



John Phillips

Can I
**FORGIVE
MYSELF?**

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John Phillips

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Introduction

We published our previous booklet, 'Forgiveness: making sense of it' in 2010. (If you have not read it, I recommend that you obtain a copy to read alongside this book. You may be able to get a copy from the person from whom you received this book; otherwise contact us at BeaconLight Trust.)

The response to our earlier booklet has caused me to realise that, for many people, the biggest question seems to be, 'Can I forgive myself?' This book attempts to answer that question.

A number of friends have contributed. In particular, I must thank Dr Paul Adams, Chair of BeaconLight Trust and Barbara Parsons for their very helpful observations and suggestions. I am also grateful to Derek, Ellen, John, Lane and Lucienne for their input, to those whose 'stories' I have been allowed to use and to Nicola, whose proof-reading skills have been absolutely vital.

I am especially grateful to Adam Shah, who has laboured with me over the past months with the design and layout.

We will be satisfied with our labours if the book brings hope for some struggling with their guilt. We will be delighted if it helps some to choose the way of God's forgiveness and the ultimate freedom which that brings.

John Phillips

April 2013

Part One

The problem: our pain and guilt

'What made me do it?'

'What made me do it?'
'Why did I say such a thing?' 'How did I manage to get caught up with that?' These are the sort of questions which many people ask of themselves.



They are questions which show regret for a wrong done, a mistake made, a failure to act or for a pattern of unsociable and offending behaviour. Alongside the regret there is often guilt and shame. And alongside their questions there is usually a further question, 'Can I forgive myself?' Forgiving oneself is seen as the key to stop reliving the incident and to start 'moving on'.

(The issue of forgiveness is dealt with more generally in our previous booklet, 'Forgiveness: making sense of it'. If you have not read it, you may find it helpful to obtain a copy to read alongside this book. See the Introduction on the previous page.)

Wrong actions: there is always a price to pay

There are consequences to everything we do. We cannot expect a good outcome from a wrong action: we reap what we sow. It is also true that if we neglect to do something we know is right, then that too is likely to result in a bad outcome.



**There are consequences
to everything we do...
...we reap what we sow.**

We might be pleased to 'get away' with something when no one else finds out. But, of course, that doesn't mean that we are not guilty and the knowledge of what we did will remain with us and make us feel guilty.



When we hurt someone, there is often pain for ourselves as well. Whether we tell lies about someone; steal; cheat on a partner; fail our children; injure someone by careless driving; engage in drug dealing; commit a violent or sexual assault or commit a murder; we have to expect that we will also suffer.

We can suffer in any of the following ways:

the pain of punishment... We may be punished. The punishment may be the loss of a job, a fine, a driving ban, a community order or prison sentence.

the pain of broken relationships... Hurting someone close to us will almost certainly affect our relationship with that person and others may also choose to distance themselves from us. Those relationships may never be fully restored. Rebuilding trust can be difficult and take time.

the pain of rejection... Other people – in our local community, for example – may express their disapproval at what we did, leaving us feeling isolated and rejected.

the pain of personal loss... There may be other consequences. For example, our reputation may be tarnished and that can affect our job opportunities. Where there is a criminal conviction, that may be seen as a blemish on our character and can be damaging in many different ways.

the pain of a guilty conscience... When we truly understand the harm which we have caused, there should be feelings of remorse and guilt. We may try to avoid them by making excuses for what we did or we may try to suppress them. However, sooner or later, a sense of guilt is likely to surface.

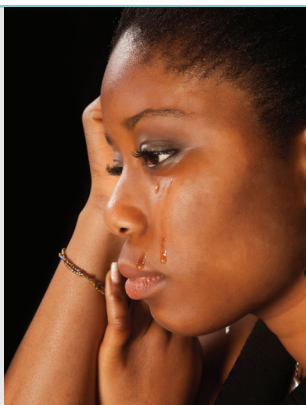
That sense of guilt may be even greater if we denied we were responsible or even blamed others. In doing so, we may have escaped punishment and avoided other consequences.

Avoiding punishment may have been a matter of great relief to us - for a while. But it will do nothing to ease the problem of our guilty conscience. Punishment, whilst painful, can at least help us to feel that we have 'paid our debt'. If we have not been punished, the guilt may be even harder to bear.

It is the guilty conscience which can cause the greatest pain. It can be like a trap from which some may never escape and sadly, some never want to escape from it, thinking that they do not deserve to be free from their pain.



It is the guilty conscience which can cause the greatest pain.



Guilt: true or false?

It is important to admit to what we have done. That is the first step towards healing for ourselves. But it is also important to guard against any tendency to carry feelings of guilt when we are not guilty. That is false guilt.



Parents may have no reason at all to blame themselves for their child's wayward life and, yet, may be burdened by feelings of (false) guilt.

It is deeply distressing to hear of a young person who has been abused and then carries feelings of guilt, believing that they were to blame.

The tragedy of a suicide may cause those close to the person to blame themselves – without any justification – for the tragic death.

Some people set such high standards of perfection for themselves (or others demand such standards of them) that they have constant feelings of failure and guilt. For them, it is so easy to accept the blame for anything which goes wrong. They – and all of us – need to distinguish between true and false guilt.

So, what is the remedy for the guilty conscience?

Is the answer to 'forgive ourselves'? If so, how do we do that? Before we consider those questions, we must be clear about what forgiveness actually means. It can be used to mean two slightly different things. Normally, it is used to explain that a victim has given up all feelings of bitterness and resentment, and any desire for revenge, against someone who has hurt them.

That may be a great help to the offender: it may help them to 'move on' with their life, even though it does not relieve them of any punishment which the law requires.

Forgiveness can also mean the granting of a free pardon or the cancellation of a debt. A head of state may pardon someone who has offended against the state. Wealthy nations may write off (forgive) the debts owed to them by poorer countries. In each case, the slate has been wiped clean.

To forgive means:

- to give up all feelings of bitterness or resentment or any desire for revenge against a person who has hurt us, *or*
- to excuse or pardon a person who is in debt to us.

So, can we forgive ourselves?

Very simply, the answer is, 'No, we cannot forgive ourselves', for the right to forgive belongs to the person who has been wronged (or who is owed the debt). That person alone has that choice. The person who has committed the wrong has no say in the matter, other than to make an apology and ask for forgiveness.

That is not the answer you wanted to hear but please don't despair! It is good news really. It is good news for everyone who has tried every possible means of 'forgiving themselves' and found that it does not work. You can give up your struggle.

You can now think about the question which you should be asking, 'How can I be free from the pain of my guilty conscience?' God has given us the answer to that question – and it is very good news. Keep reading!



Part Two

The solution:

God's mercy and grace

Our problem: how God sees it

We have identified our problem – our ongoing guilt that our conscience will not allow us to forget. We have also seen that it is not for us to wipe our own slate clean. But our guilt is not only a problem for us: it is a problem for God too.

God is absolutely pure and holy and hates all 'sin' (which is the word the Bible uses for any wrongdoing). That includes all the other wrong things in our life which do not trouble our conscience. It includes our everyday attitudes and behaviour, such as our lies, our anger, our selfishness and our jealousy. It includes our words and thoughts too, as well as our actions. The truth is that each of us has a sinful nature.



We may not allow the 'small sins' to trouble us, using the excuse that everyone is guilty of them. God cannot do that. He is just, which means that He cannot simply ignore any wrong action, word or thought. So, our sin hurts God even more than it does us.

The solution: our part

- our responsibility to the people we have hurt

There are three things which we should do, in order to help to reduce the pain of the people we have hurt. We should:

- accept responsibility for what we did – and not offer any excuses. That is important even if others – perhaps even those we hurt – were partly to blame for what happened.
- show genuine regret. Wherever possible, we should make an appropriate apology directly to those we have hurt.
- do whatever is practical to make amends for the harm done; an obvious example is to pay for any property we have taken or damaged.



These steps should also benefit us. Showing that we are truly sorry for what we did, and trying to make amends where we can, is crucial to our own healing.

Once we have taken those steps, it is important that we try to accept that:

- it is not right to allow our guilt to become like chains, threatening to keep us bound to the events of the past,
- we can be allowed to put our mistakes behind us and enjoy a future,
- there is nothing to be gained by physical self-harm or mental or emotional self-abuse: 'beating ourselves up' will never take away, or reduce, our guilt.



- our accountability before God

More crucially, we must recognise our sinfulness before God and confess the particular wrongs which we have committed. Later, we will see what that involves. But first, we need to understand that God is the one who has the answer to the dilemma of a guilty conscience. Only He can bring us the peace we desire. It cannot come from ourselves.

The solution: God's part

Although God hates sin, He is also full of love, compassion and mercy. He must deal with our sinfulness but He does not want to punish us as we deserve. He is full of grace, longing to forgive us. He created us and wants to remove the barrier which our sin has created. God's grace is truly amazing. You may be familiar with the famous hymn, Amazing Grace (see page 35).

When we speak of God's mercy and grace we are referring to His goodness, His kindness and His love.

God's *mercy* is the holding back of a punishment which we deserve.

God's *grace* is a kindness which is totally undeserved and freely given to those who will receive it.

God showed us His mercy and His grace by sending His Son, Jesus, from heaven to live as a man on earth. During His time on earth, Jesus always had time for the broken, the hurting, the guilty and the ashamed, many of whom were despised by the religious leaders. Not surprisingly, Jesus was recognised as 'the friend of sinners'.

When criticised by the religious leaders for having a meal with sinners, Jesus had the perfect answer for His critics:

People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. I have not come to call respectable people to repent, but outcasts.

Mark 2:17

Jesus died in our place

Jesus not only befriended sinners: He died for them. Eventually, the religious leaders had Him arrested and executed. His death was the very reason for His coming to earth. God sent Jesus to die in our place.



All of God's anger at the sins of every one of us – of everyone who has ever lived – was poured out on Jesus. Jesus received the punishment which we deserve. It was the only way that God could deal with our sins without condemning us: He allowed Jesus, who had never sinned, to pay the penalty for them.

Jesus, still 'the friend of sinners'

Jesus rose from the dead after three days and is now in heaven with His Father. We have to look to Jesus for the answer to our question, 'How can I be free from the pain of my guilty conscience?'

Today, Jesus has that same compassion towards all of us who have messed up. That means everyone – those who admit it and those who refuse to. Whether your guilt is because of your lifestyle or because of one (or more) serious wrong actions – whatever the reason for your guilt – Jesus has time for you. He is still 'the friend of sinners'. And what a friend! He died for you and me!

So, God invites you to accept Jesus as your friend. He invites you to receive His forgiveness of all your sins and to start a brand new life.

The Bible tells us how God deals with our sins when we put our trust in Jesus.

As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our sins from us.

Psalm 103:12

The Lord says, Now, let's settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red, you will be as white as wool.

Isaiah 1:18





A new life with Jesus

When we accept that offer of a brand new life with Jesus:

- we can be free from the burden of our guilt: we can experience a wonderful peace. God no longer sees the dirt and filth of our past: He sees in us the righteousness that comes from being made clean by Jesus.
- we become a child of God. We have the relationship with Him which He longs for – the relationship for which He created us. Our life has a whole new purpose – one that will truly satisfy and fulfil us.
- we receive the gift of God's Spirit living in us, helping us to live to please God. We do not have to rely on our own efforts.
- we are immediately safe from God's punishment forever. We no longer stand condemned. One day – we do not know when – Jesus will come to earth again, in order to judge everyone who has ever lived. Followers of Jesus are safe from God's punishment: the punishment they deserve has already been taken by Jesus Himself.

Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends...

2 Corinthians 5:17,18

There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

We are all faced with a choice: to accept the offer of a new life with Jesus or to reject it. In Part Three we will see how we can accept it and the consequences of refusing it.



A Father and His Son

The father's youngest son was bored at home and longed for some excitement. He plucked up courage to ask his dad for the share of the inheritance which would be due to him when his dad died.

His dad agreed and he soon left home, with plenty of money in his pockets. He was determined to enjoy himself. And he did – for a while.

Of course, the money ran out and his new friends were no longer to be seen. His situation became desperate, so desperate that he took a job as a farm labourer: his job was to feed the pigs.



He soon realised how much better off he would be working for his dad. Would he take him back as a servant? It was worth asking. And so he started the journey home. As he approached home, his dad spotted him in the distance and ran down the road to welcome him back.

The servants were instructed to get a set of the best clothes ready for the son and to prepare a feast. His return called for a great celebration.

Jesus told this story to explain that God is just like the father. He so wants to welcome back everyone who has made a mistake – or several mistakes – and however desperate the situation in which they find themselves. Of course, they must really be sorry for what they have done and really want a fresh start. That is exactly what God offers – a new start: in fact, a brand new life as forgiven men and women.

You can read this story (often known as the Story of the Prodigal Son) in Luke 15:11-32.

Part Three

The choice: condemned or forgiven

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 3:16-18 NIV*

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**If you choose to do nothing ...
you reject the only solution
to your burden of guilt.**

The choice you face

You are faced with a choice – whether to ignore or accept God's offer of a free pardon. You can either stand condemned or stand forgiven. Until you ask to be forgiven you *are* condemned.

Option One

remain as you are - condemned

If you choose to do nothing (or if you simply do not make any decision), you reject the only solution to your burden of guilt. You will continue with that anguished cry, 'Can I forgive myself?' Apart from the solution which God offers, there is no answer.

And the worst is yet to come. Anyone who refuses God's offer of salvation faces God's anger when Jesus returns for that final day



of judgment. Anyone who has not asked Jesus to take their punishment will have to take God's punishment themselves. It will be an awful punishment, beyond anything we can possibly imagine – and it will last forever.

We do not know when Jesus will return. When He does it will be too late to turn to Him. Decisions, as well as actions, have consequences. A decision to turn your back on God's offer of forgiveness will have the most frightening consequence.

God has overlooked the times when people did not know him, but now he commands all of them everywhere to turn away from their evil ways. For he has fixed a day in which he will judge the whole world with justice by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death!

Acts 17:30,31



**The only way to God
is through Jesus.**

Option Two

believe in Jesus and be forgiven

Many people want to earn God's favour, hoping that the good things they do will outweigh the bad. It doesn't work like that. No one can ever hope to meet God's absolute standard of holiness. We can get right with God only when we receive His grace – the free gift of salvation that comes from believing in Jesus. There is no other way to gain God's acceptance. The only way to God is through Jesus.



For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it.

Ephesians 2:8,9

You can receive God's forgiveness today by believing in Jesus Christ. To do that you need to:

- admit that you have got things wrong,
- accept that Jesus died on the cross in your place for your sins,
- ask God to forgive you for all your sins,
- turn your back on your old way of life, choose to follow Jesus and make Him King of your life.

A Prayer of Repentance

To repent means:

- to recognise the sin in your life, and
- to change your thinking and your attitudes, and
- to commit to a new way of living to please God.

If you really want to begin a new life, with Jesus Christ at the centre, you can start now by praying this prayer.

Father God, I know that I am a sinner and I know that You hate sin. I need Your mercy.

I also know that You love me and sent Jesus to die, in my place, for my sins. Thank You for sending Jesus.

I am very sorry for everything in my life, past and present, which is not right. I am especially sorry for

I ask You to forgive me. I now accept Jesus to save me from the punishment which I deserve.

I want to turn away from my old life and now live to please Jesus. I want Him to be at the centre of my life – to be my King.

Please take away – forever – this burden of guilt and shame and fill me with Your peace. Thank You, Father God.

Amen.



If you have prayed this prayer and meant it, you have made the most important decision of your life in choosing to follow Jesus. You don't need to worry any more about forgiving yourself. God has forgiven you – and that is what really matters! You have asked God to set you free from your burden of guilt and He will.

The best thing you can do now is to tell another Christian – a church leader or a friend – of your decision. You will need help as you begin your new life as a follower of Jesus. Living as a Christian is not easy and it will be important to meet regularly with other Christians, so that you can learn together (from the Bible) and support each other.

Happy are those whose sins are forgiven,
whose wrongs are pardoned.
Happy is the one whom the LORD does not
accuse of doing wrong
and who is free from all deceit.

When I did not confess my sins,
I was worn out from crying all day long.
Day and night you punished me, LORD;
my strength was completely drained,
as moisture is dried up by the summer heat.

Then I confessed my sins to you;
I did not conceal my wrongdoings.
I decided to confess them to you,
and you forgave all my sins.

Psalm 32:1-5

On the following pages are the accounts of two very well known Christians – one from the first century and the other from the eighteenth century – whose lives were dramatically changed when they encountered Jesus.

St. Paul the Apostle

Saul – only later did he become known as Paul – was born three or four years after Jesus. He was brought up in a strict Jewish home and studied Jewish history under one of the greatest scholars of that time.

Saul became a religious ‘extremist’ and was filled with hatred for the Christians. We read in the book of Acts:

But Saul tried to destroy the church; going from house to house, he dragged out the believers, both men and women, and threw them into jail. (Acts 8:3).

He was convinced that he was serving God.

Saul was on his way to Damascus, to look for Christians and to have them arrested, when he had a dramatic encounter with God. The account of this is found in Acts 9, from verse 3 onwards.

As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

‘Who are you, Lord?’ he asked.

‘I am Jesus, whom you persecute,’ the voice said. ‘But get up and go into the city, where you will be told what you must do.’

Saul suddenly realised who Jesus was – the Son of God.

Paul experienced God's mercy and grace. His passion had been to destroy the Christian church: his passion now was to spread the good news of Jesus. He travelled extensively, starting new churches. Under God's inspiration, he wrote many letters to explain the essential teaching about the Christian faith – what Christians believe and how they should live. Today, they form a major part of the New Testament.

It is truly amazing that God should choose Paul, so committed to crushing the Christian church, to become its most prominent leader. God still longs to change lives around. He will not turn His back on anyone who comes to Him.

In the Apostle Paul's own words

I give thanks to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength for my work. I thank him for considering me worthy and appointing me to serve him, even though in the past I spoke evil of him and persecuted and insulted him. But God was merciful to me because I did not yet have faith and so did not know what I was doing. And our Lord poured out his abundant grace on me and gave me the faith and love which are ours in union with Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 1:12-14

John Newton

John Newton (1725-1807) is best known for writing the hymn, Amazing Grace (the most recorded hymn ever), as well as many others.

John Newton's mother died when he was six and her strong Christian faith meant nothing to him. In his teens he became wild, angry and rebellious, a confirmed atheist and a very vocal blasphemer. He was press-ganged into the Royal Navy and publicly flogged after deserting. Later, he got caught up in the slave trade in Africa. To use his own word from Amazing Grace, he was a 'wretch'.

When he was twenty-three, he was returning home from Africa when a very severe storm threatened to break up the small ship into pieces. At that point of facing death, John Newton cried out, 'the Lord have mercy upon us!' He astonished himself by this cry and by his reverent use of the Lord's name. He was only accustomed to speak of God to blaspheme.

He continued to pray. On the one hand, he questioned why God would have time for someone who had ridiculed Him so much: on the other, he began to recall promises in the Bible which he had learned as a child. And God did have mercy on John Newton and the other members of the crew. The ship survived and all the men were saved.

John Newton's experience of God's mercy and grace changed his life dramatically. His experience is expressed wonderfully in

Amazing Grace, which he wrote twenty-five years later. By that time he was an ordained clergyman. For almost fifty years he preached of God's mercy and grace.

John Newton is also remembered for his part in the campaign to abolish the slave trade, as he encouraged his close friend, William Wilberforce, who led that Parliamentary campaign.

In John Newton's own words

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Verses from John Newton's famous hymn, Amazing Grace

Part Four

Living as a forgiven person

‘Why do I still feel guilty?’ ‘Has God really forgiven me?’

It is possible to receive God’s forgiveness but to continue to live with feelings of guilt. You may accept that you are forgiven and, yet, still be weighed down by the memory of past wrongs. Or you may even begin to question whether God truly has forgiven you.

In this final part we will look at some of the reasons for these feelings and doubts and how we can overcome them.

As explained in Part One (page 9), there is true guilt and false guilt. True guilt comes from God and is healthy. It can lead us to make amends for what we have done and to repent before God.

False guilt can come from Satan, from others or even ourselves. False guilt is unhealthy. It can only keep us bound to the past, preventing us from moving forward and from living productive lives.

Faith, facts and feelings

Deciding to follow Jesus is an act of faith. Faith means ‘... to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.’ (Hebrews 11:1). Our decision is based upon our belief – our confidence – that every statement and promise in the Bible is true.

Christians often experience feelings which differ from the facts – the truths – as presented in the Bible. Often, but not always, Satan – God’s enemy – will be responsible for those feelings.

As Christians, we are constantly under Satan’s attack. He will do all he can to prevent us from experiencing the peace and joy which God intends for us. Satan wants us to be anxious and fearful. His ultimate aim is to destroy our



faith and one of his tactics is to plant lies in our minds. Jesus described him as ‘a liar and the father of all lies.’ (John 8:44).

One important defence against Satan is to read and study the Bible. As we do that we will really get to know God in a personal way and begin to discover all that He wants to teach us. When we know His truth, we can recognise the lies with which Satan tries to deceive us.

'But I still feel guilty'

If you have truly repented, then you must accept that God has done exactly what He has promised to do – He has forgiven you. That means that your guilt has been dealt with. That is a fact and you must hold on to that, despite any guilty feelings which may remain.

The fact is that you are now a changed person: your guilt has been washed away and you have been set free. That is what God has told us in the Bible. It is important to get to know the wonderful truths in the Bible. As you do, you will get to know God and be able to trust what is true, rather than rely on what your feelings are telling you.



In view of all this, what can we say? If God is for us, who can be against us? Certainly not God, who did not even keep back his own Son, but offered him for us all! He gave us his Son – will he not also freely give us all things? Who will accuse God's chosen people? God himself declares them not guilty! Who, then, will condemn them? Not Christ Jesus, who died, or rather, who was raised to life and is at the right side of God, pleading with him for us!

Romans 8:31-34



‘But I still have doubts’

Often it is Satan who is responsible for causing us to doubt. Consider some of the thoughts – the lies – which he will sow in our minds. Then look at the facts – what is true – as we find them in the Bible.

Satan’s lie: ‘What you did was unforgivable’

Nowhere in the Bible does it state that God will forgive some sins but not others. The Bible does say:

But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing. (1 John 1:9)

... But God has now brought you to life with Christ. God forgave us all our sins; (Colossians 2:13)

Confession is followed by forgiveness: that is what God has promised. And note the words ‘all our wrongdoing’ and ‘all our sins’. That means every one of them!

Satan’s lie: ‘You haven’t been punished enough’

Satan may want you to believe that but the Bible tells us:

The Lord is merciful and loving ...

He does not punish us as we deserve or repay us according to our sins and wrongs. (Psalm 103:8,10)

Remember the price already paid for your forgiveness – and mine: the awful, agonising death of Jesus on the cross. There could be no greater price – no greater punishment – than the crucifixion of the Son of God.

If you believe these lies – that you are unforgivable and that you haven't been punished enough – you will be accepting that Jesus dying for you was not sufficient to cover your sin. And that is the biggest lie of all!



To accept that lie is to believe that you have to punish yourself to add to what Jesus has done for you. No! Jesus has paid the price and He has paid it in full.

Satan's lie: 'You don't deserve to be forgiven'

Actually, this is true! But Satan wants you to think that God's forgiveness is only for those who deserve it. And that is *not* true!

No one deserves God's forgiveness and no one can earn it. We are rescued from God's anger by His love and kindness alone.

The Bible tells us:

For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it. (Ephesians 2:8,9)

Jesus's death was totally undeserved. But, because He died, all who have received Him are forgiven, made clean and given a new beginning – totally undeserved.

Don't listen to the lies: hold on to the facts

Instead of dwelling on your doubts, feelings of failure and the lies of Satan, live by what the Bible teaches. That is where you will find God's truth and that is where you will get to know God's heart. You will discover the certainty of His forgiveness and enjoy the freedom that living as a forgiven person will bring.

For by the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God, which he gave to us in such large measure!

Ephesians 1:7,8

Wise words from the Apostle Paul

There were Christians in the first century who also experienced feelings of guilt and doubts about whether God had really forgiven them. Two particular pieces of advice which Paul had for them are appropriate for us too.

Probably it was advice that Paul himself needed to hear. After all, Paul described himself as 'the worst of sinners' and Satan will have attacked him with the lie that he was not worthy of God's forgiveness.

Firstly, Paul encouraged the Christians in Corinth to recognise who they were now, not the immoral people they used to be. In fact, each Christian was now a new person.

You are no longer the person you used to be ...

*Some of you were like that. But you have been purified from sin; you have been dedicated to God; you have been put right with God by the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.
(1 Corinthians 6:11)*

... you are a new person

Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Secondly, Paul told the Christians in Philippi not to dwell on the past (and on their mistakes and regrets) but to aim to please God with all the things which lie ahead.

Forget the past, focus on the future

... the one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. (Philippians 3:13)





There is no better example for us to follow than the one Paul has set. He did not allow the guilt and shame of his past life to destroy his new life. He did not need to. He knew that he was forgiven. He knew that there was no guilt for him to carry. He knew that Christ had taken it and dealt with it.

This enabled Paul to leave the past behind him and live a purposeful and productive life to please God. Towards the end of his life, he was able to say:

I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept the faith. And now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day – and not only to me, but to all those who wait with love for him to appear.

(2 Timothy 4:7,8)

May you and I press on in the race and look forward to the day when we can echo these words of Paul. That is what Ellen, Imogen, Noel and Tom are doing. You can read their stories on the following pages.

Ellen

At the age of eight I decided to start attending Sunday School, much to my parents' surprise: they had no interest in church themselves. It was not long before I told my mum that I wanted to serve God. She assured me that I would soon think of something better to do with my life! I didn't and I did commit to serving God - 30 years later!

When I was eleven my mother suffered a brain haemorrhage. She died two weeks later. It had a massive impact upon my family – and me especially. My dad turned to drink and my brother began to abuse me. The effect for me was the beginning of a period of 27 years of getting things wrong. One bad decision followed another; a breakdown of family relationships as I felt rejected; erratic attendance at school; encounters with the police; relationship failures; dabbling with spiritualism leading to a very frightening realisation that the devil is real.

By the time a friend invited me to church (now with two beautiful children), I was burdened with the guilt of my catalogue of mistakes and wrong choices. I was soon challenged by one lady's question, 'Do you really know who Jesus is?' I was incensed! I was also determined to make up my mind about Jesus. For a couple of days I studied the Bible, desperate to find the truth.

During that time of serious study, God spoke to me unmistakably and revealed the truth Himself: Jesus is God's Son who died for

me. He paid the penalty for me so that all the wrong things I had done would no longer count against me. I experienced His wonderful grace. At that moment, I knew that I was God's child. Finally, I chose to serve Him with all my heart: there is no better purpose in life than that.

It has been like starting life afresh, growing in true wisdom, having the best teacher and being loved – forever – by the best parent ever, Father God.



... all the wrong things I had done would no longer count against me.

Imogen

I had never done anything terribly wrong but the following verses from a modern version of the Bible sum up very well what my life was like.

'A stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; ...'
(Galatians 5:19-21, *The Message**)

At my lowest point I contacted an aunt – despite the fact she was a Christian! I was definitely 'anti'. We saw things differently. I spoke of my hate, my resentment and my need for revenge. She spoke of the need to forgive – and to receive God's forgiveness.

I did not want to hear about Jesus but my aunt explained that my sin was preventing a right relationship with God. She pointed out that Jesus had already taken the punishment I deserve: He had died on the cross for me.

That night I prayed, 'God, if You're there, I'm sorry. I am sorry for all the things I've done against You and I'm sorry that I haven't believed in Jesus. Please forgive me. I forgive all the people who have hurt me. I release them – and the pain – to You. God, if You're willing to teach me, I'm willing to learn.'

I still struggled with forgiving myself. I could not let go of the hate I had for myself, born out of rejection and failure. I felt that I had to hold on to it, to fuel my belief that I was not good enough and deserved punishment.

God revealed to me, through something that I read, that self-forgiveness was not the real issue: the root problem was in fact pride. My pride was saying that I would be the judge, jury and executioner (or forgiver). My self-condemnation showed that I was rejecting God's acceptance and that I wanted to be in control.

I am learning that how God views me is more important than what I think about myself. I know God loves me and accepts me because of Jesus. Jesus has paid the penalty for all my sins. If God has forgiven me, how can I possibly condemn myself?



**If God has forgiven me,
how can I possibly
condemn myself?**

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Noel

I was raised in Brixton when the Rastafari movement was so popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I found my identity as a 'rastaman'. My dreads grew beyond my knee caps. As I am 6ft plus, they were pretty long dreads!

By the age of twenty-seven I was struggling with life, notably with broken relationships and the risks of dealing in 'weed'. I felt that I could best solve my problems by moving from Brixton. It did not help. In New York I began to deal in 'crack' to make real money. Inevitably, I also made real enemies and was forced to return to dealing in Brixton.

Eventually, I decided to try my own 'crack', with devastating consequences. When you are in the pit, Satan is the one in control, not you. I sank deeper into evil under the influence of the crack pipe.

It was after I went to sell my very last ounce of weed that I began to reflect on my life. I was so badly beaten that day that I almost died. When I woke up in hospital two days later I began to reach out to God. In His mercy He didn't ignore me. He sent a Christian to bring me a Bible. My spirit leapt as I began to read it.

I called one of my sisters to find out how I could have Christ in my life. I prayed a very simple prayer, confessing to God my sins and asking for forgiveness. That night, for the first time for almost twenty-five years, I had no fear of sleeping, just an amazing peace.

I am now a church leader working amongst men and women who are in that same pit (or coming out of it) that caused me to cry out for God's mercy.

Of course, I regret my early life but I know that the precious blood of Jesus has made me clean: I have been washed as clean as snow. Like the Apostle Paul, forgetting what is in the past, I am now living to serve and please God and I am pressing on towards the goal ahead. I give thanks to God that He considers me worthy to serve Him.



I know that the precious blood of Jesus has made me clean.

Tom

I can now appreciate the wonderful advantages I've had in life: first and foremost, two parents who loved me. Secondly, I was educated at Eton College, so posh it was where Prince Harry and Prince William would go.

As a kid, I believed that Jesus was God and that He did lots of amazing miracles. But I also believed that God was my friend for when I needed him – like if I'd lost a pen or stuff like that. He was my mascot, my dog on a lead. Of course, that's madness but that was how I was thinking!

It was when I was 16 I decided to try alcohol. Soon, £15 pocket money a week wasn't enough for my needs, so I started dealing in alcohol. In time, I 'progressed' to hash and then to LSD and 'speed'. My trading quickly escalated. But, inevitably, my life soon spiralled to its lowest point: I had lost all my money, my gear and my friends.

I began attending church, partly to please my mother and partly because I was now awaiting trial and I thought it might help to have God on my side. One day the pastor asked, 'Why don't you become a Christian?'

'I will - if your God gets me off at the trial,' I replied.

Immediately I thought, 'Hang on a tick, Thomas! You've never done God a favour in your life (but only used Him), and now

you're asking a favour from Him? Isn't that a bit off? Anyway, why would He want your life? You're a wreck!

But then I sensed that God was saying, 'Tom, I'm not really interested in this petty earth court. You stand guilty at *my* court and I'm trying to set you straight, so you don't have to do eternity.' I then realised that was my real problem: the great trial I would face the moment I died.* My prayer changed immediately, 'God, please save me *forever*.'

And so about two weeks before I went down - I got six months and served three - I trusted my life to Jesus Christ. I knew He would never let me down and never let me go. And He hasn't. That was 17 years ago, in July 1996.



**... that was my real problem:
the great trial I would face
the moment I died.**

** Everyone must die once, and after that be judged by God.
(Hebrews 9:27)*

A fuller account of Tom's testimony can be found at <http://www.transformed.org.uk/lives/tom-seidler/>

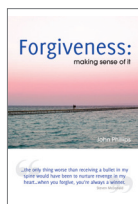
BeaconLight

BeaconLight is a small charity providing resources to help Christians grow in their faith and to help them share their faith with others.

The following resources may be of interest.

- **Forgiveness: making sense of it.**

This is a 40-page booklet exploring the freedom which we experience when we forgive - and the even greater freedom and joy when we know God's forgiveness.



- **Word@Work**

Word@Work is a unique expository devotional for busy people delivered

Word@Work

by email - free! Including a Bible passage with explanation and prayer, it is designed to challenge Christians to work with God who is always at work.

You can sign up at www.wordatwork.org.uk.

- **CrossCheck**

CrossCheck is an audio visual presentation of six helpful steps to finding real friendship with God. You can view the presentation at www.crosscheck.org.uk.



The presentation is also available on DVD and in booklet form.

Please contact BeaconLight with any enquiries about these resources.

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Can I **FORGIVE MYSELF?**

Where a person is feeling guilty and remorseful over a wrong done or mistake made, there is often a longing to know how they can forgive themselves. 'Forgiving oneself' is seen as the way of getting free from the pain of guilt.

This book is a straightforward Biblical response to that very question, 'Can I forgive myself?' It explains the need we all have of God's forgiveness and how we can receive it.

Following an insurance career in the City of London, John Phillips is now actively engaged in Christian ministry in Banstead, Surrey. He is a Director of BeaconLight Trust.


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