

Dealing with Past Guilt

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Are you feeling down? Is there something that you did in the past day, week, month, even year that you just can't get over? Hurtful words that you wish you could take back? Things done in secret that no one else knows about? A simple mistake that has hurt those you love? What you might be feeling is guilt, and it's a powerful emotion. Guilt drives the murderer to flee from law enforcement. Guilt can even make you feel bad for something someone else has done. God can use guilt over sin to bring us to repentance. But how can we deal with the guilt over sins from our past?

In our lesson this morning, we see just how disastrous the result is when we try to deal with past guilt on our own. However, God has promised that he has done something new through our Savior Jesus. Through faith in his sacrifice, the results are truly wonderful!

I. Disastrous are the results of dealing with guilt on our won.

The prophet Isaiah had a ministry that faced him with many challenges. His work as a prophet of God began around 740 BC. His message was simple. Repent and turn from your former ways, and keep your eyes focused on the coming Messiah. Getting Judah to stay focused on this goal was the difficult part. In 722 BC, the 10 northern tribes were defeated by the Assyrians, and would never again be a nation. The southern kingdom of Judah continued to chase after things that were not God-pleasing.

Because of this, in the verses preceding our lesson Isaiah has words of warning for the people of Judah. He tells them, "Because you have forsaken God, he will hand you over to the Babylonians. However, even though you have been unfaithful to him, God will always be faithful. He will never turn from his promise to watch over his people, and to provide for their eternal salvation through the coming Messiah."

At the beginning of our lesson, the LORD reminds his people of his faithfulness. He points them to the Exodus, and the events that happened at the Red Sea. The Israelites were trapped. After releasing them from slavery, Pharaoh doubted his decision and came after the Israelites with his army. But God would not let his people be wiped out. As the LORD says in verses 16 and 17 of our text, he is the one, "**who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick.**" He was the one who had provided and cared for them throughout the years. They should probably trust in what he says!

In verse 19, God gives his people a promise. "**See, I am doing a new thing.**" God would do the impossible. Water in the wilderness, where there was none before. Paths through even the most dangerous sections of the wilderness. Even the animals understood who gave them water! God would make life spring up out of death through the promised Messiah.

But after reminding the Israelites of their past deliverance, in verse 18 the LORD tells them, "**Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.**" Immediately after reminding the Israelites of their past, God tells them to forget it? Why? This wasn't a bad thing to remember, but perhaps it was a warning to the Israelites against living on past success. God had greater things in mind for his people. As he has just said, he's going to do something greater for them, something new!

However, there was an even greater reason for Judah to forget the past. They had done much to turn against the LORD. Last week, we saw the cycle of sin that the Israelites were stuck in. That cycle didn't stop after the time of the judges. Time and time again they failed to worship the LORD and serve only him. As the LORD says in verses 22-24, they failed to call on him, and bring sacrifices for their sins.

Judah had not done as God wanted but continued to turn to sin to try and deal with their guilt. They tried to do this on their own, and it only made things worse. Instead of fixing things, they made it worse, "**burdening [God] with your sins and wearying [him] with your offenses.**"

God's words here apply to us as well. He wants us to **"forget the former things; do not dwell on the past."** It sure is difficult to do this sometimes. Remembering the past seems to be a part of who we are as humans. Guilt hits us when we least expect it. It keeps us awake at night, replaying over and over again the things we have done in the past. We want to move past these things, but we can't stop remembering!

More than this, we also have sometimes failed to call on God in our time of trouble. The temptation is there to turn to man-made solutions for guilt. Distractions, talking through it, even "self-medication" with drugs and alcohol. But what do these things do with guilt? It only delays feeling it. They do not get rid of guilt entirely. Dwelling in sin, walling in guilt, this consumes our mind and heart and drives a wedge between us and God, blinding us from the NEW thing – the most important thing God has done for us.

This can lead only to disaster. God alone is the only one who can free us from guilt. But when we fail to call on him, there is no release from our guilt. We cannot do it on our own. How can we move past these things if we can never forget them? Where is there release from the guilt that plagues us if we do not call on the one who can free us? When we see our past failings, all we see is what they deserve; death. However, God has already done something "new." He sent his Son, Jesus, to die for our sins and take away our guilt!

II. Wondrous are the results when we trust the NEW thing that God has done!

Thank God, my brothers and sisters in Christ, that he has done this. Thank God that he has dealt with our guilt by doing a NEW thing through our Savior Jesus. The LORD tells us, just as he told the Israelites, to forget the old that we have done in the past, and to focus on his plan for salvation.

The Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed this new thing. God demanded blood as payment for the Israelites' sins. But Christ's sacrifice was so much better! The Israelites sacrificed day after day, but Christ offered himself once. His death, the greatest sacrifice, paid the debt of sin that the whole world owed to God! He no longer sees our sins, but instead sees the blood of our Savior, which has washed away all our sins.

As Isaiah records, God alone can do this new thing. He is the only one who can make life where before there was only death. He has done this new thing in each of us. We were dead in our sins. We were a spiritual wasteland. But as St. Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:17, **"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"** The old Adam, our sinful nature, was drowned in the waters of our baptism. In its place, God has created the new man, which is eager to do his will.

This NEWness is enduring and lasting, not because of anything we have done, but because of what God has done in us through our baptism. Just like Jesus' death on the cross, baptism is powerful. God uses water and his Word to wash us clean from all our sins. Through our baptism, he strengthens our faith and declares us his own dear child. Why do you think we have the baptismal font front and center here? It's to remind us, each time we worship, of the miracle that God performed when we were baptized.

Jesus is the only one who can help us fight the temptation to wallow in our guilt. Through faith in him, we are reassured that all our sins are forgiven. Satan and our sinful nature cannot use our guilt against us, because God has forgotten our sins! In the verse following our text for this morning, the LORD says, **"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more."** He does not keep a record of our wrongs because of what Christ has done for us. We have been freed from all guilt!

Verse 21 is a beautiful picture of this freedom. God has formed us, his own people for himself. There is a purpose for the new creation in each of us. The Hebrew verb that Isaiah uses here is a potter forming something out of clay. God creates something beautiful out of us "lumps of clay." However, our purpose is more than just to look pretty. We are formed and molded into vessels of God's glory, doing everything to proclaim his praises.

Because of this new creation in us, given to us through faith in Christ, we can bring forward fragrant offerings to the LORD. As Isaiah says, we can **"lavish on [God] the fat of our sacrifices."** In Isaiah's context, fat is good. It's the best, richest part of an animal. Offering the fat to God was a way of saying thank you to him for the blessings that they had. We can offer the richest, choicest parts of our lives to God as well! Whether that is through our offerings, or talents, or even time spent in the Word, all of these are fragrant, pleasing offerings to God, because they are done through faith in Jesus.

So, rejoice, my brothers and sisters. Rejoice that Jesus has washed away your sins with his blood. Rejoice, that he has freed you from past guilt. Rejoice, as you proclaim the praises of our God. Amen.