



# UNLOCKING THE PRISON OF GUILT

by *Tim Wesemann*

Consider the following items:

- A pair of boots
- Thirty pounds of frozen meat
- Four ballpoint pens
- Blankets
- A few pennies
- A fund totaling more than \$3.5 million

The list contains an odd assortment of items. Yet they have something in common. Give up? The answer may surprise you. The common denominator is guilt.

In 1811 the United States government created “The Conscience Fund.” People had been sending in letters filled with money they believed they owed the government. Over the years, the fund has accumulated over \$3.5 million.

The government received \$50 one day from a man who had stolen frozen meat, a pair of cavalry boots, and a few other items from the army in the 1940s. A former IRS employee sent \$1 to cover the cost of four ballpoint pens she took home from the office. There was \$10 sent as payment for blankets an ex-GI stole during World War II. In the letter that accompanied the money, he said he couldn’t rest and wanted to be ready to meet God.

Then, there was the dollar bill sent in by a man who felt guilty about putting a few pennies on a railroad track to be flattened by a train. He also confessed he had used a dime or a quarter in a high-school silver-coating experiment. The writer heard there was a law against defacing money and he hoped to redeem himself as a law-abiding citizen.



If you started a conscience fund for your life, what would it hold? How much money would that fund accumulate as you try to free yourself from the guilt of mistakes you’ve made? What “borrowed” objects would you deposit there? What memories would be on display in your guilty conscience gallery?

Perhaps the reason you're holding this booklet is that you're dealing with guilt. Nearly all of us struggle with guilt feelings at times. "If you're like me," says Dr. Leo Buscaglia, "you may forget your own telephone number, but have an unfailing memory for past mistakes you've made."

Oh, there are some people who seem to lack a conscience about anything and act like guilt is not part of their lives. But I'll let you in on a secret—feeling guilty and being guilty are not the same thing!

Some people seem to know how to properly deal with guilt and can move forward confidently in their lives. Have you figured out their secret to dealing with guilt? That's what we want to look at in the following pages.

Guilt can be disabling. It affects us physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It changes the way we react to other people. Guilt attacks us, wounding our spirits and draining the joy from our lives.

If you can relate, hang on, because there is help and hope! There is good news if you feel like guilt is burying you alive. As you keep reading, I hope you will feel the guilt leave your mind and body like the pressure of air being released from a tire.



Consider another list. Think about all the different things people feel guilty about:

- Arriving late
- Living comfortably when so many people need so much
- Eating too much
- Spending too much
- Saying or doing something hurtful (recently or in the past)
- Parental guilt - Part I (not measuring up to be a good parent)
- Parental guilt - Part II (not living up to parents' expectations)
- Forgetting to thank someone who acted kindly
- An addiction
- A secret character flaw
- Someone else's death (thinking it was caused or could have been prevented)
- Not feeling guilty
- Not having paid for this free booklet.

There may be as many causes for guilt (right or wrong) as there are people who read this book. You can add your own guilt-trip itinerary to the list. As you look over this list and consider your own additions, do you notice that sometimes we feel guilty when we haven't done anything wrong? Why do we feel guilty about so many things?

While some people seem to be exceptions to the rule, most people seem to be hard-wired with the sense of right and wrong we call a "conscience." People say they have a "clean conscience" or a "guilty conscience" or even "no conscience," or that "my conscience is bothering me" or "my conscience is telling me..." We all have it. If your heart is beating, you have dealt with guilt.

There are many reasons you might be or feel guilty. Sure, guilt can serve a good purpose.

As the popular essayist Max Lucado writes, "Guilt is the nerve-ending of the heart. It yanks us back when we are too near the fire. Godly sorrow 'makes people change their hearts and lives.'" (*A Gentle Thunder*, p. 173).

Therapist Dr. Susan Forward says that “guilt is an essential part of being a feeling, responsible person. It’s a tool of the conscience that, in its undistorted form, registers discomfort and self-reproach if we’ve done something to violate our personal or social code of ethics.” Guilt can motivate you to abide by your code of ethics.

But if, instead of inspiring growth, guilt burdens you and prevents you from growing and living your life, something is wrong. You need to know that there is hope.

## **IMPRISONED BY GUILT**

You may never have been a prison inmate or inside the walls of a jail, but I suggest that you’ve been confined to a tiny, locked cell. You see, guilt can be a prison. You can put up emotional, mental, or spiritual walls between yourself and others or between yourself and God. Sometimes those walls create a fort from which you shoot angry arrows at others or bomb your self-image to pieces.

At times it can seem as if you’re like a criminal on trial and guilt plays the role of prosecuting attorney, judge, and jury. Guilt accuses, convicts, and condemns you to live behind the prison walls you’ve built.

Just as some criminals repeat their offenses and return to prison again and again, so you may be a repeat guilt offender. Maybe you’ve gone in and out of prison all your life. Maybe you’ve been sentenced to remain in prison for years. Or perhaps you’re a lucky one—you’ve served time, been released, and your life is changed as you live in freedom.

Even if right now you are an inmate in a guilt prison, I pray you will be released by the end of this booklet and find the freedom intended for you.

I’m just as guilty as anyone else, and the principles I’ll mention, which others explained to me, continue to help me deal with my own guilt.

## **POISONOUS GUILT**

Guilt not only confines you from the outside, it also condemns you from within. Like a poison flowing through your body, it affects every part of you. It attacks your mind, causing you to see yourself as inferior, worthless, or evil. It can make you think others are looking down on you or judging you, even if they don’t know your situation. Your mind tells you to react defensively in conversations with people who know nothing of your guilt.

Guilt also attacks your heart. You may be so paranoid you think everyone around you knows you feel guilty and is talking behind your back. Guilt can rob you of joy because it weighs you down. It can make an it-won’t-matter-tomorrow problem feel like an earth-shattering, must-solve-right-now dilemma!

The poison of guilt also attacks your body. It can cause sleeplessness, nervous tension, or an upset stomach. Guilt is truly a sickening poison.

## **TRUE OR FALSE?**

In dealing with guilt, we must also discuss the difference between false guilt and true guilt. You may be plagued with unnecessary, false guilt, which means feeling guilty about things that don’t call for it. If you are suffering

from false guilt, you may run into the prison and lock yourself in the cell because you figure you must have done something wrong.

You may lack confidence in yourself since the poison of guilt can leave you feeling doubtful, fearful—even hopeless. Sometimes it’s really hard to figure out whether your guilt is true guilt or false. Sometimes there are gray areas. Dr. Forward suggests asking yourself these questions: “Is what you did or want to do:

- malicious?
- cruel?
- abusive?
- insulting?
- belittling?
- demeaning?
- harmful to the other person’s well-being?

“If you answer yes to any of the questions, the guilt you’re feeling is appropriate as long as it creates feelings of remorse and not self-hatred ... But if you’re doing something healthy for yourself and not trying to harm or diminish another person, then your guilt is undeserved and needs to be confronted.”

True guilt, on the other hand, takes some true grit. It takes true grit because you have to confess (that is, admit) you have really done something wrong. True guilt can result from knowing you have hurt someone. Maybe it was intentional, maybe not. Either way, you have violated your conscience by doing something that offends your sense of responsibility to the world around you. That means you have to show some true grit, confess your mistake, and be truly sorry for it.

## A STORY OF GUILT

Dave had good reason to be completely overwhelmed by guilt. He received an invitation one day from Temptation, and he sent back an R.S.V.P. that he would be attending. So Temptation kept sending more invitations and he continued to respond in the positive, which was truly a negative for his life.

Dave had an affair with a married woman and she became pregnant with his child. Finding out this news, Dave hoped the woman’s husband would think it was his own child. But the timing was off because the husband had been out of town and couldn’t have fathered the child.

When Dave realized this, he made plans to have the husband murdered. The plan succeeded. The woman moved in with Dave; the child was born, and Dave was locked up in prison. It wasn’t a prison with physical walls. It was a prison of guilt. The deadly toxin running through his veins was not the usual venom that kills a man on death row, but the poison of guilt.

Dave was overcome with guilt. In fact, in all of the literature I have read, I have never come across words that describe the feelings more vividly than the way this man penned them. Visualize the picture he paints with his words:

“I know about my sins. Before I confessed my sins, my bones felt limp, and I groaned all day long. Night and day Your hand (God) weighed heavily on me, and my strength was gone as in the summer heat.”

Have you ever seen this person staring back at you in the mirror? The pressure never lets up. The joy of life is nowhere to be found. Your strength is gone because all your thoughts are focused on the guilt of sin.

The man who wrote those words and who had the affair and planned the husband's death is better known as David, not Dave. He was a shepherd and a king. He was father to the wisest man the world has ever known: Solomon

He was a writer and a singer. He was disobedient to his God and hurtful to some of the people around him. He once lived in the prison of guilt over his mistakes. If you have a Bible, you can read the part of his story I told in condensed form here. It's in 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12.

I noted that David *once* lived in the prison of guilt over his mistakes. I emphasize once because of how David learned to deal with his guilt.



There are two poems, or psalms, that David wrote about this. They are also found in the Bible, in the book of Psalms, chapters 32 and 51. The words of David I quoted above convey how he was affected mentally, physically, and spiritually. His words come from these two psalms.

David wrote that at first he tried to keep quiet about his sins but discovered it was useless. His bones “felt limp.” His strength was gone. The poison of guilt consumed him and made his whole body ache. He was like a prisoner moaning the day away, alone in his cell. He felt God's hand weighing on him; clearly, God knew what he had done. Sounds like God used David's conscience to force him to deal with his guilt. I've been there, haven't you—living with a guilty conscience? There are several ways you might deal with guilt. Sometimes you might do everything you can to avoid admitting your guilt. It sounds like that's how David started. You can avoid taking responsibility by justifying or rationalizing your behavior. Maybe you blame someone else, or just come up with a good reason for doing what you did. These efforts could fall under the category of redirecting the guilt.

You might also try to bury the guilt, or stuff it down deep inside and try to forget it. Move on. Don't deal with it. Out of sight, out of mind. This may work for a while, but it will come back later—during an argument, a stressful situation, or something that jogs your memory in the right direction. The poison won't lay dormant forever. It may even attack you physically, affecting your nervous system, contributing to high blood pressure, or causing other physical difficulties.

Another way you might try to deal with guilt is to bargain or work the guilt away. Do enough good works to counter the wrong actions and the guilt should eventually be erased, right? Wrong! It doesn't work that way.

Recently, I heard a man speak about trying to deal with tremendous guilt in exactly this way. When he was a child, he accidentally shot and killed his best friend. Now, more than 20 years later, he is a rescuer with the United States Coast Guard and has saved many people's lives. He described how he has tried to make up for that childhood mistake by making his life useful—but he still feels guilty for causing his friend's death. He cannot save enough people or do enough good things to make up for that one tragedy over which he feels so much guilt.

## A STORY OF FORGIVENESS

David found the prison's key and the antidote for the poison that was destroying his life. He confessed (admitted) his mistakes, expressed remorse (was truly sorry) for his wrongdoing, and then received freedom and healing from his guilt through God's mercy. God forgave David, and he was able to let go of the guilt of his mistakes.

The same key can unlock your prison. The same antidote will neutralize your poison. Confess your mistakes; be truly sorry for them, and God will have mercy and forgive you. Read that paragraph again. Let it sink in: first in your mind, then let God plant it in your heart.

Now I encourage you to read the prayer below. It was written by the forgiven offender, poet, and singer—King David. Then pray the words for yourself. That simply means to read them as though they are your words, with your heart open to God. Pray them silently or aloud—wherever you are, whomever you are with.



David uses three different words for sin in these psalms. Two of them, “iniquity” and “transgressions,” we don’t use much these days. But their meanings, as David wrote them, are important.

“Sin” means missing the mark. David believed God had called him to live up to a certain standard. Perfection is the bull’s-eye on the target. When he sinned, he missed the mark of God’s expectation.

“Transgressions” are sins done out of rebelliousness. David knew what was right (leaving other men’s wives alone), yet did the wrong anyway.

“Iniquity” means sin along with its accompanying guilt. Sometimes I find it helpful in confessing and praying about the guilt in my life to use this word to specifically combine sin and guilt.

Consider those definitions as you read and pray David’s words.

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely You desire truth in the inner parts; You teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

“Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Psalm 51:1-12).

For me, that is a wonderfully freeing prayer of confession, along with a plea for forgiveness and the restoration of joy in David’s life and mine.



The psalms are not arranged chronologically in the Bible, so Psalm 32 was written after David’s confession of sin and guilt in Psalm 51.

Now read below David’s joyful words after his confession, written as he realizes God has forgiven all of his sins. Undeserving as he is, he has been rescued from the prison and cured of the poison of guilt. God forgave the guilt of his sin and made him joyful again.

“O God, You bless everyone whose sins You forgive and wipe away. You bless them by saying, “You told me your sins, without trying to hide them, and now I forgive you.” Before I confessed my sins, my bones felt limp,

and I groaned all day long. Night and day Your hand weighed heavily on me, and my strength was gone as in the summer heat. So I confessed my sins and told them all to You. I said, “I’ll tell the Lord each one of my sins.” Then You forgave me and took away my guilt” (Psalm 32:1-5, CEV).

God heard David’s prayer for forgiveness and release from the prison of guilt. God answered his prayer. When David confessed, “I have sinned against the lord,” he was assured that “the lord has taken away your sin” (2 Samuel 12:13-14). God would not count his sins against him! His guilt had been removed!

This freedom from guilt isn’t just for David but also for you and me.

## **ARE YOU SURE?**

I’ve told you how God forgave David’s sins, and that God also forgives you. I’ve said that with forgiveness comes freedom from guilt. But how do you know this applies to you? How can you be sure God will forgive you just as He forgave David?

Let me introduce you to the One who made this all possible and brings you the certainty of forgiveness. He already knows all about you, and loves you like no one else can love you. His name is Jesus Christ, and He’s the one who holds the key to release you from the prison of guilt and found the antidote to heal you from the deadly poison of your sin. You see, we’re all in the same situation: we do things we don’t want to do, and the good things we want to do, we often don’t. God knew we needed someone to save us from the hopelessness of our repeated failures. So He sent His Son, Jesus, to the world to live a perfect life, die to pay for our sins, and rise from the dead so we could be forgiven and have eternal life.

It is as though you were convicted of a crime and sentenced to death. But, instead of sending you to prison to await execution, the judge who has presided over your trial steps down from the bench and offers himself to be taken away in your place. He is executed to pay the penalty for your crime, and you are allowed to go free.

The fact that Jesus came to earth and did this on your behalf is your assurance that He will be merciful to you. He has already paid the penalty for everything you have done wrong. By believing in Him, you are freed from the prison of your guilt and cured of the poison of hopelessness.

Jesus steps between God and you, saying to God, “Judge this person, whom I love, on the basis of My perfect life, not his imperfect life.” With that you are declared not guilty! You are free to go! The assurance that you’re forgiven doesn’t come from anything you have done, but comes only from God’s love for you. He won’t change His mind. You have His invincible word on it! You can make this real in your life right now by trusting Christ to forgive you. You can tell God what David did as I mentioned above. Or you may want to tell Him something like this:

God, I recognize I have fallen short of Your standards. Thanks for sending Jesus Christ to die and rise again for me. I trust His death for me as the only means of my forgiveness. Thank You for forgiving me. Please give me the complete life You said You would.

If you trust that Jesus came down from the judge’s bench and paid the penalty for your sins, then you, too, can be certain God has forgiven all your sins and taken away the guilt that accompanies them. Not only does He give you the key to unlock the prison gates—but He opens the doors Himself. He personally escorts you out of the prison, past the thick walls you built, and then heals you of the guilt that had poisoned you. He walks with you and promises never to leave you.

## STAYING OUT OF PRISON

You are forgiven! Now what? Are you going to walk right back into the prison of guilt? Do you feel the guilt continuing to flow through your veins? Perhaps you find it hard to really believe His words of forgiveness. Perhaps you find it impossible to forgive yourself. Sometimes I feel that way. I just feel too awful about what I've done and don't think I can ever forgive myself. I deserve to feel guilty! Then I realize that if God can forgive me, certainly I can forgive myself. I believe He gives me the power to stop punishing myself and move on.

When guilt just won't go away, often it's because you don't believe His forgiveness is real.

God's forgiveness does not depend on anything you say or do, or on how you feel or what you trust, but only on God's promise to do it. Focus on God's promise to forgive you. He will not go back on His Word.

Try re-reading this booklet, or praying David's prayers again. Write reminders to yourself and tape them on the bathroom mirror, over the kitchen sink, or on a bookmark in your favorite book. Sometimes I do this with promises from the Bible, but insert "I" or my name so I remember they are true for me:

"If we [I] confess our [my] sins, He [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our [me my] sins and purify us [me] from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

"When we were [Tim was] overwhelmed by sins [kept missing the mark], You forgave our [his] transgressions [rebelliousness]" (Psalm 65:3).

## LIVE CONFIDENTLY, GRACEFULLY

Prolonged guilt can rob you of a confident, joyful life. As you have trusted Jesus to rescue you from sin and guilt, keep your focus on Him. Pray that God will burn this promise on your heart so you can live confidently and gracefully in His love: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). No condemnation. None. Nil. Zero. That's one to post on the mirror and read every day!

Confidence comes through esteem found in Jesus and not in yourself. If you seek to find esteem within yourself, you'll keep meeting disappointment. You know how it is when you try to buck up and do things right. Eventually, you will disappoint yourself because you're not perfect. Try looking to Jesus instead. He'll tell you that you are loved, beautiful, and worthwhile no matter what. Every day you can confess your mistakes, and He'll remove your sins, transgressions, and iniquities through His endless forgiveness! When you take this road to freedom from the prison of guilt, you will find it ultimately leads to your eternal home in heaven—made possible by Jesus.

## ANOTHER LOOK AT THE CONSCIENCE FUND

At the beginning of this book, I told you about "The Conscience Fund" set up by the government. I asked, "If you started a conscience fund for your life, what would it hold? How much money would that fund accumulate as you try to free yourself from the guilt of mistakes you've made? What "borrowed" objects would you deposit there? What memories would be on display in your guilty conscience gallery?"

How have your answers changed? Do you notice as you look around the gallery that the pieces are gone? It's though someone stole them right from under your nose! That's what happened the minute Jesus stole your heart.

Are you searching for cash in your conscience fund savings account? It disappeared the minute God created faith within you.

If you're still searching for other items held captive in your conscience fund, you won't find them. They've been set free, along with you.

You are free to go in peace! I look forward to seeing you in heaven, where guilt is not allowed!

## FINAL THOUGHTS

You may be thinking—where do I go from here? First, thank Jesus for the freeing gifts He has brought you today through His Word and life. If you have a friend or family member who already believes in Jesus, share your guilt-free living good news with them. Then, look for a Bible-teaching church to attend in your area. Maybe you have Christian friends nearby who can help you. You can also call Lutheran Hour Ministries at 1-800-876-9880, and they can help you find one.

If you don't have a Bible, put one on your shopping list! Then start reading. Some good starting points would be: The book of Psalms, the Gospel (Good News) of John, or Paul's letter to the Philippians. Pray that God will send you Christian friends, so you can encourage one another. And then go enjoy the wonderful life God has planned for you.

As you enjoy it, don't feel guilty about it! God wants you to have an abundant, forgiven, and eternal life through Jesus! You're free!

## LIFE-GIVING WORDS ABOUT GUILT

As you begin (or continue) your journey with Jesus, the guiltless Son of God, here are some words from the Bible about guilt, forgiveness, and hope.

“He [Jesus] Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that who ever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“Jesus said, ‘Are you tired? Worn out? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly’” (Matthew 11: 28-30, The Message).

“When we were overwhelmed by sins, You forgave our transgressions” (Psalm 65:3).

“My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear ... I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin ... Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Savior” (Psalm 38:4, 18, 22).

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

*Check out LHM's online store  
for a variety of ministry resources*

If you would like to get hard-copy booklets  
of this item, you can do so by going to

<http://www.lhmgift.org/storefront/products.asp?by=topic&id=7>.

There you will find this and other **Project Connect** booklets,  
with many titles in Spanish as well. Subjects like peace,  
divorce, forgiveness, cancer, gambling, post-traumatic  
stress disorder and loneliness are only a few of the topics  
sensitively addressed in these concise, Christ-centered volumes.



© 2005 Int'l LLL  
Revised 2008

Lutheran Hour Ministries is a Christian outreach ministry supporting churches  
worldwide in its mission of *Bringing Christ to the Nations-and the Nations to the Church*.

Unless noted otherwise, Scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®,  
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.  
Capitalization of pronouns referring to the Deity has been added and is not part of the original New International Version text.