

# ***Jesus Wept: The Bible and Human Emotions***

## ***Guilt***

Lesson #5 for January 29, 2011

Scriptures: Genesis 3:8-13; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 32; 1 Timothy 4:1,2; Matthew 26:75; Romans 8:1.

1. Guilt is sometimes described as “a feeling of having done wrong or failed an obligation.” (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*) Thinkers through the years have looked at guilt in various ways.

Political theorist John S. Mill saw guilt as a good thing, providing a moral restraint on society and preventing people from harming others. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche saw guilt as a sign of human repression and weakness. Sigmund Freud, founder of modern psychiatry, considered guilt a psychological sickness, the product of impossible demands placed on people by an overdeveloped conscience. *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, p 63.

2. This lesson will review the biblical passages about four groups who experienced guilt or shame: Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8-13), Joseph’s brothers (Genesis 42:21; 45:3), David (2 Samuel 11,12), and Peter (Matthew 26:75).
3. Read Genesis 3:8-13. Was this the very first time Adam felt afraid or guilty? Where did he get the idea that he was naked? Is blaming others a common part of sin? Adam and Eve had lived in a perfect environment with the best possible associations. But, having sinned, they suddenly experienced some terrible changes. What actually happened to Adam and Eve when they sinned? What does it mean to “know good and evil”? What do garments of light look like? Why did they hide? How did Adam even have a vocabulary to describe that new experience? God is responsible for sin and evil in the sense that He created us with freedom and made those things possible. A God of love had to let it be possible to happen as it did.
4. Did God create us with the capacity for guilt? If so, why? Sometimes, guilt serves a good purpose. It makes us uncomfortable enough to try to do something about it. On the other hand, guilt may be highly destructive. Sometimes, those who survive a serious accident where others were killed wonder why they were preserved or even feel guilty for what happened. Children of divorced parents sometimes feel that it was their fault. Even soldiers who survive a terrible attack when others die may feel guilty. Look at what guilt did to Judas and Peter.
5. In fact, after sinning and coming face-to-face with God, what was Adam’s response? Why is it so natural for human beings to blame others when they feel guilty or are caught in some offense? Isn’t that a part of our pride. Human beings tend to become very adroit at justifying their actions, even rationalizing their behavior. Freud called that “projection”—the idea that by blaming someone else, we can somehow lighten the burden of our own guilt.
6. What is the right way to deal with guilt? Someone has said that when God forgives us of our sins, we are “justified”—that is, I am treated “just as if I’d” never sinned. Is that really true? Even if God treats us “just as if we had never sinned,” does that change the fact that we are somehow scarred? Isn’t it easier for us to make the same mistake again? Do our friends who know of our mistakes treat us the same?
7. Think of your own personal experience. How do you deal with guilt? Read Psalm 130:3,4. The psalmist recognized that if we kept a full list of all our sins, we would never be able to escape

them. But, the Bible gives us wonderful promises about God's willingness to forgive. How did David know that God was so forgiving? Did he learn it herding sheep?

8. Where does our conscience come from? Is it our parents voices speaking to us? Is the conscience the same as the "superego"? If God did not exist and we lived in an evolutionary world, would we still have consciences? What is the relationship between having a conscience and guilt? Is there such a thing as a healthy or unhealthy conscience?
9. If you have done something seriously wrong and you ask God's forgiveness, do you feel completely free? Just as if you had never done it?
10. Do you agree with this statement from our Bible study guide: "Sin acknowledged and forgiven brings freedom, peace, joy, and an abundant life that starts now and stretches into eternity"? *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, p. 55. Have you ever been embarrassed whenever you see someone who generously forgave you?
11. The story of Jacob's 12 sons is quite well known. (Genesis 37,39-45) What is implied by Genesis 42:21? How many years had the 10 brothers lived with their guilt? Festering guilt can be a very destructive emotion—sometimes even causing dreams and nightmares.
12. Try to imagine being one of Joseph's 10 brothers at the time when he suddenly said, "I am Joseph!" (Genesis 45:3) Which do you suppose was their predominant emotion? Terror? Guilt? Shame? Even after their father's death many years later, they were not sure that they could believe Joseph's forgiveness! (Genesis 50:15-21) When did they "grow up"?
13. Unfortunately, no amount of ruminating or rethinking the sinful past can change it. Even if God works in all things for good, (Romans 8:28) that does not change the facts of our previous behaviors.
14. How do things actually change when we confess our sins to God or to others? (James 5:16; 1John 1:9)
15. Your sins may be as mountains before you; but if you humble your heart and confess your sins, trusting in the merits of a crucified and risen Saviour, He will forgive and will cleanse you from all unrighteousness. . . . [The work of His righteousness] is peace, and its effect quietness and assurance forever.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 566.
16. What does it mean to trust in "the merits of the crucified and risen Savior"? Roman Catholics believe that saints have excess merits which they can share with us to help alleviate our debts of sin. Do you believe that? Do you know about any person that you truly believe lived such a good life that he built up extra "merits" in God's books? (Anyone except Jesus?)
17. What would happen if there was no such thing as guilt and no guilty feelings? There have been a few individuals labeled as psychopaths who apparently feel no guilt. Ted Bundy was a very famous example. He is known to have assaulted and murdered at least 30 women, apparently with almost no feeling of guilt. Such people seem to have a moral emptiness—almost an inability to experience empathy or remorse.
18. Romans 5 seems to suggest that when Adam sinned and was cast out of the Garden of Eden, we all became sinners and even guilty. What is your understanding of original sin? (Compare Ezekiel 18 & 33:10-20) Read Psalms 51:5. Is this a carefully thought out theological statement? Or, is it poetic hyperbole? Ellen G. White said, "There is in his [man's] nature the bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he cannot resist."—*Education*, p. 29.
19. One Adventist theologian, Gerhard Pfandl, suggested that we should call this problem

“original corruption” rather than “original sin.” We do not inherit the actual guilt of Adam’s sin, but we certainly inherit the tendency to sin. Hopefully, it will lead us to a greater awareness of our need of Jesus Christ and His righteousness.

20. Review 2 Samuel 11,12. As king, David had gradually gotten to believe that he was above the law—even above God’s law. But when Nathan pointed out his sin, he immediately confessed. The Psalms he wrote after committing that sin with Bathsheba are some of the best in the entire Bible. (See Psalm 51, 32) David said that trying to keep silent about his sin “wore him out,” and it made him “get old.” He was “drained.” Mental health experts recognize that those feelings can even lead to physical diseases sometimes called “psychosomatic diseases.” Someone has suggested that a psychotic person is someone who thinks that  $2 + 2 = 5$  while a neurotic person knows that  $2 + 2 = 4$ —but it makes him very nervous!
21. In more recent times, a whole new field of investigation called psychoneuroimmunology has opened up. That is the study not only of the negative effects of bad emotions but also of the positive effects of good emotions. Guilt can be a very harmful and destructive emotion not only mentally and spiritually, but also physically. When God forgives us, He truly treats us as if we had never sinned.
22. In 1 Timothy 4:1,2, Paul suggested that individuals who practice sinning so long that they feel comfortable teaching others to do so have consciences which are burned with a hot iron. We know that a fairly severe burn can produce a patch of skin that is almost without sensation. Do our consciences become like that when we sin repeatedly? A modern, well-known preacher has written a book suggesting that we are not really that bad; he says that we are just misinformed about how good we are! Why is there such a huge movement to get rid of guilt without changing the behavior that caused the guilt?
23. Before modern technology became available, miners took canaries down deep into the mines. Canaries seem to be particularly sensitive to methane and carbon monoxide gases which sometimes reached dangerous levels in the mines. The discovery of a dead canary was an alarm system that led to people fleeing from the mine as quickly as possible.
24. Read John 13:31-38. Peter was probably the oldest and almost certainly the most outspoken of the disciples. He had great confidence in himself and his ability to lead. He could not believe what Jesus was saying to him! How could he be a great friend of Jesus and ever, ever deny Him? But, we know the truth of what happened. After denying Jesus three times in different situations, he suddenly remembered the words of Jesus. Read Matthew 26:75.
25. With blinding tears he [Peter] makes his way to the solitudes of the Garden of Gethsemane and there prostrates himself where he saw his Saviour’s prostrate form when the bloody sweat was forced from His pores by His great agony. Peter remembers with remorse that he was asleep when Jesus prayed during those fearful hours. His proud heart breaks, and penitential tears moisten the sods so recently stained with the bloody sweat drops of God’s dear Son. **He left that garden a converted man.** He was ready then to pity the tempted. He was humbled and could sympathize with the weak and erring.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 416.

Contrast the behavior of John in Caiaphas’s court; he did not try to hide his association with Jesus. (DA 710.3-711.1)

26. The history of Peter’s recovery in the first half of the book of Acts is clear evidence that Peter’s confession and repentance were genuine. He became a great preacher, a great

leader, and a great miracle worker for Christ. He also became one of the authors of the New Testament.

27. Contrast that with the experience of Judas. (DA 716-722) When he finally recognized that Jesus was not going to exercise His divine power to escape from His captors, Judas went in and threw down the coins and then went out and hanged himself. (Matthew 27:3-10; Acts 1:18,19) Why did these two disciples respond so differently to their feelings of guilt? Judas could not deal with the crushing of his pride; Peter did.
28. In the past, some mental health professionals have asserted that people who are raised within strong faith communities and with high moral expectations will live lives wracked with guilt! Does that describe our experience?
29. The Bible suggests that when we confess our sins after feeling a sense of guilt, a transformation can take place. What changes actually take place? Our self-esteem changes because of what we understand God's attitude toward us is. Our relationship to God and to others changes as well.
30. Read Romans 5:10,11; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20; Colossians 1:19-22. If possible, read those in the *Good News Bible*. God is doing everything possible to change the whole universe from enemies into friends. If we truly become God's friends instead of remaining enemies, then we are saved by the life of Jesus. In the past, we were far away from God—even enemies of God. But now, we are new creatures and friends. It is our task to make others friends also.
31. Read Romans 8:1. As hard as it is to believe, God tells us that when we go through this transformation process, there is no condemnation anymore.
32. What happens to our sins when God forgives them? (Psalm 103:12,13; Isaiah 1:18; Micah 7:19) Does Satan forget our sins? Is the record of our sins expunged from history? If so, then how do we explain all the records of the sins of the saints in the Bible? Will Bibles in heaven be redacted? Is it possible even for God to change history? Does He choose to do so? God will certainly treat us as if we had never sinned. God does not care nearly so much about our past as He does about our future, and He wants us to live the kind of lives that a child of God should live. He wants us to recognize that He does not condemn us.
33. The more clearly we see our sin, the more intensely we may recognize guilt's power.
34. Recognizing God's incredible forgiveness, some claim that forgiveness as an excuse for continuing to sin. Was that ever God's intention? Guilt and all the emotions that go with it including shame, fear, terror, etc., were not given to us by God as instruments of torture. It is God's intention that they will motivate us to live better lives. It is God's plan to use guilt to bring us to faith and repentance. If we develop a true faith relationship with God and truly desire to become more and more like Him—spending more and more time with Him and contemplating His life and His death—how could we ever choose to remain in the guilty condition of persistent sinners?

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