

What Can I Do with My Guilt?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

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Chapter One

Guilt and Guilt Feelings

During my career as a seminary professor, I frequently have been called upon to teach courses on Christian apologetics. The term *apologetics* comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which means “to make a reply.” Thus, the discipline of apologetics is not concerned with apologizing for being a Christian, as the term might suggest. Rather, its aim is to provide a rational, intellectual defense of the truth claims of Christianity and to answer objections that people raise to the faith. This can be a very abstract, philosophical enterprise.

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As I engage in apologetics, I often converse with people who are not Christian believers; some of them are indifferent, while others are openly hostile to Christianity. For this reason, when I have these discussions, I often encounter questions about various truth claims. I think, as Francis Schaeffer used to say, that it is the Christian responsibility to give honest answers to honest questions, as far as we are able, so I try my best to do that.

Sooner or later, however, particularly in discussions with skeptics and people who are philosophically hostile to Christianity, I pause from my attempts to give answers and raise a particularly pointed question of my own. I say: “We’ve discussed the abstractions, the rational arguments for the existence of God and so on. Let’s lay those aside just for a moment and let me ask you this: What do you do with your guilt?”

This question often provokes a dramatic shift in the tenor of the discussion. It touches on something that is a visceral matter for many people, something that affects them at an existential level, so it moves the discussion beyond the abstract realm. In most instances, the person with whom I am speaking does not become angry when I ask this question. Sometimes the person will say that he has no guilt or that guilt is simply a term invented by religious

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people. Usually, however, the person treats the question seriously and tries to explain how he is dealing with guilt. This, I think, is evidence that every human being knows what guilt is. Every human being, at some level and at some point in his or her life, has to deal with it.

Guilt: An Objective Reality

What is guilt? In the first place, we have to say that guilt is not subjective but objective because it corresponds to an objective standard or reality. That leads me to the simplest definition of guilt that I can compose: Guilt is that which a person incurs when he violates a law.

We understand how this works in the criminal justice system. If someone breaks a law, a statute that has been enacted by a government, and that person is apprehended for having broken the law, he may have to appear in court. The person may say he is not guilty, in which case he is entitled to a trial, frequently a trial by jury. At such a trial, evidence is produced and testimony is heard. At the end of the trial, the members of the jury come to a verdict. They decide whether, in their judgment, the person is, in fact, guilty of breaking the law he is charged with violating.

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There is a wide range of kinds of trials, kinds of arguments that are used, and levels of evidence. Some years ago, it seemed that the entire United States was transfixed by the two trials of O. J. Simpson—one a criminal trial, the other a civil trial—which featured different rules on evidence, different guidelines for reaching a verdict, and so forth. But in any kind of trial, the key question is this: Is the person guilty? In other words, did the suspect do it? Did he or she transgress the law?

Laws are an inescapable reality in our world. There are rules imposed by our parents. There are rules imposed by teachers and by employers. There are laws enacted by the states and the federal government. All of us are subject to rules and laws. We might disagree with some of these laws or even with the idea of laws altogether. We might not have had the opportunity to vote on the laws we are required to heed. Still, those laws are there. We cannot ignore them. When we talk about guilt, we're talking about the transgression or violation of these rules or laws.

The biblical view is that God is the supreme Lawgiver and that He holds every person who is alive accountable for conforming to His mandates. Yes, God has rules and laws. People have said to me on many occasions that

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Christianity is not about rules and regulations; it's about love. That's simply not true. Christianity is about love, but that is because love is one of the rules—God commands us to love Him and to love one another. Christianity is not just about rules and laws, but rules and laws decreed by God have been a fact of life since the day of creation. So if we define guilt as that which a person incurs when he violates a law, we incur supreme guilt when we break the law of God. That is because His law is perfect. It is never arbitrary. It does not reflect merely the vested interests of a particular lobby group, but the perfect, holy, righteous character of God Himself.

Obviously, if there is no God, we don't have to worry about breaking His rules, because He doesn't have any rules. Still, we have the rules of the lesser magistrates to deal with. I believe all of us have broken the law of God, but even if we have not violated God's laws, we've certainly broken the laws of men. So all of us have experienced the objective situation of having transgressed a law.

Suppose a person commits murder with malice aforethought; he willfully plans to take another person's life, then executes his plan. The vast majority of people in this world agree that killing is a bad thing, that murder is wrong. Even

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in this age of relativism, when many people say there are no absolutes, a person will fudge on his commitment to relativism if someone comes at him with a knife and threatens to kill him. He will say, “That’s wrong, and if you kill me maliciously, you will incur guilt.” He’s right. At some level, we all understand that there are certain things that are inherently wrong, and if we do those things, we incur guilt.

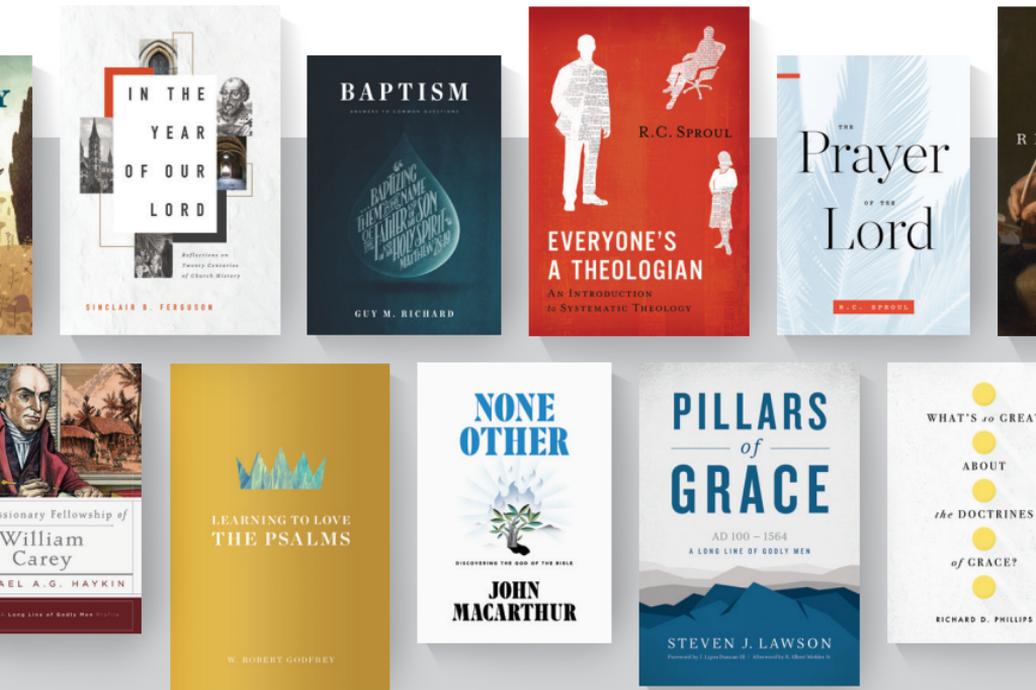
Guilt Feelings: A Subjective Response

An interesting thing occurs when I ask people, “What do you do with your guilt?” I don’t ask what the person is going to do about his or her guilt *feelings*. My question has to do with his or her guilt. However, almost everyone to whom I pose this question tends to respond concerning his or her guilt feelings. At that point, I stop the discussion to make a careful distinction between guilt and guilt feelings. While these two are closely related, they are not precisely the same thing. The basic distinction is between objectivity and subjectivity.

Let’s think about feelings for a moment. Feelings are things that personal beings experience. Rocks, to our knowledge, do not experience personal feelings. They are cold, lifeless objects. Therefore, if someone throws a stone

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Is the whole world guilty before God?

If you say “nobody’s perfect,” likely everyone will agree with you. Feelings of guilt over sin are common. A person may ignore their sense of guilt, rationalize it, or suppress it, but it is there. It points to the fact that all people are objectively guilty before God.

So, what do we do with our guilt? In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul shows how God can use these feelings to reveal our true guilt. Dr. Sproul then points to the only remedy—the forgiveness that God provides through Jesus Christ.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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