
⁴ The Sovereign LORD has taught me what to say, so that I can strengthen the weary. Every morning He makes me eager to hear what He is going to teach me. ⁵ The LORD has given me understanding, and I have not rebelled or turned away from Him. ⁶ I bared my back to those who beat me. I did not stop them when they insulted me, when they pulled out the hairs of my beard and spit in my face. ⁷ But their insults cannot hurt me because the Sovereign LORD gives me help. I brace myself to endure them. I know that I will not be disgraced, ⁸ for God is near, and He will prove me innocent. Does anyone dare bring charges against me? Let us go to court together! Let him bring his accusation! ⁹ The Sovereign LORD Himself defends me— who, then, can prove me guilty?

Isaiah 50:4-9a (TEV)

“It’s your fault. You’re to blame. You’re the reason for this. It’s not my fault. I didn’t do it. It wasn’t me. Don’t look at me. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

How often do we hear lines like this? Your favourite football team loses, and people look for someone to blame. A political party endures a significant defeat, and people look for someone to blame. We do something wrong, and there is something in our ‘instinct’, in our ‘human nature’, that wants’ to say “It wasn’t me”.

Right in the Garden Adam blamed Eve. He didn’t want to ‘man up’ and accept responsibility for his part in ‘The Fall’. Eve, likewise, wanted to blame someone else. “It’s not my fault,” she also said, and blamed the serpent. And when God looked at the snake, the snake had no leg to stand on.

‘It’s not my fault,’ we like to say. Yet denial often leads to a sense of ‘guilt’. (*) We may not always realise this, but denial of problems can lead to feeling of guilt, or a ‘weight’ or ‘restlessness’ in the heart, and possibly even to feelings of shame.

‘Guilt’ and ‘shame’ are real human emotions (look at Adam and Eve in the Garden). Like ‘anger’, or ‘love’, or sadness, or happiness, or hate (God ‘hates’ what is evil), ‘guilt’ and ‘shame’ are also necessary human emotions.

One writer (secular) has spoken of three types of ‘guilt’. First, there is a ‘healthy guilt’. Healthy guilt is when you know you’ve done something wrong. It’s our conscience telling us that we have done something against our morals and beliefs. It’s a natural process of evaluating our self in the light of honesty. For these things we need to identify and correct the action as much as possible. Accept responsibility for your actions. Ask for forgiveness. Live with the consequences.

Then there is “Unhealthy Guilt”. Unhealthy guilt occurs when you feel everything is your fault – even things totally beyond your control. You did nothing wrong. You want everything perfect. You feel responsible for everyone and everything. If it rains – it’s your fault. If someone else makes a mistake – it’s your fault. You have a low self-esteem. Somehow by feeling everything is your fault – You are giving yourself approval to sink into further despair. You may feel like you are helping the person actually at fault by covering for them.

Finally, there can be a sense of “False Guilt”. Victims of all forms of abuse (sexual, physical and mental) and of violent crimes often have false guilt. They feel they were somehow at fault for what has happened and accept the blame. This creates an unhealthy emotion of guilt that may end in grief, self destructive habits or isolation. You may be overcome with fear of doing something wrong or making a wrong decision. You may be over sensitive to other people’s beliefs and comments.

Tied up with guilt can be a sense of shame. In his book, “The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse”, Dan Allander speaks about the way ‘shame’ can affect a person’s life. He doesn’t use this illustration (but something like it). Say a boy at school has his zipper down on his pants and doesn’t realise this. He might notice and discretely pull it up and no one notices. No real sense of shame. However, a friend may notice and quietly point this out. He may feel a slight sense of shame. However, if someone across the room yells out, “Hey, so-and-so’s got his fly undone”, and then makes more mocking sounds, the shame may be great. It is the same situation (a zipper is absently mindedly undone), but the effect is completely different. Shame is necessary sometimes to understand guilt, but sometimes shame is unnecessary. (Of course, there are also situations when people do not have a healthy sense of guilt, or who understand ‘shame’, and who struggle to differentiate what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ [and for us, as Christians, ‘sinful’ and ‘God-pleasing’ behaviour]).

What did the prophet Isaiah say of Jesus suffering? He said (and ultimately this is a prophecy of Jesus): “I bared my back to those who beat me. I did not stop them when they insulted me, when they pulled out the hairs of my beard and spit in my face. But their insults cannot hurt me because the Sovereign LORD gives me help.

We are about to enter ‘Holy Week’. In this week we focus on the cross of Jesus. And why was Jesus on the cross? Quite simply, it’s your fault. It’s all because of you. You are the one who has done wrong. You put Jesus there. I’ve said before that if you were the only person in the world, Jesus would have suffered and died for you. Such is His love for you. But such is the nature of your sin, that if you were the only person in the world, Jesus would have suffered and died. Do you feel guilt over your sin?

Again, we need a 'healthy' sense of guilt. Your sin is great. You must face your own heart. You must be honest with yourself. But remember... God's love is greater!

One Palm Sunday several years ago, a young child ask a powerful question after listening patiently and reverently to the long story of Christ's crucifixion. "But Mummy, why did Jesus have to die?" That boy voiced the question that has confronted and challenged people of faith for a very long time. Why did an innocent man come to such a horrid and horrible end? Why did someone who proclaimed love and lived the very compassion of God suffer and die as a common criminal? Why the pain, the cross, the death? "Mummy, why did Jesus have to die?"

It is a complicated thing to ask, "What does God save us from?" A pastor once asked a group of seventh-graders "if God was on the ball, what would God save you from?" Suddenly, the conversation got more interesting. One of the youth raised her hand and said, "Death." Another fellow offered that God could really help him out by saving him from an upcoming math test. Then one of the seventh graders said, "Pressure." And another said, "My parents' expectations." Then another, almost in a whisper, said, "Fear. I want God to save me from my fears." That pastor went on to say, "Can we dip down into our souls and be as honest as these young people were?"

One of the dangers in Holy Week is that as we hear the story of Jesus we may not feel like we need salvation. Or, we may be looking for the wrong sort of 'salvation'. The people of Jesus' time wanted 'salvation', but they often defined it as freedom from the Romans (thus, in immediate 'material' terms). So what does it look like to be saved by God? One writer has said, "The important question to ask is not, "What do you believe?" but "What difference does it make that you believe?"

In the crucifixion of Jesus we are confronted with our sins. But here we may also see the overcoming of our sin. Such is the mercy of the Cross. We see the real and radical meaning of Christ's Incarnation. He has come near to us to restore us to divine fellowship through the most intense and disturbing act of sacrifice and service imaginable: the way of the Cross. And, only convicted of our own sin, can we be convinced of the true love of God that seeks our good.

It is said that one thing which distinguishes human beings from other animals, is our vast range of sophisticated emotions. This is not to say that animals are incapable of feeling emotion, but it is to say that our emotions are hugely more complex. One emotion felt very deeply by human beings is guilt. Closely associated with it is shame. God has given us emotions for a reason...

When Jesus was arrested He was tried for a crime which He had not committed and He was subjected to brutal and degrading treatment. He was treated shamefully. But there is a difference between being *treated shamefully*

and *feeling shame*. Instead of being shamed, Jesus was vindicated. And, our 'Not Guilty' is found in the cross of Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah said, "The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together." Jesus endured a far greater shame than you and I could ever face. And yet by His cross He has brought us an incredible gift of life. Thank God for His great cross of love to us all which brings us true forgiveness of sin, and lifts us up from our guilt and shame. Amen.