

PUTTING YOUR PAST BEHIND YOU!

By Dr. Edward Watke Jr.

Introduction:

For all the sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: *"It might have been!"* so wrote John F. Whittier.

It might have been! has a way of catching up with each one of us! We have all known how painful regret can be especially when lives are deeply affected.

- A teenager blows his mind on drugs,
- An alcoholic leaves his wife and children,
- A Christian's life is wasted in the pursuit of greedy ambition.
- A husband or wife enters into an adulterous affair.

In all of these we think of what it might have been. If only, if only, if only.. can be the ongoing cry of our hearts. ***These situations, and dozen more, like them, trigger painful regret*** regardless of how sheltered or permissive our past, all of us have had regrets accompanied with feelings of deep guilt.

You must deal with your **past** before you can experience **freedom** in the future! The SIN that troubles you today sank its roots into your life possibly many yesterdays ago!

Let's consider the following stories for sake of illustration and a way to beginning this study:

GEORGE:

He wanted to break his adulterous relationship because he felt guilty; and he was in constant fear of being discovered.

He sought God's assistance to save his marriage, but above all his reputation. To begin with his marriage was in disarray before the affair began. He had a hot temper and had begun to deeply wound his wife's spirit soon after their marriage. His proud, self-righteous spirit had strained his relationship with his two children. He was selfish, spending his free time fixing race cars, his family was considered an inconvenience.

What Was God's Concern for George?

That he stop his adulterous relationship?

Yes, but much more besides - God wanted him to humble himself, to ask for forgiveness of his wife and children and to reorganize his priorities. Attitudes had to be confessed, pride had to be broken, selfishness had to be face head-on. God desired to become Number One in his life. But George wasn't concerned about such drastic treatment! God wanted to give him a whole house cleaning, but George wanted only the dirt swept from his front step.

WHAT ABOUT KEN?

He wanted to stop smoking, yes, he was a Christian, but lived only on the fringes of spiritual commitment. His children never heard him pray, except for the perfunctory grace said at meal times. He was not a spiritual leader in his home; his wife taught the children the few bible stories they knew. He wanted God to help him quit smoking because the doctors told him he might die of lung cancer. Could God help him overcome that habit? Yes indeed! But he would have to yield himself fully to God -- his time, property, and reputation would have to be committed to God.

Ken would have to begin reading the Scriptures, turn to God daily for the needs of himself and his family. **But he didn't bargain for such changes. He thought God would deliver him from cigarettes and leave the rest of his life untouched. That is what he wanted!**

Then there is MARY!

Yes, she desperately wanted to lose those ugly pounds. In fact she did not see her problem as a genuinely spiritual one for she spoke of it as her weakness without treating it as a sin of the flesh. God wanted to use Mary's problem to teach her valuable lessons about resisting temptation, the tactics of Satan, and above all, the remarkable power of the Word of God. But sadly her mind was focused only on her weight.

She passed up an opportunity to have victory over her sensuality, and to take giant steps in her Christian walk.

Finally, what about JOHN?

His problem, so he thought, was that he was born with a short fuse. And of course, his circumstances were to blame -- if everything would go more to his liking, there would be no need to blow up, no need to put his fist through the wall. One reason John still lacks self-control today is because of his unwillingness to face his underlying attitudes toward God and His family.

Actually, John is always angry -- angry at his employer, angry at life itself. He feels he has been gypped because he has never been the success his father hoped he'd be. Though he does not realize it, he is a man at war with God, rebelling against the vocation and circumstances of his life to which God has called him. Until he accepts himself and his place in the world with joyful thanksgiving, he will never learn to control his temper.

God is concerned about a change of John's attitudes, but John isn't. He wants the minimum required to maintain his life on a fairly even keel -- but no more than this.

I. THE EFFECTS OF PAST FAILURE!

You can't break your *sinful habits* until you have a new beginning and therefore you must deal with all that past programming of habits, patterns of failure.

1. Satan is particularly adept at using your past to ruin your future.
2. Satan's weapon is the ***illegitimate use of guilt feelings***. Sins multiplies in the soul of discouragement.
3. One offense easily leads to another and you are caught in the vicious circle until you realize that your past need not control your future.

Note: When I attended country grade school in Nebraska as a child, we often played fox and goose in the winter time, in the fresh snow. Tracks were made in a wide circle for us to use for the game but in 15 minutes or so it was so messy that we'd move to a clean area and stake out new paths in the glistening snow. Soon we'd have to move again, and then again, always searching for a place for a new beginning.

Whenever we would blaze a new trail most of us children were anxious at first to stay within the boundaries, but after the trail became wide and untidy, we were less careful about spoiling the pattern in the snow -- **soon we made it as messy as we could** -- WHAT A PICTURE OF MANKIND!

4. So with many who become trapped in one sin or another -- ***sinful habits have a domino effect*** -- if you do it once, the thought is -- ***"you might as well go all the way as often as you like."***
5. That's why some Christians ***question whether they can ever change -- or if God can ever change them***. They believe they cannot live differently in the future because of the past.

6. **Satan delights in such logic.** He wants you to think that you have gone too far -- that since the past cannot be reclaimed, you might as well give up.

James Stalker, the Scottish preacher, wrote, *“The great tempter of men has two lies with which he plies us at different stages. Before we have fallen he tells us that one fall does not matter -- it is a trifle; we can easily recover ourselves again.*

After we have fallen, he tells us that it is hopeless; we are given over to sin, and need not to attempt to rise. It is useless!”

7. **Consider:**

- a. **One sin does matter.** Even one fall can cause you to lose something that cannot be recovered. As an exquisite vessel, can be broken and mended, but it will never be the same.
- b. **One sins leads to others.** It is like climbing up an icy hill for even as you attempt to rise, you fall again.
- c. But when you do fall -- **you dare not accept Satan’s lie** --namely, that there is no use in attempting to rise. Your enemy wants you to believe that since the past cannot be reclaimed, there is no way to break with its power.

8. **You can have a new beginning!**

- a. It is true that you cannot relive the past,
- b. maybe you cannot reclaim all that could have been, but you can make a new beginning.
- c. God offers many precious truths, or realities in Isaiah 1:18; Isa. 43:23; and 44:22. **Genuine forgiveness** and **blotting out of all your sins** past, present, and future can be yours! GLORY!!
- d. **The cycle of sin can be broken, you can rise again!**

LISTEN TO GOD’S PROMISE to a nation possessed with violence, deceit, and sensual corruption: *“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be as wool.”* Isa. 1:18

II. THE CONSEQUENCES OF GUILT!

- To deal with the past is to deal with guilt!
- Guilt feelings can be like a millstone around your neck, keeping you tied to your sins and wedded to the past failure.
- Sometimes your conscience may trouble you causing a rehearsing of the sins of your past in vivid detail!
- Or you may have a vague feeling of guilt, a confirmed suspicion that you’ve blown it again... and will be a second class citizen in the kingdom of Heaven.
Living with guilt is like driving with the brakes on!

1. **Guilt feelings can produce some serious consequences!**

- a. Physical illness --often cause by suppressed guilt.
- b. Some doctors estimate nearly half of their patients could be released from guilt if they only know that it was to be **forgiven!** **To hear the words... “You are forgiven!”**

2. Unresolved guilt causes depression!

- a. Feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness are generated by the nagging feeling that *“you have blown it, it is hopeless, God can’t use you, or bless you any more.”*
- b. You feel, *“Since the past cannot be reclaimed, there is little use trying to live a fruitful godly life.”*

3. Guilt is often the cause of a lack of faith in God.

(Heb. 11:6; Rom. 10:17; Matt. 7:7, 8)

- a. I Jh. 3:21 -- note -- I have discovered in my counseling ministry ***that perhaps the most widespread cause of doubt is guilt!***
- b. A person who struggles with guilt, and feels impure will also struggle with trust in God.

4. Guilt causes people to desire to punish themselves.

- a. Example: some parents whose children have gone astray do not want to be free from guilt. They feel they need to suffer for their failure.
- b. They believe they must pay for their children’s sinful behavior and that guilt is the price they must pay.
- c. Others take this step further and interpret every tragedy as God’s way of punishing them. ***Such guilt feels are never appeased... they can’t be!*** Maybe actually long to become physically sick or die so they will feel the satisfaction of paying for their sins.

5. Guilt often causes people to do many good works!

A guilty husband brings flowers to his wife because he shouted angrily at her in the morning. People do many good works even at their church, or for a needy friend to try to atone for their guilt. Others give money to the church, rather than ask parents for forgiveness -- some will take up social concerns -- assuming that their sacrificial spirit will balance the books!

- a. But good works will never erase guilt!
- b. Good activity can suppress guilt, ***can help you to deny it, or buy time with your conscience -- but it will not remove it.***
- c. The guilt will continue to resurface.

III. PRINCIPLES FOR HANDLING GUILT!

- God’s will for you is that you be **free** from all forms of guilt!
- He who is **rich in mercy** anticipated your moral and emotional entanglements.
- ***God is never taken by surprise.***
- He offers you **freedom** from a nagging conscience.

Let us consider three steps toward finding this freedom!

A. Identify the cause of your guilt feelings!

1. ***Often this can be done easily -- If we are honest***
 - a. An immoral relationship;
 - b. Cheating on income tax,
 - c. dishonor, disrespect to parents, a harsh word,

- d. screaming at your spouse, anger, hatred, bitterness, resentments toward another or scorn, and contempt, etc.
 - e. holding on to grudges, being hostile and unforgiving.
 - f. impure thoughts, desires!
2. **List them on a sheet of paper, deal with each one specifically -- honestly, confess... forsake, put them behind you -- once and for all.**
 3. Let me warn you about false guilt or bringing torment to ourselves for matters beyond our control. A woman with a 3 year old daughter stood at curb. The child asked, "*Can I go across, mother,?*" mother not thinking said, "yes," and the child ran out in front of a car and was killed. *This woman needed to forgive herself and realize that self-incrimination is not what God desires!* She plagued herself with guilt, an incredible feeling of regret and anger at herself. God does not convict you for an error in judgment, but rather for consciously choosing to sin.
 4. **We must look at guilt feelings**, bring them into the open, where we can deal with them, and ask ourselves, "*Why do I feel guilty?*"

B. Realize that God's Remedy for Sin is complete!

In Christ, God anticipated all of your feelings, discouragements, and failures. Christ's death on the Cross included a sacrifice for ALL our sins -- past, present, and future. All of your sins were **future** when they were paid for -- that payment is complete! **There is no sin but what Christ has already paid for it!** (Col. 2:13; Col. 1:14; Eph. 1:7; Eph. 2:4-7)

The cry from the Cross was "*It is finished!*" **Teleslestai...** a word used in business -- *paid in full!* You need never try to make up for your sins on your own for Christ's death paid for sins in FULL!

1. **God does not find it hard to forgive!** It is not as though God regrets giving you another chance.
 - a. When God forgives you, your sins are blotted out so completely that He does not remember them.
 - b. He never holds them against you again.
 - c. The sins confessed yesterday will never again be a barrier between you and God -- ***unless you refuse to accept God's forgiveness or doubt the value of Christ's sacrifice.***

God's forgiveness reminds me of a business calculator, when you press cancel all is gone. The previous information is lost forever, gone. God cancels out all the sin we confess; He not only forgives but also cleanses us from the results of the sin. **God forgives the consequences often remain, but the guilt, the legal condemnation for offense, is gone.**

2. Why do people constantly confess the same sins?

- a. Sometimes it is because they cannot believe that God would actually forgive so freely -- surely they must suffer first.
- b. Often they doubt whether they were sincere enough when they confessed it the first time.
- c. Or maybe they never experienced grace and forgiveness from another person. **What ever the case Satan is winning the victory.**

Satan, the accuser of the brethren (Rev. 12:9-10) is actively in business, night and day He delights in having believers confess the same sins over and over again. "Why don't you confess that sin again?" he suggests to your mind, the next day he tells you that you were not sincere enough. Later he tells you that you did not repent enough. Or you do not deserve forgiveness anyway or that you have made such a miserable mess of your life, how could God ever love you?

3. How do you avoid this trap?

- a. The secret is to thank God for your forgiveness even when you feel guilty as you confessed it.
- b. Use guilt feelings as a reminder to give praise to God for His forgiveness.
- c. Memorize Psalm 32:12, 5 and recite them with thanksgiving to God when those guilt feelings surface. (Or memorize Isaiah 4:22.)
- d. This will become a great stepping stone in your life for you will learn to trust God by faith.

C. God Promises you cleansing as well as forgiveness!

1. I Jh. 1:9; Forgiveness refers to your **legal** standing while **cleansing** is the **subjective work of God whereby you are actually made clean.**
2. Reject sensual thoughts does not stop lustful thinking that have been set in motion.
3. The antidote to the problem is to insist on God's cleansing and trust God for that.
4. By forgiveness and inner cleansing you can put away the past, yes, put it behind you.

D. Far as possible, experience the healing of all your personal relationships.

1. The severest attacks toward sin comes usually when we have wronged others and have not dealt with our sin, nor gotten right with them.
2. You can accept your own hurt more easily when things are right with others.

E. Live by God's GRACE -- *The purpose of the Cross is to repair the irreparable. Christ says "go and sin no more." God offers you a new beginning... come to HIM.. KNOW HIM!*