take the judge's place by proclaiming irreparable guilt when he proclaims hope, grace, and pardon. If we think our sin is too great to be pardoned, remember that Christ doesn't agree.
- *Shift your focus off of self-contempt.* If we're focused on hating ourselves, realize that we're focused on ourselves and not

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on him. Self-contempt is a subtle form of self-centeredness, which is the opposite of Christ-centeredness. Unless our self-contempt makes us look more at the righteousness of Christ and the cross of Christ and less at ourselves, the whole endeavor leads to death. Let our sin break our hearts but not our hope in the gospel.

There's only one way to escape the grip of guilt: we must flee to the gospel. It's the only perfectly safe and sufficient place to turn. Be assured, there's no lack of grace for us there. John Owen, another of our favorite giants of the faith, pointed to "the *infiniteness of grace*" and asked, "What is our *finite guilt* before it?"<sup>3</sup> Owen knew we can never exhaust the supply of the grace purchased by Christ's obedient life and sacrifice for us.

Here's one last consideration from our adaptation of *Honey out of the Rock*, one that explains how our desperate need for the first bookend results in our treasuring Christ:

The greatness of Christ's merit is known best by sinners in deep distress. The thirstier a man is, the more he'll prize a cup of water; the more our sins break and burden us, the more we'll treasure our Healer and Deliverer.

Join us in letting this quote resonate deeply within you. Don't avoid the voice of your conscience; instead deliberately and regularly remember your past sin and acknowledge your present sin. Then return to the cross, the epicenter of the unfathomable greatness of Christ's merit. Don't be reluctant to feel thirst; it points you to

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living water where you can cherish every drop of it he gives for what it really is—precious beyond comparison. And when those old guilt pangs stab at you, thank them for doing you a great service by reminding you afresh that there's a Deliverer who has already delivered you, a Healer whose stripes have already healed you (Colossians 1:13–14; Isaiah 53:5). And because of this, Christ is your all-surpassing treasure.

Not only do we recognize that we deserve none of this, but also we *love* the fact that we don't deserve it. It's a fact that displays and magnifies his grace. We share something in common with the sinful woman in Luke 7: our tears and our "ointment" don't earn a thing; they simply express our gratitude for the overwhelming way Christ has loved us in the gospel. We've been forgiven much, freed from much, and blessed much. So we love him much (but not nearly as much as he deserves). We continue to sin every day in ways that, if not big and scandalous, are nevertheless offensive and grieve his heart. And amazingly, he continues to love us, and keep us, and treasure us as the apple of his eye (Zechariah 2:8).

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14, the tax collector took a far different approach from the self-righteous Pharisee. Trembling because of his guilt, he stood far off, eyes to the ground. He beat his breast and acknowledged his sinfulness. And he begged for God's mercy. Remarkably, Jesus declared him justified! And as if that good news were not astonishing enough, there's more. Jesus declared that in the future this tax collector would be

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*exalted!* And for what? Begging for mercy? Yes! Because his begging was a heartfelt acknowledgment of his sinfulness in the light of God's holiness; it was a burning expression of his desperate need of mercy—the very thing the gospel provides. His begging did not nullify the grace of God but exalted it.

If you're embracing persistent guilt, lay it down at Christ's feet and beg for a cleansed conscience—for the mercy, freedom, and peace he provides in his righteousness. That's the first step. In the next chapter we'll discuss more steps, important strategies for leaning our books on this first bookend.