

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

A guilty conscience

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! When Henry Lawson was 30 years old he wrote a poem entitled 'The Men We Might Have Been.' It's a sad and wistful poem, where Lawson laments his failures to be all that he could have been. He is haunted by what he describes as 'the ache of remorse or weak regret.' It's an honest description of Lawson's own struggle with a guilty conscience.

Most people struggle with some form of a guilty conscience. For some, major failures cause huge amounts of guilt. Other people don't think much about their guilt, but it's there, lingering below the surface. In quiet moments of reflection they regret actions or words that damaged people, or they're disappointed at present standards of behaviour.

This morning let's look at a wonderful statement made by the apostle John, recorded in the Bible. He wrote: 'the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin' (1 John 1:7). That promise makes a huge difference when we're aware of a guilty conscience.

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Throughout history many people have desperately wished they knew how to find freedom from a guilty conscience. The Bible records these words of Job, a man who lived over 1,000 years before Christ. Job cried out to God: 'Why do you not pardon my offences and forgive my sins?' (Job 7:21) For Job there was no obvious way he could deal with his guilty conscience. It was the same problem in other cultures and religions too. In ancient Greece Socrates cried: 'O Plato, Plato! It may be that the gods can forgive sin, but, alas, I do not see how!'

That's why it's so wonderful to come to the statement from the Bible we're thinking about today. The apostle John wrote: 'the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin' (that's from 1 John 1:7). To me it's very significant that John was the one who wrote those words. We read in John's Gospel that this disciple John was the young man who stood at the foot of the cross. He observed the final suffering and death of Jesus. John watched as a soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear, and out came a sudden flow of blood and water (John 19:34-35).

As John wrote this letter we call 1 John to Christians, he thought of the power of Jesus' death to set a guilty conscience free. He was writing probably 50 to 60 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. Throughout all those years, John had seen again and again that 'the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.' He used the word 'blood' because it emphasises the violent and costly way that Jesus gave his life in sacrifice for us. As he suffered on the cross Jesus absorbed the just anger of God against our sin, he paid the horrible price for our failings. He was the only one who could do so, for he was both perfect God and perfect man. As we see in our verse today, he was called Jesus (the name that reminds us of his humanity) and he is God's Son (which reminds us he is fully divine).

There was a man who lived on the coast of Malabar in south west India, who was troubled by his guilty conscience. He enquired of many religious people and priests as to how he could deal with his sins and

failures. At last he was directed to drive iron spikes, sufficiently blunted, through his sandals, and on these spikes he was to place his naked feet and then walk a distance of 800 kilometres. He undertook the journey, but loss of blood and physical exhaustion compelled him to rest one day under the shade of a spreading tree. As he lay there, a Christian man approached and began to tell him about Jesus. The Bible verse quoted was: ‘the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.’ The injured man sprang up, tore off his sandals, and cried aloud: ‘That is what I want! That is what I want!’ He placed his trust in Jesus Christ, and for the rest of his life he was able to witness to the fact that the costly sacrifice of Christ does purify from human guilt.

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A guilty conscience! Let’s be frank enough to admit that we all struggle at times with guilt. The apostle John wrote these brilliant words to help us in the struggle: ‘the blood of Jesus, God’s Son, purifies us from all sin.’

It’s important to notice the way in which John introduces his promise. He begins the verse: ‘If we walk in the light, and he is in the light ... the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.’ John reminds us that God is holy and pure. If we are responsive to the revelation of God’s truth in the Bible, then we can experience this daily cleansing of our guilt through the sacrifice of Jesus. We cannot expect to be cleansed if we consciously tolerate sin in our conduct, or if we are trying to conceal our sin. We must be open, vulnerable before God, honest and sincere. When we are aware of sin or wrongdoing, be quick to admit it to God and ask his forgiveness. Be ready to fix up damage you have done. Then we can claim this promise that ‘the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.’

It’s wonderful to think about that word ‘purifies’. The word is in the present tense. That means the cleansing of our guilty consciences happens not only when we first trust in Jesus, but this cleansing is a continuous process that can occur every day. To say that the costly death of Jesus purifies us is to say that our sin is removed, cleansed, and forgiven. God does more than forgive us: he erases the stain of sin. It’s defiling effects no longer condemn us in the sight of God.

John Bunyan, who wrote the famous *Pilgrim’s Progress*, tells of a period in his life during which he felt bound by chains, failure and guilt. He wrote: ‘But about 10 or 11 o’clock on a certain day, as I was walking under a hedge (full of sorrow and guilt, God knows), suddenly this sentence rushed upon me, ‘*The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*’ Now I began to conceive peace in my soul, and I felt like the tempter did steal away from me, as being ashamed of what he had done. At the same time I also had my sin and the blood of Christ thus represented to me, that my sin, when compared to the blood of Christ, was not more to it, than this little clod or stone is to the vast and wide field that here I see. [Bunyan concludes] This gave me good encouragement.’ (from *Grace Abounding*, p.59)

I love the final verse of the hymn ‘And can it be’ by Charles Wesley. ‘No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine! Alive in him, my living head, and clothed with righteousness divine, bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.’

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It’s so helpful to know that when we struggle with a guilty conscience, there is a great statement from the apostle John we can trust in: ‘the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.’

But let’s be honest. Even the most sincere follower of Jesus will experience some periods of struggle with guilt. We may feel that the sacrifice of Jesus covers most of our sins, but we’re troubled by one sin that hurt people very deeply. We still regret our failure and the wounds we gave to ourselves and others. Or perhaps there are things we think we should be doing, and we’re not sure if these omissions are displeasing to God.

Or perhaps we do confess our sins to God and try to patch up the hurts we've caused, but we're not sure if God really forgives that failure.

We can take great comfort in the statement the apostle John gives. He says 'the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from **all sin**.' The promise is that if we are sincere about living in God's light and purity, then when we confess our sin we are cleansed not only from deliberate sins but from every sin, even those committed unconsciously.

There are some things I did many years ago that I deeply regret. Occasionally they haunt my memory and I feel guilty again. Sometimes when I'm dealing with my guilty conscience, I sing to myself the final verse of the song 'God of mercy, Lord of grace' by Australian Christian song writer, Rob Smith. The verse goes: 'When our hearts are crushed by guilt, and our peace is lost, drink again at Calvary's hill, see the Saviour's cross. Know your conscience purified by his precious blood; rise and stand forgiven in his love.'

Martin Luther, the great Christian reformer, recorded that in one of his periods of depression at the Wartburg castle, it seemed to him that he saw a hideous spirit inscribing the record of Luther's own sins round the walls of his room. There seemed to be no end to the list – sins of thought, sins of speech, sins of conduct, sins of omission, sins of commission, secret sins, open sins – the pitiless scribe wrote on and on with no pause. While the accuser was doing this, Luther bowed his head and prayed. When he looked up again, the writer had paused, and turning, faced him. 'You have forgotten one thing!' said Luther. 'And what is that?' asked the tormentor. Luther replied 'Take your pen once more and write across it all: 'the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin!' And, when Luther said these words, the spirit vanished and the walls were clean!

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Have you been troubled by a guilty conscience? There's a wonderful promise for us all to meditate on: 'the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.' The apostle John assures us that we can know God's peace and pardon when we place our confidence in Jesus, who died for our sin in our place. His sacrifice means we can have rest and security that all our sins and failures are dealt with.

'Father God, how we praise you that Jesus shed his precious blood for us when he died on the cross. His costly sacrifice means we can be clean in your sight. When our consciences are troubled with guilt, help us to fix our eyes on Jesus, your Son. Grant us peace and reassurance. Give us confidence in your promise that through Jesus we are purified from all our sin. Amen.'

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