

THE SOLUTION TO THE GUILT PROBLEM

Is something keeping you awake at night? Something that just won't let you go, something you've tried to get rid of in a thousand different ways? But nothing quite works?

There's a good chance that guilt is buried somewhere in that anguished restlessness. Nothing is quite as paralysing, nothing quite as debilitating, as the persistent shadow of unresolved guilt.

But what you may not have considered is that the answer to this most basic of human problems is tied up in a "Spotless Lamb, a Lamb burning in the desert".

The problem of human guilt has been around a long time, of course. We've been struggling with the internal consequences of our wrongdoing since history began. As a result, people have developed all kinds of ways of dealing with guilt, all kinds of do-it-yourself strategies.

Sometimes we try simple denial: we simply pretend that the wrong isn't there, or that it never happened.

Denial has become a "default position" for many people who find themselves caught out. Take, for example, the company involved in tense negotiations with union leaders. Company officials insisted that workers were abusing sick-leave privileges. The union denied it.

One morning at the bargaining table, the company's negotiator held up the sports page of the local newspaper. He pointed

to a picture showing an employee winning a golf tournament in town. “This man,” the negotiator declared, “called in sick yesterday.”

But there he was in the paper beside a caption describing his excellent golf score.

After a moment of silence, a union man spoke up. “Wow,” he said, “think of how much better he could have played if he HADN’T been sick!”

Nice try. We can deny; we can try to blanket our deceptions or our misbehaviour. But it usually doesn’t take us very far. Our sins have a way of finding us out.

When denial fails, as it very often does, people then try to fall back on excuses. We try to explain away responsibility. At one university, two psychologists tried a simple

test. They gathered a group of students in a room, while in the adjacent room they staged what sounded like an accident.

A woman fell down and screamed, “Oh, my foot! I can’t move it. My ankle! I can’t get this thing off me!” The woman’s voice could be clearly heard by all the students. But almost no one offered to help.

What really surprised the psychologists, however, was the explanation these people gave afterwards. Most said, “I didn’t really know what happened.” Others claimed they thought it “wasn’t serious.”

Excuses can keep guilt at bay, for a while at least. Sometimes excuses become quite creative. A teacher at a Christian primary school had ongoing problems with a boy who constantly tripped people as they walked by his desk. She had a very earnest talk with him about the problem, and at

the end, the boy agreed to pray.

He said, “Dear Lord, please help those kids walking down the aisle not to be so clumsy.”

“It wasn’t really me. It was somebody else’s fault.” That kind of excuse has become all too common among adults as well. We hear it in courtrooms all the time. “Diminished responsibility” is the term used, and lawyers find multiple creative applications of this means of avoiding personal guilt.

Excusing wrong, however, breaks down just as our denial does, because we know deep down that we are indeed guilty. Eventually, the weight of that guilt becomes too great for denial, or flimsy excuses.

There’s one final strategy left for us in our do-it-yourself attempts to deal with guilt. That is, to make up for it, to atone for

what we've done. At first glance, this may appear rather noble. But it leads people down a self-destructive path.

Mark grew up in a very religious home. Through most of his childhood he tried very hard to please God. But he always felt guilty about falling short. And his harsh, rigid parents didn't offer much help.

Mark became a successful businessman and he gave generously to charities. In fact, he gave to the point of sacrifice. At one point, he got it into his head that some local church leaders were destroying true religion. He spent thousands of dollars on a campaign to denounce them.

Mark kept trying to do the right thing, but he could never do enough. He could never give enough. He could never sacrifice himself enough. Those terrible guilty feelings persisted.

Finally, the guilt overwhelmed him and he had to be admitted to a mental institution. While there, he deliberately burned his hands and feet on a radiator, and even gouged holes in his feet and in the palms of his hands. He was imitating the crucifixion. He just couldn't stop his tortured efforts to atone for his wrongdoing.

Unresolved guilt is a very real problem that can drive us to alarming extremes, and destroy our emotional health. It becomes worse when we attempt to deal with it in all the wrong ways.

Many people look for answers in the wrong places. This has become painfully evident in the current search for the sacred that dominates the religious landscape. Most people are searching for peace, for spiritual tranquility. They often try to put together a religious "package" that will do the trick. Maybe a bit of Zen

meditation will help, along with a trip to the temples of Japan. Perhaps listening to someone channel the wisdom of an ancient prophet will turn on the lights. Maybe we can combine bits of the Bible with the teachings of Siddha Yoga or some other guru.

If you think that sounds like a spiritual cafeteria, you're right. People want to pick and choose elements from all kinds of religious traditions. The do-it-yourself strategy now seems to encompass all of religion.

But does this approach really deal with basic human problems? Are we really attending to the state of our moral lives, and coming to grips with the issues of guilt and responsibility? When we pick and choose for ourselves, the natural tendency is to pick and choose the most comfortable, and the least demanding,

solutions. In adopting this approach, we create religion in our own image.

Take the altar in Rita's house, for example. This 50-year-old nurse conducts her personal rituals at an ever-changing altar. It consists of her special things. At one point, the altar contained an angel statue, a small bottle of "sacred water" blessed at a women's vigil, a crystal ball, a pyramid, a small brass image of Buddha, a votive candle, a Hebrew prayer, a tiny Native American basket and a photograph of her "most sacred place", a lovely tree near her home.

Rita's formula seems to be to put as many "sacred" things together as possible, mix vigorously and worship. Many people seem to choose variants of this approach as the current path to peace. However, the sum total of many possible answers doesn't necessarily add up to the complete

answer we need. It doesn't really deal with our guilt problem. It takes a lot more than trinkets and talismans to solve this fundamental problem.

I would like to suggest to you that the answer lies at another altar, a very different altar, found at the one place on Earth that the God of Heaven designated as holy.

This is the altar of burnt offering, which God Himself designed, along with everything else in the Hebrew tabernacle. The books of Exodus and Leviticus in the Old Testament present detailed explanations of how this altar was to be constructed and how various offerings were to be made.

How can a religious artefact thousands of years old possibly relate to our struggle with guilt today? The following story

provides one example of what happened at this tabernacle.

In the early morning light, a man named Eliud walks through the encampment of Israel. Passing tent after tent of his own tribe, he knows that friends, relatives and strangers follow his steps with their eyes. They know where he is going. Eliud is leading a small lamb. Sometimes he has to pick it up and carry it in his arms. It's pure white: spotless. His children have played with it since its birth.

But Eliud is going to the tabernacle to slit this animal's throat. A splinter in his memory drives him there, a sin that's been gnawing at his bones. He has to make it right. So he keeps walking, eyes straight ahead.

At the entrance to the outer court of the tabernacle, Eliud waits with others

who have brought their sin offerings. He watches as the priests perform their ancient ritual. And then it's his turn.

Eliud kneels beside the lamb and places one hand around its neck. A priest approaches. Eliud places his other hand on the lamb's head and confesses his sin. He tries not to look in the animal's trusting eyes.

Quickly, its head is lifted. There's a swift flash of the knife. Dark blood spurts out on the ground. The lamb kicks once and then falls limp.

Priestly assistants then take the carcass toward the large altar. They drain the blood into a trench at its base. Then they place the slain animal on the grating and flames begin to consume it.

As Eliud watches the smoke curl up toward

a perfect blue sky, he feels for a moment that his own life has been whisked from the plunging blade. He's been rescued. This spotless sacrifice points to a divine forgiveness. And that grace is as real to Eliud as the blood that still stains his hands.

That is what happened here at this Hebrew tabernacle, here at the altar of burnt offering. What did it all mean?

First of all, people were accepting responsibility for their wrongdoing. They were facing up to it squarely, confessing it. No denials, no excuses. Leviticus pictures one of the temple sacrifices in this way:

Aaron [the high priest] shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat [and] confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel . . . putting them on the head of the goat. Leviticus 16:21.

One of the most fundamental truths about human guilt is that we can never escape it until we accept it.

That's why people brought their sacrifices to this altar at the temple. But they were also acknowledging something else: the fact that they couldn't atone for their sin; they couldn't really make up for it. Certainly, they could provide restitution where that was possible. But they couldn't erase their guilt by anything they did. They could never do enough to change the past.

That spotless lamb slain, lifted up to Heaven, was an act of faith, faith in the fact that Another would take their guilt, Another would make atonement.

This altar was holy only because it pointed forward to a holy event. It linked sinful human beings, by faith, to the death of the

Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, on the cross. The writer of Hebrews describes these prophetic animal sacrifices and what they accomplished. Then he says:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! Hebrews 9:14 (NIV).

Christ offered Himself on the cross, as a sacrifice for sin. And that sacrifice is the only thing that can purge human consciences, the only thing that can cleanse guilty hearts.

Do you know why? Because ultimately it has to be God who forgives. When we fail morally, pardon has to come from the Lawgiver. In our innermost hearts we know that forgiveness has to come

from a higher source. Our friends can comfort, but they can't really solve our guilt problem. Psychology can help us adjust and cope, but it can't really deal with our guilt.

It took the cross to create pardon and grace. Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, poured out His life on the cross. He took on our guilt and gave us His righteousness, His right standing with the Father.

This altar shows us exactly where to find holy ground today. We find it at the foot of the cross. We find it as weak, undeserving human beings who look up at a crucified Christ. We find holy ground by reaching out in faith toward this Saviour, just as Eliud placed his hand on the lamb's head. We find forgiveness when we look down and see that our hands, too, are figuratively stained with blood. We're involved; we're participants. It's our sin that required this

great sacrifice. And it's our lives that Jesus wants to rescue.

We get in touch with reality today by really understanding this great sacrifice. It's got to sink in. We've been whisked from the falling blade. We've been rescued. Like Eliud, looking up at that dark smoke curling toward the sky, we realise that Someone died in our place and has lifted His spotless life toward Heaven.

Sinful, guilty human beings can be accepted by a holy God through faith in this unique sacrifice.

The book of Hebrews gives us a graphic picture of this when it points to the sanctuary, the place that symbolised the very throne room of God, the seat of His glory. It says:

He entered the Most Holy Place once for

all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:12 (NIV).

Jesus Christ, having laid down His life to redeem us, walked right into the sanctuary. How? By His own blood. By His own sacrifice. By the perfect life He had poured out on our behalf. And he did this, “once and for all”. It’s a permanent, eternal redemption. It’s an eternal solution to the guilt problem.

We don’t have to keep coming up with excuses. We don’t have to keep trying to make up for our past mistakes. Jesus Christ has created a way to deal with guilt “once and for all”.

Because of that, the writer of Hebrews tells us, we can come boldly to the very throne of God and receive grace in our times of need. We are accepted fully because Christ was accepted fully.

A young airline pilot named Henry Feinberg spent a great many years looking for a unique holy place where he could find peace. He just couldn't come to terms with the materialism and suffering that he saw all around him.

Henry made a trip to Israel, certain that he would find God in the land of his ethnic roots. But people seemed just as secular there as everywhere else. He got a job flying in Alaska and was awed by the magnificent landscape. Then he took time off to sail through the South Seas. He saw much that was breathtakingly beautiful and exotic.

But he still couldn't find peace; he still couldn't find a way through his guilt to God. Friends gave Henry books on Buddhism and Hinduism. He read about all kinds of religious philosophies. He searched in New Age libraries. He went

on weekend retreats with gurus.

Everyone seemed to be saying the same thing, “God is in you and in everything.” That seemed to Henry a pretty hollow slogan in view of the darker side of human life. It didn’t seem to touch the problem of sin and guilt at all.

Henry fell in love with a woman and got married. But it lasted only six months. After the divorce, Henry felt like he’d been placed in front of a mirror. “I finally saw myself as I really was,” he said. “I’d been on a quest for spiritual awareness for years. I considered myself a basically nice guy, but now, I saw that I was extremely selfish, and my actions had devastated another human being.”

Henry decided that all the spiritual gymnastics he’d practiced for years had done nothing. His spiritual search

had been in vain, and lasting peace completely eluded him. He developed a drinking problem.

Finally, Henry gave up the search. He decided to stop trying. Still, once in a while, he would cry out, “God, if you’re real, please reveal yourself to me.”

Then Henry met a young woman who suggested he study the Bible. He’d already studied so many religious books that he wasn’t eager for another “head trip”, as he called it.

But one day Henry met another Christian who began pointing out what the Bible says about sin and redemption. He talked about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, about what Jesus accomplished on the cross. This believer seemed to be a very caring individual and his words cut straight through to

Henry's heart. There, they began to fill the aching emptiness.

Henry felt that God was finally speaking directly to him, when he least expected it. He described it in these words: "The realisation that God exists and that He had something to say to me was almost overpowering."

Some time later, Henry became aware of a tremendous weight on his shoulders. He wanted desperately to get rid of this heaviness. At that moment, for the first time, he realised what sin really is. He realised what it means to have to cut the throat of a spotless lamb.

Henry broke down weeping. He had a full sense of the burden of guilt he had carried all his life, but there came to him an even stronger sense of the graciousness of God. He recalled the words of that Christian who had spoken of Jesus' forgiveness,

how Jesus had paid the penalty for our sin, how He had solved the guilt problem once and for all.

In that moment, with that realisation burning in his mind, Henry poured out his heart to God: he confessed all the things he felt bad about, committed his life to Christ, and thanked Him for His forgiveness.

After that experience, Henry's life began to change. He had found that spot of sacred ground at the cross. He was no longer tormented by sleepless nights, as he had been for years. He began devouring the Bible. His drinking problem disappeared. He began to sense that God was guiding his life.

Most of all, he finally discovered the source of lasting peace. He could look up and see his Saviour: a burning Lamb,

the smoke curling up toward the sky. This was the spotless sacrifice made once and for all. Henry Feinberg had finally found the way into God's presence.

Have you found that place, that spot of holy ground? Have you come to the foot of the cross, where the guilt problem is solved once and for all?

I'm so glad that God has provided a very clear and comprehensive answer to this basic problem of human guilt. I'm so glad that we don't have to try to deal with it on our own. People end up twisted into all kinds of unhealthy shapes trying to find a way to outmanoeuvre their guilt.

There is no need to twist and turn. We can simply come to the burning Lamb, to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And we can accept His full and free forgiveness.