

Jesus: King of Guilt

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Give ear, O shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth. Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved! O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us an object of contention for our neighbors, and our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine that we might be saved! You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? Psalm 80:1-12

Psalm 80 is a prayer. It is a prayer of God's people. In the prayer, the "vine out of Egypt" referred to in the psalm is imagery that stands for God's people. It was God who had chosen them, established them, and promised them all sorts of benefits. But now, because of the Gentiles, they have been ravaged and ruined. God's people of the Northern Kingdom fled to Jerusalem in the south when the Assyrian army took over the north. Their homes? Gone. Their places of worship? Gone. Their government? Gone. Everything they had built up? Gone. They have a question for the Lord in their prayer. If God has planted and shown such care for his "vine", why would he allow such violence against it?

Of course, there are reasons. God's people messed up and they know it. They got caught up in worldliness and false gods and were not obedient to God's Word.

So, they ran. Where? They ran home to Jerusalem. They returned to the temple. There, mourning their sorrows, they said this prayer: "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." (verse 7) It's a plea for God to do something about the situation they are in.

"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel", they say. They know they don't deserve it. They took God for granted. They didn't listen to him. They know they failed him. They wanted other things, instead of the things of the Lord of the Universe. They coveted what other nations had. They had to be feeling guilty of their disobedience as God's people. But they also knew something else very important. They knew that their God, their King, was a merciful God. He had saved them before, and they called on him to save them again.

The King eventually kept his promise and came to his vineyard. That's what Christmas is all about. But most of them were not prepared for the way he came to save them. They prayed "Restore us..." and shouted "Hosanna" to him, but even in seeking salvation, they wanted something different from what God was going to give them. Here is a lesson: God often answers our prayers in ways we don't recognize or do not expect.

The people of Israel are not alone in messing up and feeling guilty about some of the things in their lives. Just what is guilt? Webster defines it as committing an offense, especially one that is punishable by law. It also includes a feeling of responsibility for an offense that you have committed. I would have to say that all of us at times have had the experience of feeling guilty, and it is not a pleasant experience. There are, of course, varying degrees of feeling guilty, usually related to the seriousness of the wrong act that has been committed. Guilt can result from either sins of commission or sins of omission.

Know this. Guilt that is not dealt with can bring consequences. It can help contribute to making an unhappy life. Something we do wrong can hold us in bondage for a long time, even the rest of our lives. One source I had told about an 84 year old lady was still tormented because she had had an affair while she was married and had a secret abortion. She was still feeling miserable over this even though her husband was now deceased.

Guilt can be on a smaller scale and yet still have an effect. I lived in Euclid, Ohio, for a few years as a young boy. One day I was visiting with one of my girl friends while she was counting money from her enormous piggy bank out on the living room carpet. There were a lot of coins there. Her mother called from the kitchen and asked her daughter to come help her with something. Up to that day, I don't think I had ever thought about stealing anything in my life. But when I saw all of those coins there, and nobody was watching, I saw my right arm and hand reach out and scoop up many of those coins and deposit them in my pockets. You will note I said my right arm did it. I'm trying to avoid taking the blame myself!

My mother remarried sometime after that and we moved to Chesterland. But that single act bothered me for years. I had become a more serious Christian. So I asked my second dad if he could drop me off in Euclid. I told him I wanted to see some of my old friends. That was the truth, but it wasn't the whole truth. Dad dropped me off and went shopping, and the first house I visited was the home where I had stolen the money. I was going to confess it and return it plus interest. But my heart sank when the door was opened, and I found out that my friend and her family had moved. The new owner did not know where they moved.

How do we get rid of our guilt? That's where we as Christians are blessed by our relationship with Jesus, the King who destroys guilt. Jesus paid for it on the cross so that we could be forgiven and released from the penalty of death for any of our sins. If we confess it and are sincerely sorry, Jesus takes that guilt on himself in exchange for his righteousness. We are free of that sin. We don't have to carry it as a burden on our heart and mind any more. That's what one of my pastors explained to me, and I finally had peace in regard to the matter.

1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Proverbs 28:13 says, "Whoever conceals his transgression will not prosper: but he who confesses them and forsakes them will have mercy." Psalm 103:12 says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

So as we approach Christmas, let us give thanks not only that we have a Savior, but as we said last Sunday, we have a God who does not change. If he has said it, he will do it. We only need to follow the steps that he has given us, and we will be free of our guilt at last. Amen.

