Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived and Sung

"How Sweet the Sound"

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. "Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)," Newton wrote, "That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."{1} He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.{2} My university roommate and I used to try to see how many different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.{3} Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject's. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."{4} At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."{5} He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.{6}

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.{7} Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."{8}

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.{9} Life was good, he recalled. "We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied."{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, "to pass away the time"—an edition of Thomas à Kempis' classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, "What if these things were true?" Dismayed, he "shut the book quickly." {12} Newton called himself a terrible "blasphemer" who had rejected God completely.{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, "The Lord have mercy on us!" Spending long hours at the ship's helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, "I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him."{14}

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus' message and his own need for it. "I was no longer an atheist," he writes. "I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man."{15}

Newton discovered that the "new man" would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we'll see.

From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.{16}

Newton set sail again on a slave ship, seeing no conflict between slaving and his new beliefs. Later he led three

voyages as a slave-ship captain. Newton studied the Bible. He held Sunday worship services for his crew on board ship.{17}

Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely disgusting today. How could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it. As Aitken points out, this cultural disconnect doesn't excuse Christian slave trading, but it does help explain it.

During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. I concluded that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable."{18}

Two days before he was to embark on his fourth slave-trading voyage as ship's captain, a mysterious illness temporarily paralyzed Newton. His doctors advised him not to sail. The replacement captain was later murdered in a shipboard slave uprising.{19}

Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.{20} Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.{21}

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years.

Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.{22} Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.{23} His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his mentor.{24}

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.{25} During the arduous abolition campaign, Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, "trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him."{26}

Newton's biblical worldview had matured to the point that he

became active in the abolition movement. In 1788, he published a widely circulated pamphlet, *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me," he wrote, "that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."{27} His pamphlet detailed horrors of the slave trade and argued against it on moral and practical grounds.

Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.{28} Jonathan Aitken says, "Newton's testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause."{29}

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace

John Newton encountered "many dangers, toils, and snares" on his life's voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

Moral maturation can take time. Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life. He

learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"{30} Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."{31}

Newton related Jesus' message to current events and everyday life. For him, faith was not some dull, dusty, irrelevant relic but a living relationship with God, having immense personal and social relevance. He grew to see its import in fighting the slave trade. He used both the Bible and friendship to encourage Wilberforce. He tied his teaching to the news of the day, seeking to connect people's thoughts with the beliefs that had changed his life.{32}

Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence. Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he was nearly impaled in a riding accident.{33} Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.{34} A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.{35} He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."{36}

Notes

1. From Olney Hymns, 1779; in John Newton, *Out of the Depths, "Revised and Updated for Today's Readers by Dennis R. Hillman"*

(Grand Rapids: Kregel 2003), 9. Newton's autobiography was originally published in 1764 as *An Authentic Narrative*, a collection of letters between an anonymous writer (Newton) and a pastor. Newton was not yet ordained when he wrote the letters.

2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.

3. Aitken, op. cit.

4. Newton, op. cit., 24.

5. Ibid., 33.

6. Ibid., 34.

7. Ibid., 34-37; 40-41.

8. Ibid., 44-45.

9. Ibid., 57-64; Aitken, op. cit., 63-64.

10. Newton, op. cit., 60.

11. Aitken, op. cit., 64.

12. Newton, op. cit., 69.

13. Ibid., 65, 68.

14. Ibid., 69-80; quotations from 71, 75.

15. Newton, op. cit., 82-83.

16. Aitken, op. cit., 85 ff.

17. Ibid., 91, ff.; 106, 107.

18. Ibid., 112.

19. Ibid., 125-126.

20. Ibid., 127-137.

21. Ibid., 140-141.

22. Ibid., 143-177; 193.

23. Ibid., 304.

24. Ibid., 299-308.

25. Ibid., 310 ff.

26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce's thoughts about quitting.

27. Ibid., 319.

28. Ibid., 319-328.

29. Ibid., 319.

30. Ibid., 243.

31. Ibid., 347.

32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.

33. Newton, op. cit., 23.

34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.

35. Ibid., 85.

36. Aitken, op. cit., 350, 356.

© 2008 Probe Ministries

Spanish Feedback: “I Regret My Abortion, We Must Fight It”

Translated Spanish Q & A:

Dear Sirs:

I support the points you make in your article about abortion. It is true…I’m telling you this because I had one. The abortion happened when I was 21 years old and now I really regret doing this. I have 2 children that show me how beautiful it is to be a mother. When I think of what I did, I feel very sad.

We definitely have to fight against abortion. (“Definitivamente hay que luchar contra el aborto.”)

Dear friend,

I am so sorry to hear of your pain over your abortion. Do you know that Jesus Christ offers you forgiveness and cleansing for your sin? He cannot take away your choice, but He can take away the guilt and the pain. The Bible tells us, If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for all of your sins, including abortion, and then God raised Him from the dead. He is alive today and wants to have a warm, love-filled relationship with you. For more information, please see this article on The Most Important Decision of Your Life at www.ministeriosprobe.org/docs/decision_mas_importante.html

Warmly,

Sue Bohlin

© 2008 Probe Ministries

A Doctor's Journey with Cancer

When you suddenly learn you might have only 18 months to live, its a good time to sort out what really matters in life.

Last December, Yang Chen, MD, dismissed an aching pain under his shoulder as muscle strain. Five weeks later, as the pain persisted, a chest x-ray brought shocking results: possible lung cancer that might have spread.

A highly acclaimed specialist and medical professor at the University of Colorado Denver, Yang knew the average survival rate for his condition could be under 18 months. He didnt smoke and had no family history of cancer. He was stunned. His life changed in an instant.

I wondered how I would break the news to my unsuspecting wife and three young children, he recalls. Who would take care of my family if I died?

Swirling Vortex of Uncertainty

When I heard his story, I felt a jab of recognition. In 1996, my doctor said I might have cancer. That word sent me into a swirling vortex of uncertainty. But I was fortunate; within a month, I learned my condition was benign.

Yang did not get such good news. He now knows he has an inoperable tumor. Hes undergoing chemotherapy. Its uncertain whether radiation will help. Yet through it all, he seems remarkably calm and positive. At a time when one might

understandably focus on oneself, hes even assisting other cancer patients and their families to cope with their own challenges. Whats his secret?

I learned about Yangs personal inner resources when we first met in the 1980s. He worked at the Mayo Clinic and brought me to Rochester, Minnesota, to present a seminar for Mayo and IBM professionals on a less ponderous theme, Love, Sex and the Single Lifestyle. With the audience, we laughed and explored relationship mysteries. He felt it was essential that people consider the spiritual aspect of relationships, as well as the psychological and physical.

Later he founded a global network to train medical professionals how to interact with patients on spiritual matters. Many seriously ill patients want their doctors to discuss spiritual needs and the profession is taking note.

Reality Blog

Now a patient himself, Yang exhibits strength drawn from the faith that has enriched his life. He has established a websitewww.aDoctorsJourneyWithCancer.netto chronicle his journey and offer hope and encouragement to others. The site presents a compelling real-life drama as it happens.

As a follower of Jesus, Yang notes biblical references to Gods light shining in our hearts and people of faith being like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. He sees himself as a broken clay jar through which Gods light can shine to point others who suffer to comfort and faith.

As he draws on divine strength, he reflects on Paul, a first-century believer who wrote, We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A dedicated scientist, Yang is convinced that what he believes about God is true and includes information about evidences for

faith. Hes also got plenty to help the hurting and the curious navigate through their pain, cope with emotional turmoil, and find answers to lifes perplexing questions about death, dying, the afterlife, handling anxiety, and more.

With perhaps less than 18 months to live, Yang Chen knows whats most important in his life. He invites web surfers to walk with me for part, or all, of my journey. If Im ever in his position, I hope I can blend suffering with service while displaying the serenity and trust I observe in him. Visit his website and youll see what I mean.

© 2008 Rusty Wright

"Will I Go To Hell For My Doubts?"

I have been a Christian my whole life. I have been struggling with faith lately. I am mostly intellectually convinced in Christianity, however I have a lingering doubt based on a few intellectual things. One is the battle between old earth and [young] earth [creation] and the other is the age of the book of Daniel—which online resources I have read seem to prove that it was written after the fact. (I have seen the Christian responses and they do not deal with all of the facts.) Anyway, none of these doubts would bother me except that Hebrews 11:1 and James 1:8 imply that any doubt might be cause for exclusion of me from heaven. I can't even sleep at night because I am so afraid of going to hell. Is there any hope for me?

I would suggest that Hebrews 11:1 and James 1:8 do not imply that at all. In fact, doubt isn't even mentioned. Hebrews is

about the nature of faith, and James simply says that the double-minded person—one who continually wavers back and forth between trusting and not trusting—is inherently unstable in his thinking.

See, the Lord understands that we see through a glass darkly, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians. He understands that we are trying to make sense of a fallen world through a fallen intellect, and we don't have all the puzzle pieces. He gives much more grace than you know, I think. The issue is not about having doubts, which usually just means we haven't figured things out. God's indictment is on those who refuse to trust. They are not the same thing. The Lord Jesus said to love God with our minds, and wrestling through the hard, meaty issues of apparent contradictions and complications is one way we do that. The very act of pursuing truth to attack our doubts and questions is a kind of worship!

Let me encourage you that there are answers, even if you haven't found them. For instance, Probe's position on the age of the earth question has brought great peace to my husband, Dr. Ray Bohlin's spirit; he's been diligently studying this issue for 30+ years. He has looked at the evidence for a young earth and universe, and an old earth and universe, and found compelling evidence for both. They clearly cannot both be true. So he says he is an agnostic on the age issue. He doesn't know. And can live with that, especially since: 1) the issue is not WHEN but WHO created, and 2) the Bible doesn't tell us, which means it doesn't matter enough to get caught up in it. How long ago God created the heavens and the earth has nothing to do with whether Christianity is true or not.

I just read my answer to him to get his approval, and he added that he would be VERY careful about trusting online resources on the book of Daniel. Why should you believe them? The nature of the web is that anyone can publish anything, whether they have any expertise or not. Are they qualified? Biased? Especially sources like Wikipedia, which are going to reflect

the anti-Christian bias of the culture, since the entries come from people whose thinking is pickled in the brine of secularism. I invite you to read another answer to email at Probe.org about the book of Daniel.

I would also spend some time shoring up your understanding of your security in Christ if you have placed your trust in Him. If you became a Christian years ago, you became a new creature, a forever child of God. You cannot lose your relationship with your heavenly Father, no matter how many doubts plague you, any more than you can become unborn from your mother. Our founder, Jimmy Williams, wrote an article "How Can I Know I'm Going to Heaven?" here: www.probe.org/how-can-i-know-im-going-to-heaven/

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

© 2007 Probe Ministries

"Will Jesus Still Forgive Me?" – Did My Sin Re-crucify Christ?

Please help–I'm really worried Jesus won't forgive me. I regressed and viewed a pornographic image. While praying for forgiveness a voice in my mind said it hurt like nails and that I had re-crucified Christ and that there was no sacrifice left for me. I'd heard of this verse but now I'm really worried is there any hope of forgiveness for me. Please, I'm worried really bad.

Sounds to me like you were hearing from a demon who was sending what scripture calls a “fiery dart” at you. Yes, your sin hurt the Lord. (Sometimes the Enemy throws some truth into the midst of his lies.) No, you did not crucify Christ because if you recall, His last words on the cross before He died were “it is finished,” or actually more accurately, “it is paid in full.” Lord Jesus fully paid for your sin of looking at porn 2000 years ago.

And no, it is not true that there is no sacrifice left for you. The verse you are thinking of is Hebrews 10:26, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left.” But consider that equally true is the promise of 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

When a born-again Christian sins, God promises to forgive us. What you are exhibiting is the regret and remorse that shows God is continuing to give you the grace of repentance. The people Jesus doesnt forgive are the hard-hearted ones who refuse to ask for it.

Concerning Hebrews 10:26, listen to what theologian Dr. Wayne Grudem says about this verse:

> *“A person who rejects Christ’s salvation and ‘has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him’ (Hebrews 10:29) deserves eternal punishment. This again is a strong warning against falling away, but it should not be taken as proof that someone who has truly been born again can lose his or her salvation. When the author talks about the blood of the covenant ‘that sanctified him, ‘the word sanctified is used simply to refer to ‘external sanctification, like that of the ancient Israelites, by outward connection with God’s people.’ The passage does not talk about someone who is genuinely saved, but someone who has received some beneficial moral influence through contact*

with the church." (Bible Doctrine, p 343.)

Be encouraged, brother. Receive Gods forgiveness and cleansing according to the riches in Christ, which he has lavished on you (Eph. 1:8).

Blessings, Sue

© 2007 Probe Ministries

"Can I Be Forgiven for My Abortion?"

What if someone really believes that they were saved at a young age (14). . .but is then faced with an unwanted pregnancy at age 15 . . .and she terminates the pregnancy even though she KNOWS in her heart that it was wrong – do you believe that she can be forgiven? God tells us that He will never put more on us than we can handle . . .so what if we make the WRONG choice . . .what if we take the easy way out??? Do you think he can forgive us for this? I mean . . .what about the sacredness of life . . .I mean a baby is the most innocent of His creation . . .I hope with all my heart that it can be forgiven. . .but I just don't see how!!! I interfered with His plan!!! Plus what about the scripture in Proverbs . . .about a man being tortured by the guilt of murder shall be a prisoner forever . . .let no one support him . . doesn't this mean that I'm supposed to be tormented by it FOREVER!!! and no one should help me????

Okay . . .Here's my story . . . [Story edited out]

Thanks so much for listening . . .this has been hidden for so

long that it has been so difficult re-living it!!! Maybe it is my judgment to live with this internal struggle . . .maybe I'm not supposed to find peace . . .

What a mess I've made of my life!!!!!!!

Dear _____, precious child of God, beloved daughter of the King—

I am so very very VERY glad you wrote! I hurt with you. . . in fact, there are tears in my eyes as I write this to you—-my heart hurts for you and for the burden you have been carrying all these years.

Let's get to the bottom line first: In Jesus' name, YOU HAVE ALREADY BEEN FORGIVEN!!! Because you have trusted Christ, the first time you confessed your sin of abortion and asked for God's forgiveness, He gave it to you. In fact, He POURED His forgiveness out on you like an anointing of oil. Listen to 1 John 1:9:

> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

You confessed your sin, and because He is faithful and He is just (meaning, Jesus already paid for your sin at the cross), God the Father not only forgave you of your sin, He cleansed you from the stain of your guilt. Your feelings of being unforgiven and dirty and shame-filled have been lying to you, because the truth is, you are forgiven and clean and accepted in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6 KJV)

I want to challenge you to do something that will help you really GET this truth. Three times a day (at least), say out loud, "Thank You, Lord for forgiving me because Jesus died for me. I receive Your forgiveness and I receive Your cleansing. Thank You for making me clean and pure again." It really helps to say it out loud so that your spirit hears those words of truth come out of your mouth. This is the way of faith, the

way we receive God's blessings by faith even before we feel them.

You have some work to do to get to the point where you can feel unashamed and pure again—but that's not a matter of EARNING those things, but of changing your thinking so that you can embrace the reality that is yours to live out. Is there an Abortion Restoration or Recovery ministry near you? Ask the Lord to show you if there is; I don't know of any network of programs to check with, but I can point you to an excellent workbook you can do on your own. This is the book that is used at our church for the Abortion Restoration class that healed, post-abortal women offer a couple of times a year.

Her Choice to Heal by Sydna Masse and Joan Phillips

Also, there are a couple of websites where you can do some reading that will be very encouraging to you as you work your way through the necessary grieving of the loss of your baby (who is in heaven, and you will see him or her again someday!), and the necessary forgiving of those involved: yourself, the boy who got you pregnant, your parents, the Planned Parenthood people, and anyone else who played a part in the trauma to your soul.

After Abortion
After Abortion Message Boards (Online Christian Support at the above site)

www.hopeafterabortion.com

I also suggest you listen to a lot of praise and worship music so that you focus on the Lord and let Him minister His love to you. As you do that, there's one prayer I would strongly suggest you pray, regularly: "Lord, show me how much You love me." He LOVES to answer that prayer!

You have not gone further than God's grace can reach, and you

have done nothing that He cannot turn into good, for His glory and for your benefit. God wants to soak His grace down into the very bottom of your soul. Jesus' blood has covered and cleansed your sin, and you are clean and forgiven because He loves you so much He paid the ultimate price to prove it to you.

I'm glad you told me your story, because with every telling, you release more of the shame and the guilt, and you take another step toward healing. Who knows. . . some day you may find yourself telling your story to young girls BEFORE they make the same mistake you did, and you will watch God redeem your pain to change lives to His glory!

I SO hope this helps.

Warmly,

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

+ + + + + + + + + +

Addendum: I received this note from someone who works in abortion recovery ministry:

Hi Sue,

I was just reading your response to the email question: Can I be forgiven for my abortion? My heart is heavy for her and I am lifting her up in prayer.

She might also locate a recovery support group in her immediate area by doing a zip code search at www.optionline.org.

About the same time, I received this wonderful letter from the original writer:

Dear Sue,

I did find a place that ministers to women like me. . . and I am planning to participate in the "Forgiven and Set Free" Bible study. I've been through the study guide 3 times and I can't even tell you how much it helped me!! I know that I am not alone and I will continue to work on my healing…

I wanted to share a poem that I wrote with you—it comes from my heart. . .

A Baby's Perspective. . .

I can hear her talking with someone ~ I know it is all about me . . .
She says she's just not "ready" and the TRUTH she cannot see . . .
The truth that You made me and meant for me to be with her . . .
That You would never put more on her than she is able to endure.

For You created my inmost being & placed me in her womb. . .
But she does not realize this and will make a choice real soon.
Please be with her and help her to make the choice that is right . . .
And to know that NOTHING can be hidden from Your sight!

For I am a precious baby and deserve the right to live. . .
If she could only know ~ I've got lots of love to give!
They have NO RIGHT to decide to remove me from this place. . .
But I know that real soon I will be looking upon Your face.

For You are already aware of the choice she will make. . .
Oh God ~ she just doesn't realize all that is at stake!
For as hard as she tries ~ she will be UNABLE TO FORGET. . .
I just pray someday she will feel the NEED to REPENT!

And when that time comes ~ help her to cope with what she's done. . .

And to find strength, love and compassion in the arms of Your Son!
For the blood of Jesus can purify her from all of her sin. . .
No matter how SEVERE & HORRIBLE it might have been!

I know she feels scared inside as I can hear her every cry. . .
She even prays and wishes that You would let HER die.
She is being faced with a TREMENDOUS internal struggle. . .
So many feelings and emotions she will try to juggle . . .

The biggest decision she's faced thus far has been 'what to wear'. . .
But now she feels as if she is living a TERRIBLE nightmare!
Please help her to realize the truth before it is too late . . .
That a baby is a precious gift and NEVER a mistake!

These people talking to her right now don't even have a clue!
They are telling her what they believe she really needs to do.
They tell her she would be better off without me in her life. . .
Even though he says he loves her -she's too young to be his wife!

They tell her: "You must make a choice and do it really fast . . .
Then you can get on with your life and put this in the past. . .
Just go and take care of this 'problem' and never think of it again"
Oh – God – Don't they even realize the SEVERITY of this sin-!?!??!

Why is this the ONLY advice that they have to give !!?!?!?
That it's not in her best interest to even let me LIVE!?!?!
They tell her that she has so much to look forward to ~
And forgetting about this "situation" is all she needs to do!

How can they make this option sound so easy and so right??
Oh – please God ~ before it's too late – help them to see the light!
Please forgive them – they do not know what they are saying!
When instead they should be on their knees and praying!

She is now talking to her mom about her big "mistake"
Surely my grandma will help her before it is too late!
But instead I hear my grandma say she doesn't want me to be born. . .
She says that I will only bring the family a lot of shame & scorn.

God – please be with them as they face this tragic event. . .
And when it's all over – please show them their NEED to REPENT!!
What are they thinking!?!? – THIS SHOULD NOT EVEN BE AN OPTION!!!
I never once heard anyone mention the possibility of adoption!

Why do they continue to talk as if I'm not "real". . .
That I'm just a "blob of tissue" and really "no big deal"
They do not know that You made me and have a Plan for me. . .
If only we could open their eyes so that THIS they would see!

Sooner or later she will be faced with the reality of her action. . .
And grief, despair, guilt & shame will be part of her reaction.
When this time comes – God please help her to know that it is true . . .
That there is NOTHING in this world that You cannot do!

And when my mommy is forced to deal with this someday . . .
Please let her know when she seeks You ~ everything will be okay!
That Your amazing Grace and abounding love will see her through . . .

That all she needs to do is to place all of her trust in You!

When she puts her faith in Jesus and what He did on HER behalf. . .
Then surely You will save her from all of Your wrath!
For You sent Jesus into the world to save us from EVERY sin. . .
From even the most horrendous ones that are hard to comprehend!

Please help her to realize that in Your Word she needs to trust. . .
That if she confesses this sin to You, You will be faithful & JUST. . .
You will forgive her and make her "pure" again. . .
And You will no longer remember this terrible sin!

So please let my mommy confess & feel Your presence in her heart. . .
So that she will realize that she can have a brand new start!
Please protect her from all the people who will be quick to condemn. . .
For You said let him throw the first stone who is completely without sin!

For ALL sin separates us from You and no one is "good" enough. . .
For being "perfect" and always doing "right" is just way too tough!
For we have a "sinful nature" – the bible says it through & through. . .
But if we believe & trust in Jesus we can be made completely "new"!

For You can turn ANY situation into GOOD for Your glory. . .
She may even help others someday by telling her story!
For Your love is GREATER than we can ever comprehend. . .
And Your Grace covers even the very worst of sin!

Even though I wish we would never have to be apart. . .
Please let her know I still love her with all of my heart!
Tell her I forgive her and forgive herself she must . . .
For I am in heaven with You and in that she can trust.

I pray that someday she will come to You with this big “mess”. . .
And I know that You will help her in her time of great distress. . .
When she finally finds you -in Your loving arms she will stay. . .
And I will be so very happy that I will see her in heaven one day!

“How Is It Just for God to Put Our Sins on Jesus?”

How is it just for God to put someone’s sins on Jesus, making them sinless? I have heard the analogy of a judge fining someone, and then paying the fine on their behalf; but sin is surely really, really bad, and no court would allow a judge to die instead of a criminal who had been given the death sentence.

After talking through the gospel with friends, this seems to be a big sticking point. How can a murderer seemingly get away with what he’s done and go to heaven, while Johnny Average gets punished—solely on the basis of whether he accepts Jesus? It is loving on God’s part to give everyone the chance of salvation, and it is just for him to punish unrepentant sinners, but how is it *just* for God to forgive a repentant sinner, who though repentant still sins?

I think you might be confusing “just” with “fair.”

Justice is about making sure that someone pays the penalty for a wrongdoing. Fairness is about treating people appropriately and right.

It is *just* for God to insist that someone pay the penalty for sin. It wasn’t *fair* for Jesus to pay that penalty Himself, because that’s about grace, not justice. Someone has said that justice is getting what we deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve, and grace is getting what we don’t deserve. I find those distinctions very helpful.

It is just for God to forgive a repentant sinner who continues to sin (that would be all of us!) because all of our sins, those committed before salvation and all those committed after salvation, were all paid for at the cross. Maybe I can help with the “sticking point” with a very simple word picture: we are all standing at the bottom of the waterfall of God’s love and grace. Those who refuse to turn to God in trustful dependence, receiving His forgiveness and salvation, have their cups upside down and therefore can’t receive what God is pouring out on them. Those who have trusted Christ have turned their cups right side up, and can receive what God is offering.

One of the most amazing truths about the gospel is that our sins are transferred to Jesus, who paid for them at the cross, and His righteousness is transferred to us. It is the most absurdly unfair transaction in the history of all creation, but it’s true. Love does things like that.

Hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

St. Augustine

Former Probe intern Tim Garrett explains that St. Augustine's The City of God *and his* Confessions *reveal not only a brilliant mind, but demonstrate his abiding concern to announce God's righteousness in His dealings with man.*

Who Was St. Augustine?

One of the most remarkable things about a close reading of Church history is that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. In the New Testament we find that a man who called himself "the chief of sinners" due to his murderous hatred toward Christians was saved when Christ Himself appeared to him on the road to Damascus. What is clear from the account in the ninth chapter of the Book of Acts is that it was not Saul who was seeking Christ: instead, it was Christ who was seeking Paul.

In modern times we see a similar situation in the life of C. S. Lewis. In *Surprised by Joy,* he recounts the night that he knelt to admit that God was God by calling himself "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." Like the Apostle Paul, we can see that Lewis was perfectly prepared to be an apologist for the faith, but that preparation occurred *before he ever became a Christian!* It is only after the fact that we see how God was actively seeking the sinner.

In this article we will examine another reluctant convert, a man whose life and ministry has been crucial to church history. His name was Aurelius Augustine: we know him as St. Augustine of Hippo. But until his conversion, Augustine was anything but a saint! Born in the year 354 in North Africa, Augustine was raised by a Christian mother and a pagan father.

The father's main desire was that his son get a good education, while his mother constantly worried about her son's eternal destiny. Augustine indeed received a first class education, but his mother was tormented by his indulgent lifestyle. Augustine became involved with a concubine at the age of seventeen, a relationship which lasted thirteen years and produced one son. Recognizing that sexual lust was competing with Christ for his affections, Augustine uttered the famous prayer "Make me chaste Lord . . . but not yet."

While sexual passion ruled his heart, Augustine sought wisdom with his mind. After suffering enormous internal conflicts, Augustine submitted himself to Christ at the age of thirty-two, and soon thereafter became Bishop of Hippo. Augustine became a tireless defender of the faith, diligent in his role as a shepherd to the flock as well as one of the greatest intellects the Church has ever known.

In this look at the life of Augustine we will focus on two of his greatest books—the *Confessions*, and *The City of God*. As we will see, Augustine's life and work is a testimony to the boundless mercy and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Augustine's Youth

In a gripping television interview recently broadcast on *60 Minutes,* the man convicted of the Oklahoma City bombings spoke of his grievances against the federal government. During the interview, Timothy McVeigh revealed that his lawyers have filed an appeal that maintains that pre-trial publicity prevented him from getting a fair trial. Like many of us, McVeigh seems intent on avoiding the penalty of his actions; but rather than doing so by insisting upon his innocence, he is attempting to have the verdict thrown out due to a technicality.

It was truly disturbing to see an articulate young man such as McVeigh coldly dismiss the mass murder of innocents on the

basis of a legal technicality. In many respects, his demeanor reflects the contemporary shift in attitude toward sin and guilt that has had devastating consequences for society. As a nation, America has seen a shift from a worldview primarily informed by biblical Christianity to one in which the individual is no longer responsible for his actions. Now it is either society or how one is raised that is given emphasis.

Against this cultural backdrop it is truly therapeutic to read Augustine's *Confessions.* Throughout this wonderful book, which is written in the form of a prayer, Augustine freely admits his willful disobedience to God. Augustine's intent is to reveal the perversity of the human heart, but specifically that of his own. But Augustine was not intent on just confessing his sinfulness: this book is also the confession of his faith in Christ as well. Augustine, as he is moved from a state of carnality to one of redemption, marvels at the goodness of God.

One of the most telling incidents in the *Confessions* is Augustine's recollection of a decisive event in his youth. He and an assortment of friends knew of a pear tree not far from his house. Even though the pears on the tree didn't appeal to Augustine, he and his friends were intent on stealing the pears simply for the thrill of it. They had no need of the pears, and in fact ending up throwing them to some pigs. Augustine's account of this thievery reveals a penetrating insight into our dilemma as human beings. Whereas today many want to blame their parents or their environment for their problems, Augustine admits that his sole motive was a love of wickedness: he *enjoyed* his disobedience.

This reflects one of Augustine's major contributions to Christian theology: his emphasis on the perversity of the human will. We would all do well to read Augustine's *Confessions* if only to remind us that evil isn't simply a sickness but a condition of the heart that only Jesus Christ can heal.

Augustine’s Search for Wisdom

In his fascinating book entitled *Degenerate Moderns,* author Michael Jones convincingly documents how many of the intellectual gurus of the modern era have conformed truth to their own desires. Jones research reveals how Margaret Mead, Alfred Kinsey, and other prominent trend-setters intentionally lied in their research in order to justify their own sexual immorality. Sadly, contemporary culture has swallowed their findings, leading many to conclude that sexual immorality is both normal and legitimate.

However, when we turn to Augustine’s *Confessions,* we see someone who has subordinated his own desires to the truth. The *Confessions* is an account of how Augustine attempted to satisfy the longings of his heart with professional ambition, entertainment, and sex, yet remained unfulfilled. One of Augustine’s most famous prayers is therefore the theme of the whole book: “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O God.” Only by submitting his own desires to the Lordship of Christ did Augustine find the peace that he was seeking.

But that submission did not come easy. Throughout most of his adult life, Augustine had been seeking to discover wisdom. But two questions were especially disturbing for him: What is the source of evil, and How can a Being without physical properties exist? Obviously, this second question was a barrier to his belief in the God of the Bible. In his search for answers, Augustine became involved with a group known as the Manichees, who combined Christian teaching with the philosophy of Plato. Plato’s philosophy helped convince Augustine that existence did not require physical properties, but he found their answer to the question of evil problematic, and after eight years as a seeker left the Manichees.

Still, the most difficult barrier for Augustine was not intellectual, but a matter of the heart. He eventually came to

the point where he knew he should submit himself to Christ, but was reluctant to do so if it meant giving up his relationship with his concubine. One day, while strolling through a walled garden, Augustine heard from the other side of the wall what sounded like a child's voice, saying "pick up and read, pick up and read." At first he thought it was a children's game. Then, acknowledging what he took to be a command of the Lord, he picked up a nearby Bible, and upon opening it immediately came to Romans 13:13-14, words tailor made for Augustine: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticisms and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." Augustine's search for wisdom was complete, as he acknowledged that wisdom is ultimately a *person*: Jesus Christ. The wisdom of God had satisfied his deepest longings.

Augustine's Philosophy of History: *The City of God*

The United States is currently going through what some call a "culture war." On the one hand there are those who believe in eternal truth and the importance of maintaining traditional morality. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that the individual is autonomous and should be free to live as he pleases without anyone telling him what is right or wrong. Until thirty years ago the first group held sway. Today, that same group is considered divisive and extreme by the "politically correct" mainstream culture.

But culture wars are not unique to modern America. In the year 410, mighty Rome was sacked by an invading army of Goths. Soon thereafter, the search was on for a scapegoat. In the year 381 Christianity superceded the ancient religion of the Romans as *the* state religion. This enraged those who favored the old state religion, who claimed that Rome had gained world supremacy due to the favor of the ancient gods. When Rome officially accepted the Christian God and forsook the gods,

the gods were said to have withdrawn their favor and allowed the invading armies to breach the walls of Rome in order to demonstrate their anger at being replaced by the Christian God. Educated Romans found such an argument silly, but an even more serious charge was that Christians were disloyal to the state, since their allegiance was ultimately to God. Therefore, Christianity was blamed for a loss of patriotism since Christians believed themselves to ultimately be citizens of another kingdom¾the Kingdom of God.

Augustine responded to these accusations by writing his philosophy of history in a book entitled *The City of God*. Augustine spent thirteen years researching and writing this work, which takes it title from Psalm 87:3: "Glorious things are spoken of you, O City of God." Augustine's main thesis is that there are two cities that place demands on our allegiance. The City of Man is populated by those who love themselves and hold God in contempt, while the City of God is populated by those who love God and hold themselves in contempt. Augustine hoped to show that the citizens of the City of God were more beneficial to the interests of Rome than those who inhabit the City of Man.

For anyone interested in the current debate between secularists and the "Religious Right," Augustine's argument is a masterful combination of historical research and literary eloquence. Christians in particular would be well served by studying this important document, since believers are often accused of being divisive and extreme, characteristics considered by some as un-American.

In Augustine's time, it was asserted that the values of Christianity were not consistent with good Roman citizenship. But Augustine's historical investigation revealed that it is sin that is at the root of all our problems: starting with Cain's murder of Abel, the sin of Adam has borne terrible consequences.

Much of Augustine's task was to demonstrate the consequences of a society that loses its moral compass. Augustine took it upon himself to demonstrate the falsity of the assertion that the Christian worldview is incompatible with civic life. Those who maintained that the acceptance of Christian virtues had had a direct bearing on Rome's fall did so primarily from a very limited perspective. The clear implication was that Christianity, a religion that asks its adherents to love their neighbor and pray for their enemies, had fostered a society incapable of defending itself against its more vicious neighbors.

Augustine's response was to demonstrate that Rome had suffered through numerous catastrophes *long* before Christianity ever became the religion of the Romans. Actually, it was due to the respect of the Goths for Christianity that their attack wasn't worse than it was: they relented after only three days. Against those who claimed that Christians could not be loyal citizens due to their higher allegiance to God, Augustine reminded them that the Old and New Testament Scriptures actually *command* obedience to the civil authorities. And any assertion that Christianity had weakened the defense of the empire failed to acknowledge the real cause of Rome's collapse, namely that Rome's moral degeneracy had created a society where justice was no longer valued. Augustine quotes the Roman historians as themselves recognizing the brutality at the very root of the nation, beginning with Romulus' murder of his brother Remus.

Augustine's analysis came to conclude that the virtues of Christianity are most consistent with good citizenship, and then went on to show the biblical distinction between the founding of Rome and that of the City of God. Just as Rome's origins date back to the dispute between Romulus and Remus, the City of God had its origin in the conflict between Cain and Abel. The City of Man and the City of God have intermingled ever since, and only at the final judgment of

Christ will “the tares be separated from the wheat.” For Augustine, the ultimate meaning of history will be borne out only when each one of us acknowledges who it was that we loved most: ourselves, or God.

©2000 Probe Ministries.

Why A Moral Life Won’t Get Us to Heaven

Will a good, moral life get me to heaven?’ The answer is no, and Probe’s Jimmy Williams spells out why, including how we CAN get to heaven.

Man: The Worshiping Animal

This essay is concerned with the often-asked question, “Won’t a good, moral life get me to heaven?”

We begin first with the nature of man himself. One of the most remarkable things about humans is that from the dawn of history, and no matter where we find them on this planet, they are *worshipping* animals. In fact, humans are the *only* animals in the world who worship. *Homo Sapiens* is incurably religious. Why is man so inclined? What are the reasons, and how do they bear on our question about having good morals and getting to heaven?

Let’s look briefly at some foundational elements that appear to be universals when it comes to human behavior. The first, as we stated above, is simply that humans *do* worship. Ethnic groups of all kinds and in all places, whether remote or close to other peoples, have their own history, folklore, deities,

rituals, particular moral system and life-customs. All of these enable each culture to cope with the great issues of life and its passages—from childhood to maturity to old age, and to the ultimate passage through that dark gate, Death. Christians tie this human inclination to worship directly to the fact that God says man, and only man, is created in His divine image (*imago dei*).

Secondly, what is also curious is *how* and *what* humans worship. The most prominent feature of human worship from earliest beginnings has been a *sacrifice* of some sort, whether the sheep, goats or bulls of the early Mediterranean world, or the human beings hurled into the mouths of volcanos by the Polynesians, or the child sacrifices of the Canaanites, or the ritual slaughter practiced by the Aztecs, the Incas, and virtually all of the New World Indians. In all cases, it appears some kind of blood must flow. We can also add to this (in many cultures) the prominence of *self-sacrifice* through flagellation, severe asceticism, or acts of personal penance.

The centrality of sacrifice in all human religious thinking points to an unmistakable reality: that humans instinctively know, or at least suspect, that there exists One to whom they are accountable for their behavior. They also assume, or know, that they have fallen short of what that higher being (or beings) requires of them. There is a universal sense that "God is not pleased with me." So a third feature of worship is universal *guilt*. People worship because they feel guilty. They feel this guilt because they perceive they have fallen short of the standard that God, others, and they themselves require.

The Great Global Heresy: Religion

"Good little boys go to heaven and bad little boys go to hell!" Probably most of us, at one time or another, have undergone the ordeal of having a parent or a teacher point a finger at us (or a neighboring miscreant) and warn of the ultimate outcome of unacceptable behavior.

This “Santa Claus” mentality suggests that God is “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.”

Everywhere we turn, we hear people speak of this religion: it is the most popular approach to God on the planet. We all know about the good little angel sitting on one shoulder and the bad little angel on the other. And we are very familiar with jokes about what happens to the person who dies and is immediately face to face with Saint Peter at the Golden Gates of Heaven. Peter stands there ready to evaluate and pass judgement on whether we’ve been good enough to be admitted and accepted inside. Saint Peter expects us to give moral account of ourselves before we can go inside.

The general, world-wide assumption is that, when we die, our good deeds and our bad deeds will be placed on the divine scales and weighed to determine if we go “up” or “down.” However, from Christianity’s viewpoint, this is a great, global heresy.

This is “religion,” but it is definitely not Christianity. In fact, Christianity is radically opposed to such an idea, teaching us that we are not to *do* something, but rather that something has already been *done* on our behalf. This global heresy, which we call “religion,” actually comes from Hinduism. It is the idea that God resides at the top of a great mountain, and it makes little difference which path a seeker chooses in his ascent up that mountain, since all paths lead to the God on top. And it is up to you to climb if you want to reach the summit—and God.

At the western end of the Forum in ancient Rome, there stood the *Millenarium Aureum*, the Golden Milestone, a gilded bronze column set up by Augustus Caesar to mark the junction and the origin of the major Roman roads spreading out like the spokes of a great wheel in every direction to distant destinations throughout the Empire. On this column were inscribed the major

towns and their distances from Rome. From this came the popular saying, “All roads lead to Rome.”

This is what religionists believe about God. They say things like, “Well, it really doesn’t matter what you believe. What’s important is that you try to do your best and be sincere about it. After all, we’re all trying to get to the same place; we all worship the same God.”

But in the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, we encounter something very different: in fact, we discover that there are *two* possible approaches to God, but only *one* is acceptable. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, they immediately hid in the bushes, took out needle and thread, and began sewing fig leaves together to cover themselves.

God came and found them in the bushes—flunking the first home economics course ever offered! God looked at the clusters of fig leaves they had hastily sewn together, and He was not pleased. In fact, He scolded their efforts and their conduct. Adam and Eve not only had to admit their guilt and disobedience, they also had to acknowledge their inability to make things right *through their own efforts*. They could not cover, or atone, for what they had done. The account goes on to say that God had to take the initiative to adequately clothe them. He killed some animals and made garments from their skins for a covering.

All philosophy, philanthropy, asceticism, religion, ethics, and all other systems which seek to gain the approval of God through human self-effort are the “fig-leaf” approach. This method is at the heart of what we call “religion,” man’s best effort to reach up and find God. But the problem every worshipper encounters when climbing the mountain is an impenetrable barrier which denies all further advance: it is the barrier of God’s holiness and perfection. Each individual’s personal sin and imperfection prevents him or her from coming any closer.

In his autobiography Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, speaks eloquently of his own struggle with this when he says: “Oh wretched man that I am. It is a constant source of torture to me that I am so far from the one I know to be my very life and being, and I know that it is my own sin and wretchedness that hides Him from me.”

The Problem of Sin

When the word “sin” comes up in a conversation, most people look as though someone just slipped them a mildewed fig! We *do* a lot of it; we just don’t like to *talk* about it! Many people do not know what sin or a sinner really is. What is sin? Sin is a violation of the law, the standard God requires of every human. A sinner is therefore someone who has broken that standard.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that there is no good at all in people. There is a great deal of good. Humans are not as bad as they *could* be. The point is simply this: if our premise is that to get to heaven one has to be good, then how good is good enough?

The Scriptures are quite clear about this. God is not demanding “goodness.” We saw above that Adam and Eve’s best efforts to cover themselves (fig leaves) were not enough. The good which is in man, all his moral achievement, is not acceptable to God—because God is not demanding goodness, He demands *perfection!*

Many will say they try to live by the Ten Commandments or by some other rule of life, such as the Golden Rule. And yet, if we are honest, each of us discovers we have violated our own standards at some point. This is what Paul meant when he said, “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

The Grand Canyon is 6 to 18 miles across, 276 miles long, and

one mile deep. The world's record in the long jump, set by Mike Powell at the 1991 World Championships in Tokyo is 29′ 4 1/2″. Yet the chances of a person jumping from one side of the Grand Canyon to the other are greater than that of someone attempting to establish fellowship with God through his own efforts.

The standard man must meet is God's perfection. Who can match that? It is a goal so far away that *no one* could *ever* reach it. To make matters worse, James tells us that "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (James 2:10). This means if someone breaks just one of the commandments, he is as guilty as if he had broken all ten!

The purpose of giving the Ten Commandments in the first place was not because God knew human beings would keep them perfectly. The Bible tells us that these revealed standards were intended to be to us what an X-ray machine is to a broken arm. The machine reveals the *condition* of the arm, but it will not set and knit the bones, nor will it put the arm in a cast. By the same token, the Ten Commandments can only reveal to us the condition of our lives; they cannot heal us or cover our sin.

The Pharisees looked at the Law and then at their own lives and said, "I'm pretty good, really good." Jesus had wanted them to come to the opposite conclusion. He even called them hypocrites! He said they were wrong to claim they were righteous enough and that all was well between them and their Maker. That is why he said, "Those who are well do not need a physician" (Matthew 9:12). When you are well, you don't seek a doctor. The time to consult a physician is when you realize you are sick. Jesus was urging the Pharisees to be honest about themselves when He said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (v.13).

When my wife Carol and I travel, and I discover I'm lost, I

really hate for her to make her classic statement, “You’re lost. Why don’t you ask for directions?” In my case, the issue is always my male pride! With the Pharisees, it was *religious* pride, as it is for all who would seek heaven on the basis of their own merits.

A wise old Baptist preacher once said, “It isn’t difficult to get people saved; it is difficult to get them lost!” This is man’s dilemma: like the Pharisees, people cling to the old fig leaves of self-effort instead of submitting to the covering God Himself has provided for all (Christ’s sacrificial death, the Cross). Each of us must choose one or the other (John 3:18, 36).

The Problem of Righteousness

While morality and human goodness are to be commended, God makes it clear from the very outset that no one, through his own efforts, possesses the ability to make himself presentable before God. It was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said, “Man is basically a silkworm. A spinner and a weaver … trying to clothe himself … but the silkworm’s activity spins it a shroud. So it is with man.” Adam and Eve are classic examples.

Our problem is not only that we have fallen short of God’s standard (Romans 3:23), by sinning; we also *lack* something. We not only need the removal of personal sin through blood sacrifice to satisfy divine *justice*; we need something *further* to make us fit for heaven and the divine presence of God. In other words, Christ’s death in our place will keep us out of hell—but we still have the problem of getting into heaven. Isaiah spoke of this when he said, “For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and **all our righteous deeds** are as **filthy rags**.” (Isaiah 64:6). Not our *sins*, but our good *deeds!* We need not only atonement for our sins, we also need righteousness to enter heaven! But it has to be a certain *kind* of righteousness.

The most righteous people of Jesus' day were the Pharisees. They knew the Old Testament by heart. They went to the synagogue three times a day and prayed seven times a day. They were respected in the community. But Jesus looked right through their religious veneer and, in their presence, admonished the crowds that "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

The crowds responded by staring at each other in bewilderment. "You mean the Pharisees aren't righteous enough to go to heaven? If *they* can't make it, who will?"

In the Garden of Eden we observe this conflict between two *kinds* of righteousness—*human righteousness*, which is clearly symbolized by the fig leaf garments Adam and Eve sewed together to make themselves presentable before God, and *divine righteousness*, which is symbolized by the adequate covering of the slain animals provided by God Himself. We find these two kinds of righteousness marching and clashing with each other all the way through both Testaments.

Paul referred to these same two righteousnesses when he said of his Jewish brethren, "I bear them witness, that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and *seeking to establish their own*, they did not submit themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1).

In the former Soviet Union, rubles are printed and circulated. With those rubles you can buy your dinner, pay your hotel bill, and purchase things in the shops. But if you brought those rubles back to America and tried to do the same thing, the rubles would not be honored. It would be futile to try to do business with rubles in America.

Let's think of these two righteousnesses in mathematical terms. Let's call God's righteousness "+R" and human

righteousness "-R." The first righteousness is *absolute*, while the second is *relative*. Over a lifetme, a human being can accumulate a huge pile of -R, but added up, it still totals -R. To do business with God in heaven, we must deal with Him in the only "currency" honored and accepted by Him, and that is +R. It is futile to try to negotiate with God on the basis of relative, human goodness. We need +R.

Where do we get such "currency?" It is *given* to us as a gift if we will accept it—the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. The yardstick God uses to measure everyone is His Son. This +R righteousness is ours only in Christ: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

This gracious provision is a radical departure from all other religious ideas humans have ever conceived or set forth. It is so radical that human beings would never have thought of it.

The Uniqueness of Christian Grace

We have sought to arrive at a biblical answer to the question, "Will a good, moral life get me to heaven?" We have examined the bankruptcy of every attempt by people to reach that goal through any and every means of self-effort. We have discovered that the salvation offered by Christianity is uniquely opposed to all human efforts to secure it by working one's way into God's good graces. In fact, if God expected us to attain our salvation through good deeds, then God made a terrible mistake. He allowed His only-begotten Son to come to earth—robed in human flesh—and die a horrible death on a cross for our personal, eternal benefit. To choose a "good works" path to God is to negate the total significance of Christ's death, making it meaningless and unnecessary.

What God has to offer is free. It is a gift that is not deserved by any of us, nor could we ever repay what the gift

is worth. God has dealt with humankind in grace and love. The only thing that God has asked us to do is to humbly admit that we have broken His laws, acknowledge that He has indeed made things right through His Son's sacrificial death on the cross, and accept His forgiveness by faith. We are invited to lay aside our own "fig-leaf" costumes and freely submit to the covering God has provided for us, the blood-stained garment of His Son, the very righteousness of Christ.

This is what Jesus sought to communicate in Matthew 22:1-14, the parable about the wedding feast that a king was preparing to give his son: "So the servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, *both good and bad*: and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man who had not on a wedding garment. And he said unto him, 'Friend, how came you here not having on a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth!'"

The text does not tell us whether this person was one of the "good" ones or the "bad" ones. Why? Because it is irrelevant to what Jesus wants us to understand. The important issue was proper *attire* for the occasion. God is telling us that the only acceptable attire for heaven is the righteousness of Christ.

As a gracious host, He stands holding out to humanity the most expensive, costly garment in the universe, and He eagerly desires to wrap us up in it—safe and warm and happy and secure:

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God: for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." (Isaiah 61:10).

So how does this apply to you and me? Simply this: Everything that *needed* to be done for your salvation and mine *was accomplished* the moment Christ died on the cross. The penalty has been paid and God's righteous demands satisfied. God is now free to extend eternal life as a free gift. He declares, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Gifts, of course, must be received. For that reason, Jesus said, "He who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). "Believe" means "to trust or depend on." God is asking each person to come to Him as a sinner, recognize that His Son died on the cross of us, and trust His Son *alone* as our only hope of heaven.

This was the message, the good news which the first Christians took to the world: "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

In reality, every human being is just a prayer away from receiving the grace and forgiveness of God and the promise of heaven. But it has to be the *right* prayer, based on the *right* facts: that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners, not "Do-Gooders": "I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). You can begin to trust Christ for your salvation today instead of your own, futile efforts of trying to be a fairly nice person all your life. Obviously, your heart attitude, your sincerity, is what really counts. God knows your heart. But if the following suggested prayer will help to bring a sense of closure and certainty to your decision to believe in, to trust Christ, then please feel free to use it as a simple guide:

"Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner, and nothing I can do will ever get me to heaven. But I believe Jesus Christ died for me and rose from the grave to prove the validity of His claim to be my Savior. He took my place and my punishment. So right now, I place my trust in Christ alone to make me

presentable and acceptable to you. Come into my life. I accept the gift of your Son. Thank you that you are now within me, not based upon my feelings, but upon your promise that if I open the door of my life and invite you to come live within me and be my Savior, you would (Rev. 3:20, John 1:12). Make me the kind of person you want me to be. Begin to show me that you really have entered my life and heart, and now give me the guidance I need to live a new life in fellowship with you. Amen."

©1998 Probe Ministries.

False Guilt – Refusing Christ's Atonement

Kerby Anderson provides an insightful look at the important topic of false guilt. He helps us look at the sources of false guilt, it's consequences and the cure in Jesus Christ. If we refuse to fully accept Christ's atonement we can be trapped in false guilt, instead we should embrace His atonement and accept what He did on the cross for us.

Introduction

Have you ever felt guilty? Of course you have, usually because you were indeed guilty. But what about those times when you have feelings of guilt even when you didn't do anything wrong? We would call this false guilt, and that is the subject of this essay.

False guilt usually comes from an overactive conscience. It's that badgering pushing voice that runs you and your self-image into the ground. It nags: "You call this acceptable? You think

this is enough? Look at all you've not yet done! Look at all you have done that's not acceptable! Get going!"

You probably know the feeling. You start the day feeling like you are in a hole. You feel like you can never do enough. You have this overactive sense of duty and can never seem to rest. One person said he "felt more like a human doing than a human being." Your behavior is driven by a sense of guilt. That is what we will be talking about in these pages.

Much of the material for this discussion is taken from the book entitled *False Guilt* by Steve Shores. His goal is to help you determine if you (1) have an overactive conscience and (2) are driven by false guilt. If these are problem areas for you, he provides practical solutions so you can break the cycle of false guilt. I recommend his book especially if you can recognize yourself in some of the material we cover in this essay.

In his book, Steve Shores poses three sets of questions, each with some explanation. An affirmative answer to any or all of these questions may indicate that you struggle with false guilt and an overactive conscience.

1. Do you ever feel like this: "Something is wrong with me. There is some stain on me, or something badly flawed that I can neither scrub out nor repair"? Does this feeling persist even though you have become a Christian?

2. Is Thanksgiving sort of a difficult time of year for you? Do you find it hard to muster up the Norman Rockwell spirit—you know… Mom and Dad and grandparents and kids all seated around mounds of food? Dad is carving the turkey with a sure and gentle expression on his face, and everyone looks so…well, so thankful? Do you find yourself, at any time of the year, dutifully thanking or praising God without much passion?

3. How big is your dance floor? What I mean is, How much freedom do you have? Do you feel confined by Christianity? To

you, is it mainly a set of restrictions? Is it primarily a source of limits: don't do this, and don't do that? Does your Christianity have more to do with walls than with windows? Is it a place of narrowness or a place where light and air and liberty pour in?

Usually a person driven by false guilt is afraid of freedom because in every act of freedom is the possibility of offending someone. Offending someone is unacceptable. Other people are seen as pipelines of approval. If they're offended, the pipeline shuts down.

False guilt, along with an overactive conscience, is a hard master. As we turn now to look at the causes and the cures for false guilt, we hope to explain how to break down the confining walls and tiresome chains that may have kept you or a loved one in bondage to false guilt.

The Source of False Guilt

Next, I would like to focus on the source of false guilt: an overactive conscience. What is an overactive conscience? How does it function? Steve Shores says, "The mission of a person's overactive conscience is to attract the expectations of others."

Imagine a light bulb glowing brightly on a warm summer's night. What do you see in your mind's eye? Bugs. Bugs of every variety are attracted to that light. The light bulb serves as a magnet for these insects. Imagine that light is an overactive conscience. The expectations of others are the "bugs" that are attracted to the "light" of an overactive conscience.

Now imagine a light bulb burning inside a screened porch. The bugs are still attracted, but they bounce off the screen. The overactive conscience has no screen. But it is more than that. The overactive conscience doesn't want a screen. The more

“bugs” the better. Why? Because the whole purpose is to meet expectations in order to gain approval and fill up the emptiness of the soul. This is an overactive conscience, a light bulb with lots of bugs and no screen.

A key to understanding the overactive conscience is the word “active.” Someone with false guilt has a conscience that is always on the go. False guilt makes a person restless, continually looking for a rule to be kept, a scruple to observe, an expectation to be fulfilled, or a way to be an asset to a person or a group.

The idea of being an asset is a crucial point. When I am an asset, then I am a “good” person and life works pretty well. When I fear I’ve let someone down, then I am a liability. My life falls apart, and I will work hard to win my way back into the favor of others.

So an overactive conscience is like a magnet for expectations. These expectations come from oneself, parents (whether alive or not), friends, bosses, peers, God, or distorted images of God. False guilt makes the overactive conscience voracious for expectations. False guilt is always looking for people to please and rules to be kept.

An overactive conscience is also seeking to keep the “carrot” of acceptance just out of reach. This “carrot” includes self-acceptance and acceptance from others and from God. The guilt-ridden conscience continually says, “Your efforts are not good enough. You must keep trying because, even if your attempts don’t measure up, the trying itself counts as something.”

For that reason, an overactive conscience is not happy at rest. Though rest is the birthright of the Christian, relaxing is just too dangerous, i.e., relaxing might bring down my guard, and I might miss signs of rejection. Besides, acceptance is conditional, and I must continually prove my worthiness to others. I can never be a liability if I am to

expect acceptance to continue. It is hard to relax because I must be ever fearful of letting someone down and must constantly work to gain acceptance.

In summary, a person with false guilt and an overactive conscience spends much of his or her life worn out. Unrelenting efforts to meet the expectations of others can have some very negative consequences.

The Consequences of False Guilt

Now I would like to focus on the consequences of false guilt. An overactive conscience can keep you in a state of constant uncertainty. You never know if you measure up. You never know if you have arrived or not. You are always on the alert. According to Steve Shores there are a number of major consequences of false guilt.

The first consequence he calls “striving without arriving.” In essence, there is no hope in the system set up by the overactive conscience. You must always try harder, but you never cross the finish line. You seem to merely go in circles. Or perhaps it would be better to say you go in a spiral, as in a downward spiral. Life is a perpetual treadmill. You work hard and strive, but you never arrive. Life is hard work and frustration with little or no satisfaction.

The second consequence is “constant vigilance.” The overactive conscience produces constant self-monitoring. You are constantly asking if you are being an asset to other people and to God. You are constantly evaluating and even doubting your performance. And you never allow yourself to be a liability to the group or to any particular individual.

A third consequence is “taking the pack mule approach to life.” An overactive conscience involves a lifelong ordeal in which you attempt to pass a demanding test and thus reveal your worth. The test consists of accumulating enough evidences

of goodness to escape the accusation that you are worthless. For the guilt-ridden person, this test involves taking on more duties, more responsibilities, more roles. As the burdens pile higher and higher, you become a beast of burden, a “pack mule” who takes on more responsibility than is healthy or necessary.

Just as there is no forward progress (e.g., “striving without arriving”), so there is also an ever-increasing sense of burden. Each day demands a fresh validation of worthiness. There is never a time when you can honestly say, “that’s enough.”

Finally, the most devastating consequence of false guilt is its effect not just on individuals but the body of Christ. Christians who struggle with an overactive conscience can produce weak, hollow, compliant believers in the church. They are long on conformity and short on passion and substance. They go to church not because they crave fellowship, but because they want to display compliance. They study God’s word not so much out of a desire to grow spiritually, but because that is what good Christians are supposed to do. We do what we do in order to “fit in” or comply with the rules of Christianity.

Steve Shores says that the central question of church becomes, “Do I look and act enough like those around me to fit in and be accepted?” Instead we should be asking, “Regardless of how I look and act, am I passionately worshiping God, deeply thirsting for Him, and allowing Him to change my relationships so that I love others in a way that reflects the disruptive sacrifice of Christ?”

The Continuation of False Guilt

Next, I would like to talk about why people continue to feel false guilt even though they know they are forgiven. After all, if Christ paid the penalty for our sins, why do some Christians still have an overactive conscience and continue to

feel guilt so acutely? Part of the compulsion comes from feeling the noose of false guilt tighten around our necks so that we panic and fail to think rationally about our situation.

Steve Shores uses the example of a death-row inmate who has just learned of an eleventh-hour stay of execution. He has just been pardoned, but his body and emotions don't feel like it. He has been "sitting in the electric chair, sweaty-palmed and nauseated, when the wall phone rings with the news of the reprieve." He may feel relief, but the feeling of relief is not total. He is only off the hook for awhile. He will still return to his cell.

The person with a overactive conscience lives in that death-row cell. The reprieve comes from responding to that guilt-driven voice in his conscience. For Bill it manifested itself in a compulsive need to serve others. If he were asked to teach AWANA or to teach a Sunday school class, he would have great difficulty saying "No." He had to say "Yes" or else he would feel the noose of false guilt tighten around his neck.

Bill's comments were sad but illuminating. He said: "I felt as though not teaching the class would confirm that I am a liability. The disappointment…would inflict shame I felt as a boy. Disappointing others always meant that there would be some sort of trial to decide whether I really belonged in the family."

He went on to tell of the time he made a "C" on his report card (the rest of the grades were "A's" and "B's"). His father lectured him unmercifully. At one point, his father declared that "it was Communist to bring home such a bad grade." Bill didn't know what a Communist was or what Communism had to do with bad grades. But he did understand that if he didn't bring home good grades he was unworthy.

Bill even remembered the six agonizing weeks until the next

report card. When it arrived he received five “A’s” and one “B.” What was his father’s response? Was it delight? Was it an apology for his previous comments? Not at all. His father merely said, “That’s more like it.” The reprieve was halfhearted and temporary.

In essence, false guilt is a stern warden that may give a temporary reprieve but is always ready to call upon you to prove your worthiness once again. We may know that Christ died for our sins. We may know that our sins are forgiven. We may know that we have value and dignity because we are created in God’s image. But we may feel unworthy and feel as if we must prove ourselves at a moment’s notice.

The key, as we will see in the next section, is to embrace Christ’s atonement rather than our own. We must not only know that we are forgiven through Jesus Christ, but act upon that reality so that we live a life through grace rather than legalism.

A Cure for False Guilt

Finally, I would like to conclude by talking about Christ’s atonement for us. If we are to break the chain of false guilt, then we must embrace Christ’s atonement rather than our own. Although that statement may seem obvious, it is difficult for someone with an overactive conscience to truly embrace emotionally. For such a person, perfection is the means of achieving salvation. If I can be perfect, then I will no longer feel shame, and I will no longer feel guilt. This is the personal atonement that someone with false guilt often is seeking.

The Bible clearly teaches that Christ’s atonement was for our sins. Sin is “any attitude, belief, or action that constitutes rebellion against or transgression of God’s character.” Clearly sinful man is incapable of making restitution because our best works are as filthy rags before a holy and omnipotent

God (Isaiah 64:6). Our atonement must be made by someone with clean hands and a sinless life. Christ, of course, fulfilled that requirement and died in our place for our sins.

Nevertheless, someone with false guilt seeks a form of self-atonement. Why? Well, there are at least two reasons: indiscriminate shame and doubt about the character of God. The first is indiscriminate shame. We should feel guilty and we should feel shame for sinful behavior. The problem comes when we feel guilt and shame even when a sinful action or attitude is not present. Steve Shores believes that the "weeds of shame" can begin to sprout even when we have a legitimate need. We then tend to use the machete of false guilt to trim these weeds back. We say, "If I can do enough things right, I can control this and no one will know how bad and weak I am." This performance-oriented lifestyle is a way of hacking at the weeds that grow in the soil of illegitimate shame.

The second reason for false guilt is a stubborn propensity to doubt the character of God. Many Christian psychologists and counselors have argued that the reason we may question our Heavenly Father's character is because we question our earthly father's character. And for those who have been abused or neglected by their fathers, this is an adequate explanation. But we even see in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve doubting God and they did not even have earthly fathers. So I believe it is more accurate to say that our sin nature (not our family of origin) has a lot to do with our tendency to doubt God's character.

This is manifested by two tendencies: blaming and hiding. When we feel false guilt, we tend to want to blame others or blame ourselves. If we blame others, we manifest a critical spirit. If we blame ourselves, we feel unworthy and don't want others to see us as we are and we hide emotionally from others. The solution is for us to embrace Christ's atonement and accept what He did on the cross for us. Christ died once for all (Romans 6:10) that we might have everlasting life and freedom

from guilt and the bondage to sin.

©1996 Probe Ministries.