

But I Can't Forgive Myself

By Melody Green



We've all done things we regret. Sometimes, once we recognize our mistakes, we can go back and correct them. Other times we can't. The damage has been done. Memories and accusations flood our minds and we go through mental gymnastics with all the "if onlys." Sometimes we plunge into a pit of despair and the weight of our sin seems to literally crush the breath out of us. Christians know the forgiveness of Jesus, but sometimes we've only accepted that truth in our minds - deep inside there's a nagging doubt that it really applies to our situation.

What can you do with those feelings of guilt? Are they from God or the devil? Are you forgiven or just fooling yourself? Perhaps your struggles are with ongoing failures in your attitudes or actions. Or maybe your situation is so terribly painful you've thought, "Even if God *has* forgiven me - I'll never *forgive myself!*"

The following letter, sent to me anonymously, tells a familiar story. "In June of 1982 I found out I was pregnant. I was 18 years old and two months away from college. My boyfriend was a backslidden Christian like me and we chose abortion because we didn't want to face our family and friends. We took the "easy" way out.

After my abortion I faced mental heartaches, shed many tears, and regretted the whole decision. To this day I still get on my knees and cry - asking the Lord for His loving forgiveness because I know I was so wrong!

I struggle a lot, wondering if God will ever give me a second chance. He is such a loving God and I believe with all my heart that He is God, and yet I always carry a conscience full of guilt. I feel like God has abandoned me and I get so discouraged because of the nightmare of my past. Does God forgive me? I believe He does, yet I feel this sin was just too great."

The Weight Of Guilt

You may think your sins are too big and too terrible for God's forgiveness - that there's no hope for you. I'm not talking about abortion only. There are many things that leave guilty scars upon our hearts.

Some of you are haunted by things in your past like fornication, adultery, homosexuality, pimping, prostitution, or perversion. Maybe you've committed crimes like rape, molestation, or incest. Some of you have been thieves, gang members, drug addicts, or even murderers. Many of you have caused, or been the victims of, painful divorces. Some of you have emotionally tormented others through verbal abuse, or injured them through physical abuse - maybe your marriage partner or your children. And some of you carry false feelings of guilt and condemnation because you were on the receiving end of the wrong choices of others.

Some of you have been careless, selfish, disobedient, or missed God altogether, and now irreparable damage has been done. A tragedy might have been averted had you acted differently. But now you or someone else

has been hurt or left handicapped... maybe a life was lost. Perhaps your problems aren't as devastating as those mentioned, but all the same you live with continual feelings of discouragement and failure. Whatever your situation may be, if you are feeling the weight of guilt, the forgiveness of Jesus *can* be known.

Amazing Grace

The act of "forgiving ourselves" has value only *after* we have obtained **God's forgiveness**. One reason some of you can't forgive yourself is because God hasn't forgiven you. And if God hasn't forgiven you, it's because you haven't ever taken your guilt and shame to Him. Jesus Christ is the only One who can truly cleanse your heart from guilt. "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and

transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."¹ The Bible is full of this truth.

Approaching God's throne of grace in sincere humility is your first step in receiving forgiveness. Not just "going forward and saying a prayer," but admitting your own guilt, making no excuses, and wholeheartedly turning away from the things that have broken God's heart. It's giving Him full control of your life. You can no longer be your own boss - your own god. Jesus longs for an intimate relationship with you. He is waiting for you to come. You may find a temporary "cure" for your guilt, but there will be no lasting inner peace or healing apart from Jesus Christ.

When we see our sins through the eyes of God, we don't see how we could *ever* be forgiven. But that's the wonder and the miracle of His grace. We receive what we don't deserve - forgiveness. We owe Him everything. He owes us nothing - yet gives us all. That's what makes His grace truly amazing.

Loving Relationship

Many of you may already have a fairly good knowledge of the Lord. You may even go to church regularly - but for you it's "religion" not relationship. Jesus doesn't honor outward forms of godliness. He sees our hearts. Don't try to seek forgiveness for specific areas of your life without yielding your *whole life* to Him. We can't send just our *sin* to the foot of the cross - we need to take *ourselves* there as well. God's grace is not a bandage to slap over an unclean life. A **complete** cleansing is needed first, and it can only come through **totally** giving your life to Jesus.

Is there any sin too terrible for God to forgive? There's only one that I know of - the ultimate rejection of God's Son, Jesus. Our refusal to live in loving relationship with Him blocks us not only from entering into God's forgiveness, but from entering into eternity with Him as well. Anything and everything else committed against God and man, once put under the precious blood of Jesus, can be forgiven.

God Or the Devil?

But for many of you, your problem isn't that you don't know God. You do know Him. You love Him and you're making a consistent effort to be more like Him. Even though you know King David was probably referring to his sin of adultery and murder when he said, "*As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us,*"² it doesn't help you feel forgiven in some areas.

If you have gone to the cross, but still feel guilty, it's probably Satan who is accusing you. One of his favorite tactics is to bring up your past sins and failures. Things he knows you feel bad about. Actually, he talks to you in a religious tone of voice making you wonder if it could be God. He brings up your past as "evidence" that you are not totally forgiven. He tells you you're a second-class Christian - that you should be content with just *being saved* because you're unworthy of being used by God in any significant way.

Of course, we all do well to remember that *not one of us* is worthy of God's grace. We need to continually guard our hearts against pride and walking in our own strength. But I'm not talking here about our need to acknowledge God's awesome greatness and our bankruptcy before Him. I am talking about an *attack of the enemy* that keeps us looking inward instead of upward, full of guilt instead of full of peace, bound instead of free.

Conviction vs. Condemnation

Sometimes we aren't sure just *who* is talking to us. If it's God, we certainly don't want to rebuke Him. But we need to be equally careful not to confuse the attack of the enemy with the voice of God. Let's look at **who** is speaking, **what** is being said, and the **motive** behind it.

WHO: First, clarify your exact feelings. Take a moment, condense them into a few sentences and say them out loud to yourself or a friend. Does it sound like God? Does it fit His character? Is it an area of sin? Does it line up with the Bible?

WHAT: God's conviction is usually specific. He will let you know, "You just told a lie," or "Fred, I want you to take more responsibility at home." Specific. On the other hand, condemnation is usually more general in nature. The enemy says things like, "You're a lousy Christian," "Why don't you just give up?" or "God could never forgive you for *that*."

It could be a vague feeling that *everything* is wrong, but you can't put your finger on *anything*. For example, you may get the feeling that you're a hypocrite. If so, just say, "Lord, if that's *You*, please show me exactly what I've said or done so I can get it right." If it's the Lord, and if you are open to being corrected, guaranteed He will tell you.

WHY: When I discipline my children I'm specific because I'm training them. I want them to learn - to do better next time. I want them to grow into healthy maturity, not lose heart in defeat. If I spank my daughter I may say, "Mommy is spanking you because you just hit your sister." I would never grab her and say, "You're getting this spanking because you're not gonna make it as my daughter. You're a wreck. You may never grow up right!"

Many times God speaks a hard word to us. His discipline may hurt for a time, but His motive is always love. The surgeon carefully cuts out the cancer, but the robber slashes us in the alleyway. One uses a knife for healing purposes, the other for destruction. Look at the

desired outcome. The goal of God's conviction is to draw us closer to Him - our lives bearing good fruit. The devil's condemnation is designed to drive us away from God into a fruitless, hopeless existence.

Satan wants us to give up - God just wants us to shape-up!

A Double Standard?

This is a test: If someone else with a situation just like yours came to you for counsel, what advice would you give them? Is it easier for you to grab onto God's forgiveness for someone else than it is to believe it for yourself? Perhaps you are harder on yourself than you are on others.

Remember that God is no respecter of persons. To believe one thing for someone else, and another thing for yourself is inconsistent. Beliefs like that are based on *feelings* not on *truth*. Sometimes when I "blow it" I feel so hurt and disappointed in myself that it's hard to receive forgiveness, yet I would firmly tell someone else in my position to stand on the truth of the Bible. It's humbling to receive God's forgiveness, but James reminds us that, "*God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*"³ Pride must take a back seat when it comes to receiving something we know we don't deserve. If God has forgiven us, we set ourselves above Him when we reject His gift. I must learn to minister the same truth and compassion to myself that I so freely give to others.

Receiving Forgiveness

Here's an example of someone who is forgiven, but doesn't *believe* it. Three-year-old Billy has just flushed his mommy's pearl earrings down the toilet, along with his pet frog. Billy cried out a tearful repentance and mommy assured him he was forgiven. But Billy felt so bad about what he had done that he wouldn't eat dinner and the next morning said, "Mommy, I'm not gonna eat today because I think you're still mad at me." Now, what if his parents couldn't convince him they weren't angry with him? What if they couldn't get him to eat at all!

If Billy was your son, you'd do *anything* to convince him he was forgiven. You'd tell him that he was more important to you than a pair of earrings, or any other possession for that matter. You would be hurt and desperate as you begged him to please, please eat before he got sick!

Just like Billy, if you don't receive God's forgiveness, you will get sick spiritually. Your whole Christian life will suffer. Your lack of confidence before the Lord does not change the fact that you are forgiven, but it hinders you from achieving the freedom and victory that is yours in Jesus.

Present Ongoing Failures

You've repented time and time again for your temper, selfishness, pride, irresponsibility, impatience, immaturity, insecurities, and fears, etc. Once again you slink into God's presence expecting to hear Him say, "You again? Another bad attitude? You said you'd change but you haven't. That's it - no more forgiveness for you!" Perhaps you've had other people treat you that way when you've humbled yourself - but God won't.

Sometimes we have a misconception about Christianity. We think that once we gain some maturity in the Lord, all of our conflicts and struggles will end. But that happens in heaven, not here. God is fine-tuning us. He's sanding and shaping our characters into better images of Himself. Stop thinking there's an easier way and realize that life is often very difficult - even when we are walking with Jesus.

If you see your failures as opportunities to grow... you will! If you fall, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back on the horse. "*A righteous man falls seven times, and rises again.*"⁴ You're afraid you'll fall again? Keep your eyes on Jesus, "*who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy.*"⁵ You're in training, remember? If you fall, throw yourself on the mercy of God and try again with the strength He provides. That's what God's mercy is for.

Repentance is a change of heart. A change of mind concerning sin. It's more than just "being sorry." It's honestly saying, "If I could do it over, I'd do it differently. I would honor God." That's what repentance is all about. "*If MY PEOPLE, which are called by my name, shall HUMBLE THEMSELVES, and PRAY, AND SEEK MY FACE, and TURN from their wicked ways; THEN will I hear from heaven, and WILL FORGIVE THEIR SIN...*"⁶ Whether you're a mass-murderer or the "nice guy down the street," you need to come to God in the same way. But once you have given your life to God, and turned away from all ungodliness, you can be sure of His forgiveness whether *you feel* forgiven or not!⁷

If you're still having trouble feeling forgiven, ask God if there's something He wants you to do. Many times there's someone *you* need to forgive or *ask forgiveness of*. If you've stolen a book from the library, you won't have a peace while it's at home on your shelf. Do you need to repay someone? Ask Him to show you anything you've left undone.

Consequences And Compensation

Although many of our wrong choices leave us with unpleasant consequences, these things have nothing to do with the fact that we are

forgiven. Some of you are in jail. If you've had an abortion you must deal with the death of your baby and sometimes sterility as well. The key is walking in gratitude. Be thankful for your salvation and for all the good things God has done for you. Jesus points to a former prostitute and tells us that those forgiven of the greatest debts will also have the greatest love for Him. A wonderful promise of hope!⁸

God is just. If you must live with difficult circumstances, He will compensate you in ways that the average person may never know. Our deepest times with God usually come while passing through the fire. We can get hard and bitter from our hurts, or we can draw closer to God and allow Him to break open a vial of compassion in our hearts. In our brokenness we can comfort others, maybe in similar situations, with the same comfort God has given to us.⁹ We have a new understanding of God's grace - a soothing ointment to apply to the wounds of others. God wants us to use it.

Renewing Your Mind

This is very important. Becoming a new creature isn't just a fairy tale that God made up to help us feel better about ourselves. It is a spiritual truth. The Bible doesn't lie.

Paul says, *"Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."*¹⁰ When you come to Jesus something supernatural happens. You become a new person. You have the same body, the same hands, and even some of the same clothes you had when you were sinning. But you are different. You are a NEW CREATION.

In Ezekiel, the Lord says, *"I will sprinkle clean water on you and YOU WILL BE CLEAN."* He doesn't say you might be clean or I hope you'll be clean, but you will be clean. *"I will cleanse you from ALL your filthiness and from ALL your idols. Moreover, I WILL give you a NEW HEART and put a NEW SPIRIT within you; and I WILL REMOVE the heart of stone from your flesh and GIVE YOU a heart of flesh. And I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT WITHIN YOU and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances."*¹¹

God has given us a new heart and a new spirit. We need to walk in the newness of that life. *"Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might WALK IN NEWNESS OF LIFE. Knowing this, that our OLD SELF WAS CRUCIFIED with Him, that our body of sin might be DONE AWAY WITH, that we should NO LONGER be slaves to sin; for He who has died is FREED FROM SIN."*¹²

You Are A New Creature

Walking in the newness of life involves training our thinking to accept - not reject - that newness. I recently heard someone say, "I'm new in Christ. I've got a new heart and I've got a new spirit. My only problem is that I've got an *old brain*." There is a battle on for our mind and we need to continually feed it on the Truth of God - flushing out the junk. It's a process and you need to diligently apply yourself to it... *lay aside the OLD SELF . . . BE RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUR MIND.*¹³

Now, gird your mind for action and discipline your thinking. *"For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace."*¹⁴ The following are a few practical steps towards renewing your mind.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH: Self-esteem is a popular topic right now. The world says "take pride in yourself," a thought contrary to the Bible - and yet the Christlike response is *not* "belittle yourself." Many people continually downgrade themselves with their words and their thoughts believing it's biblical humility. It's not. We need to see ourselves through God's eyes and speak honestly about ourselves - acknowledging the good and the bad. When we are really honest, we can't help but be humble before God.

THINKING THE TRUTH: *"... whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things."*¹⁵ Meditate on the special Scriptures the Lord gives you regarding your forgiveness, your strength in Jesus, your new heart, and all the riches of Christ. Tape them on your bathroom mirror, underline them in your Bible, memorize them. This is the truth, and *"the truth will make you free."*¹⁶

LIVING THE TRUTH: *"But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."*¹⁷ Don't fan the flames of old feelings and desires. If you don't want to struggle with lust, don't go to enticing movies. Be careful about the influence you receive from television and books. Practice the simple things the Lord shows you in rebuilding your life and you won't hurt the Lord and come under the same guilt again. *"Put on the NEW SELF, which in the likeness of God has been created in RIGHTEOUSNESS and HOLINESS OF THE TRUTH."*¹⁸

Forgiving Yourself

After God has forgiven you, you have to forgive yourself. This will release you to walk in the fullness of Christ. Satan loves to tell you that you haven't changed. That the blood of Jesus is useless in the cleansing of sin. These are lies. Once you have given your life to God and placed your sins under His blood **you are forgiven. Period!** You must believe this truth if you're going to have any joy in your Christian life. You've been bound by the enemy's chains and Jesus wants to set you free right now. Cry out like David saying, *"bring my soul out of prison, so that I may give thanks to Thy Name."*¹⁹ The door is wide open. Walk through it in confidence! Get off alone somewhere and say this *out loud*. You are speaking to yourself, to God, and to the devil.

