

A person stands on a rocky peak, silhouetted against a vibrant sunset or sunrise sky. The sky transitions from deep purple and blue at the top to bright orange and yellow near the horizon. The Milky Way galaxy is visible in the dark blue upper portion of the sky. The person is positioned centrally on the peak, looking out over a vast, misty landscape of mountains and valleys.

The Gracious Call

**GUILT,
JUSTICE &
FORGIVENESS**

Jeffrey D. Johnson

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Guilt, Justice, and Forgiveness

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freegracepress.com • freegracepress@gmail.com

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GUILT

A Universal Problem

Dear reader, we cannot live a fulfilled and consistent life without God. Our guilt is the evidence of this. Our guilt is evidence of our unhappiness and foolishness. Though we each have tried in vain to cleanse our guilty conscience, it continues to speak out against us.

But, even worse, it is our own voice that we each hear inside of our heads. We don't want to hear it, but we are constantly condemning ourselves. "Why did I do this?" "I shouldn't have done that." "I hope no one saw me do that." We love ourselves, so we hate this guilty feeling. We hate it when we know that we are wrong.

Self-condemnation is the worst. If others condemn us, the possibility remains that they have misjudged us, but when our own heart speaks out against us, it is hard to deny culpability.

We try to shut ourselves up, but as our conscience grows ever so dim as it becomes more and more hardened, we can never completely rid ourselves of the fact that we know we are sinful and deserving of God's judgment.

What are we to do with our guilty consciences? Medication? Therapy? A pilgrimage to the Holy Land? Self-flagellation?

Though guilt is ever present, we have each become an expert at silencing our conscience. Our first defense is crafting wonderfully worded excuses. We are good at finding supposed loopholes in the circumstances that happen to exempt us from what universally applies to others. We play dumb, as if we didn't know any better. Or, we see ourselves as having been unjustly placed in some kind of catch-22 circumstance. "We couldn't help it." We turn from being guilty to being a victim.

This, of course, leads to a second layer of defense—blaming others for our actions. "Lord, this woman, which you gave me, caused me to take hold of the forbidden fruit." "It is her fault, or maybe it's even your fault, God, for giving her to me." (See Genesis 3.)

If blaming others does not remove our shame, we seek to compensate by doing some good deeds. "Look at how good I am; I am not all that bad." "I go to church, and every now and then I plant a tree and give a few bucks to the homeless."

If the guilt lingers, we move into the distraction mode. We watch a lot of TV and keep ourselves en-

tertained. Hopefully, if enough time and water passes under the bridge, we can begin to feel better about ourselves.

Yet, what we each find most helpful in softening our conscience is gathering a multitude of friends who will be ever so kind to reassure us that we are okay. We are looking for those friends that buy into our excuses or help us create new excuses. We feel much better when they say, "I would have done the same thing." These are helpful friends. And if it is not these types of friends we are looking for, we find those whose moral actions and behavior are slightly worse than ours is. "I may occasionally slip up here and there, but at least I am not like Robert who is completely addicted to this stuff." "If I do a little, Robert does a lot." "Overall, in comparison, I am a pretty good person."

After years of suppressing our consciences, we find it much easier to continue in our sins without feeling as guilty. One of my homosexual friends admitted that he felt dirty the first few times he gave into his desires. His partner reassured him that this feeling was normal, and the key to working through it was not to think about it. In time, it will get easier and easier. But this is the case for all those who enter into sinful practices. Hardened criminals are

not made overnight; it takes time to build calluses on a tender conscience.

Underneath all the calluses, no matter how many movies we have watched to distract ourselves and no matter how many friends have reassured us, down deep we know that we have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Because of our uncanny ability to forget and smooth things over, however, we have no idea how wicked and shameful we have been. We do not know the depths of our depravity. We each know that we are a sinner, but none of us can begin to comprehend how big a sinner we actually are in the sight of God. With mud-caked glasses it is hard to see how dirty we actually are. We see ourselves through sinful eyes. What must we look like to the One who is too pure to even look on sin? (Habakkuk 1:13).

Which of God's commandments have we not broken? (See Exodus 20 and Romans 1.) We have stolen, lied, and cheated. We have been unfaithful, unforgiving, unkind, and unloving. We have given our lives to fulfilling the various passions of the flesh and have been more worried about being rich, popular, and powerful than being a thoughtful friend to those in need. We have given more time and energy living for ourselves than living for God.

Not only have we transgressed God's law, we have failed to do all the things that we should have done. We should have called Grandma a few years back when she became ill. We should have stopped and helped that person on the side of the road. We should have done this or done that, but we were too lazy and self-focused. We have neglected to be thankful to God in all things (Romans 1:21). We have neglected the worship that is due to His name. We have not lived up to the standard (Romans 3:9-18).

This is not to mention the sins of our heart, such as anger, malice, bitterness, jealousy, covetousness, lustful thoughts, vain imaginations, and all manner of evil desires (Mark 7:21-23).

But what is more fearful than our hearts condemning us is knowing that God has personally chronicled everything that we have ever done. Every thought, word, and deed has been recorded. God is not fooled by our silly excuses. He has clearly manifested to us that those who practice such things are worthy of death (Romans 1:32).

These sinful acts are treasonous. We have not only rebelled against our Maker and King; we have defected over to the kingdom of darkness. We have seditiously picked up our swords in opposition and have shaken our fists at Him in defiance. Our sins

are a direct and bold attack against God. He has blessed us with life. He has showered us with good things, such as the rain and the sunshine. He has graciously been kind, long-suffering, and patient with us. He has sent us the gospel. He has given us plenty of opportunities to repent. He has seen fit to keep the blood pumping in our veins and uphold the beating of our hearts. But how have we responded to such kindness? We have defiled His name by the things we have watched and the jokes that we have entertained. We continue to bite the hand that is feeding us every time we utilize the gifts, money, resources, and health, which God has given us, for selfish, sinful, and disgraceful activities. The life that God has given us to serve Him, we have used to defy and curse Him.

JUSTICE

A Universal Certainty

God's wrath is terrifying because it has been provoked by our rejection of His love. God finds infinite joy, happiness, and glory in His Son, Jesus Christ; His love for His Son is incomprehensible. God loves His Son, and He has also loved wretched sinners enough to give that which He loves the most—His only begotten Son (John 3:16). He did not hold back His greatest treasure, but freely offered Him—who holds life, meaning, and happiness in His hand. God gave the best He had to give. God has offered everything—something truly priceless.

Yet, we have not only provoked God to wrath by our transgressions, but even worse we have spurned the love of a jealous God by rejecting His gift of love (John 3:18). The thing God valued the most is that which we have despised, as if His Son were not good enough. We, who are worthless, have rejected the One who is of infinite worth. We, who are unlovable, have turned away from God's immeasurable love.

Thus, what anger must reside within God for the disgrace that we heap on Him when we turn our backs on His beloved Son?

Our rejection of God's love is open rebellion. Every moment we refuse to bow our knee and surrender all to His Majesty, we continue to provoke Him and to store up wrath for ourselves.

We are but a second away from running out of time. He will not hold back His wrath forever. The Day of Judgment is coming (2 Peter 3:7-14; Revelation 22:12). Our guilt testifies of the certainty of this.

Death is coming, but we live as if it is not. As with our guilt, we have pushed this knowledge away from us. We have blinded ourselves to the severity of our condition and the gravity of the wrath of God. We have blinded ourselves with a false sense of security because of our self-righteousness. We have blinded ourselves with the pleasures and concerns of the world.

We are more concerned about a pay-raise than saving our souls from hell. We are too busy fishing, hunting, playing golf, and keeping in shape than with getting right with God. We are too busy eating Esau's soup and playing a game of freeze-tag with our friends than seeking to meet with God (Genesis 25:29-34; Hebrews 12:16-17). Because we still hear the birds singing and feel the warmth of the sun, we are under the false delusion that everything is okay.

We should be alarmed, but we are walking around in a haze. We are following the crowd, caught up in the madness, blown about by the latest fads and new releases. Like dogs roaming about looking for their next meal, we are carried about by the tide of hedonism. We are adrift, lost at sea, but completely unconcerned. As a mouse runs around and around in a wheel, we chase one pleasure after the next. The tide is rocking us asleep as it is taking us deeper out into the sea. We are unknowingly enslaved to our routines. Our daily lives, filled with pleasures in business and recreation, blind us to the approaching danger. As a herd of cows willingly follow each other to the slaughterhouse, we follow the course of this world unaware that it is reserved for fire.

It is only a matter of time before all this carelessness and false sense of security will be blown away. Death overtakes us all. In time, you will be standing before a holy God. No excuses. No self-righteousness. No atheistic worldview. Just you and your guilt, fully exposed before the Almighty God. But for now, your carelessness remains.

FORGIVENESS

A Universal Offer

The tragedy of it all is that, on your way to hell, you must purposefully walk over the dead and resurrected body of Jesus Christ; you must push Christ and His free offer of grace aside. If you face the wrath of God, it will be because you have refused the love of God. Having heard the gospel, you have been given a promise—a way of escape has been provided. To remain in unbelief is to knowingly reject this gracious offer and say, “I don’t want to think about that right now.”

Moreover, if you push Christ out of your way, be fully aware of the One you are rejecting. The gospel that offers you salvation cost Christ everything. For God to give you the universe, He would only have to speak the word. For God to save your soul from sin, He had to sacrifice His only Son. This free promise was not free for the One who made it (1 John 4:10).

Christ laid aside His glory and became a man. He did not come dressed as a King but as a servant (Matthew 20:28). He came into this world knowing that, as a man, He would face every temptation imaginable. After John baptized Him, Christ was led

into a deserted area for forty days (Matthew 4). During this time, all hell was unleashed on Him. The devil and all his demonic forces threw everything that they had at Him. In utter hatred, the devil sought to crush Him.

Christ was famished, tired, and beaten down in every possible way, and yet, He remained true to His Father. He resisted every temptation. He did not once shame or dishonor the One who sent Him into the world. He loved God and His neighbor with all of His heart, mind, and soul perfectly, entirely, and at all times. His life and earthly ministry were full of love, mercy, and compassion for others (Acts 10:38). He sought not fame, nor fortune, nor power. He was lowly of heart, gentle, and humble. He gave everything He had to the service of God and to assist others. He was sinless, righteous, perfect, and altogether glorious (Hebrews 7:26).

And this is not all—in this state of humility, sinlessness, and goodness, He willingly took sinners' place on the cross—the just for the unjust (1 Peter 3:18). He took our shame and guilt on Himself. The mocking we deserved, He willingly embraced. He was beaten, spit upon, and utterly humiliated as the chief of criminals. His own disciples and closest friends forsook Him in this dark hour. He was rejected because He was holy. But, worst of all, the

anger and wrath of God, which we deserved, was poured out upon Him in full. Read the final chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John for the details. He endured the judgment of God so that believers could be declared innocent (2 Corinthians 5:21).

What kind of king dies for His enemies? He is such a King; He offers those who repent a free pardon.

Christ rose from the dead, which proved His innocence. By His resurrection, Christ won the victory over sin, death, and the devil. We can be forgiven because the King of glory took care of justice for those who believe (Acts 13:39). What a Savior! If you continue in unbelief, then this is the Savior you are rejecting. This is the gospel you continue to shun.

If God required a million dollars to wipe away our sins, many would pay the price willingly. If God required that we give up our firstborn to inherit eternal life, this too would be a price that some would be willing to pay. But, no! It is the offended party—God—who has laid down His firstborn for those who have sinned and rebelled against Him. Christ paid the ultimate price so you may be freely forgiven. Not only the just for the unjust, but the wounded party taking the place of the guilty party (Romans 5:6-9). Salvation is free, but this is what you refuse when you turn away in unbelief.

What kindness, what graciousness, and what goodness must you turn your back on when you reject the gospel! If you go to hell, it is because you refuse this offer; you turn your back on the goodness and mercy of God; you reject a Savior who died so sinners may live. And why do you reject Him? Because you want to play freeze-tag with your buddies? Because you are too insubordinate to accept that there reigns a King over your soul? Because the pleasure of a Twinkie sounds more desirable than the pleasure of being in a relationship with God?

Deciding not to follow Christ proves you do not want to be saved from your sins. Rather, your pride, ego, and self-centeredness keep you from accepting a Love to reside in your heart that is greater than all loves. It is *absurdity* to reject such a humble Savior, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. You reject life, meaning, purpose, and happiness so that you can hang onto sin, death, meaninglessness, and despair. You exchange the truth for a lie and heaven for hell.

For those of you who are still carefree and unconcerned about the condition of your soul, there is not much more I can say. But, for those of you who have a broken and weary heart, for those who can see their sins and rebellion against their God, for those who truly hate their sins, for those who are ready to humbly ask God for forgiveness and sur-

render to the lordship of Christ, I have wonderful news. Look unto Jesus and you shall be saved (Isaiah 45:22; Matthew 11:28-30). This is a promise that is certain to be fulfilled for all who believe. It is not by works but simply by believing this promise that we are made right before God (Galatians 2:16).

He came to die for sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). He freely offers Himself to all who truly desire to be delivered from their sins and their guilt. Those who hide and cover their sins will remain in their sins (Proverbs 28:13), but those who repent—taking ownership and confessing their sins before God—and believe in their hearts that Jesus is who He says that He is shall be saved (Mark 1:15; Acts 3:19; Romans 10:9).

Dear reader, there is forgiveness. Your guilt and sin may be removed as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12), and the perfect righteousness of Christ could be credited to your account (Romans 3:20-26). All your guilt may be washed away, and the blood of Jesus is able to cleanse you from all of your sins (1 John 1:9). “Come unto me,” Christ says, “and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). God made this promise. He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). He is able to save the worst of sinners. Salvation is free; you only have to believe. ❧