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How Can I Handle Persistent Feelings of Guilt over Past Sins?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how one can handle persistent feelings of guilt over past sins that remain despite repentance and forgiveness in Christ and how to help someone overcome her doubt that God can love her.

- * How can one handle persistent feelings of guilt over past sins that remain despite repentance and forgiveness in Christ?
- * What can I do to help my partner overcome her doubt that God can love her?

Transcript

[Music] This is Amy Hall and Greg Koukl and you're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRaskPodcast. Greg. Amy.

We have some kind of emotionally difficult questions today. So hopefully you have some advice for some people who are... Thanks a lot. Sorry.

That's my forte, yeah, of course. Well, I think a lot of people... You know, I do get questions like this quite a bit, so I think a lot of people will benefit from this. So this one comes from Ann.

How can one handle persistent feelings of guilt over long past sins despite repentance and forgiveness in Christ? Well, I can just speak from my own experience at this point. I'm not going to confess sins here publicly, but there are things that have done in the past that were really deplorable. Lots of them, especially when I was a younger Christian and even before I was a Christian.

And there was repentance in those cases and God rescued me from absolute disaster in some cases, thankfully. And I am thankful for the mercies of God. But when I think back on those circumstances, I do feel... I don't know if guilt is the right word here.

Well, I certainly had culpability blame for those things and I took the guilt to the cross. And I'm fortunate in that my early years as a Christian, I had really good instruction on the grace of God. And that continues to be such a magnificent factor in my own life.

And I have quoted this passage from Psalm 130, I think. So many times, and this might be helpful for Anne. And it's 130, verse 3 and 4, I think.

But there the Psalmist says, Lord, if you should mark iniquity. In other words, in the final analysis, God is keeping track. He doesn't miss anything.

He's making a list. He's checking it twice. That's what's going on with those books in Revelation 20.

But ultimately, if you should mark iniquity. And that's just it. That's the beginning and the end.

He's keeping track of everything. The psalmist then says, oh Lord, who could stand? Oh Lord, who could stand? And so when we start feeling guilty about things, we think, well, I know my interior life and what I've done and my interior, exterior, whatever, it's shameful. And that's what I do feel sometimes about those things, the shame of them.

But other people are a whole lot better. Okay? And the psalmist is saying, those people won't stand either if God is keeping track in that way, if that's the long and short of it. But, and this is what follows, but there is forgiveness with you so that you might be praised.

But, adversative, a contrast, but by contrast, there is forgiveness that you might be, that you might be praised. So, so for me, I have to continue to go back and remind myself of the truth. Now, there may be some things in people's past that they need to rectify.

They feel guilty about something and needs to be rectified. And I am not one who would counsel if you have had secret hostility towards somebody in your heart. It's not my view that you should go and confess it to them.

That's happened with people regarding me. I didn't know they had all this hostility. Then they came and confessed, confessed and said, "Will you forgive me?" "Well, they never hurt me.

So, I didn't do wrong to me, but they confessed to me. I said, "Yeah, okay, I forgive you. And guess what? Every time I think of that person, that's what I think of." You know, words of a whisperer like Dainty morsel's goaded out in the heart of a man.

And so, I mean, it's well-intentioned, but I don't think it's wise. Some things people don't need to know. It's going to hurt them more to know it.

Okay, but there might be some other circumstances where there's a conflict that

requires reconciliation, an apology for something that's actively done to another person. You need to clear the decks. And maybe that's what is going on with Ann in the guilt that she's feeling.

I don't know. I suspect not in that case because these are things, as she said, I repented of, and then I went to God for forgiveness of. But keep in mind, we're for all in human beings.

And so, we can still feel bad for things that God has forgiven. And this is where I think it's important for us to remind ourselves of the truth regarding forgiveness as needed. I was going to say on a regular basis, but as needed.

So, as you are feeling these shameful, guilty feelings, taking them to the Lord, the verse I just cited from Psalm 130, maybe something you commit to memory. If you, oh Lord, should mark iniquities, oh Lord, who could stand? Nobody's going to make it if that's the way, but there's forgiveness. And then I go to Hebrews 10.

And there you have this magnificent theology developed about the finished work of Christ that takes away even the reminder of sins. And whether it's forgiveness of these things, there's no longer any sacrifice. It's a completed work so that we can go, and the picture there is the holy of holies, we can, with full assurance of faith, go right into the very presence of God, knowing our hearts have been cleaned from a knee of a conscience, our bodies washed with pure water for he who promises faithful.

Why do I know these words? Because I have to go back to them myself and remind myself that God has forgiven me. And then so this pattern of reminding ourselves of the truth that applies to our circumstances. And that's why I think the distinctions or the point that Anne made was I confess, repent, and resolve, however, that's important.

That means that's her side of the equation. She's done what's necessary to deal with these things. Now this is now we need to remind ourselves what God has done regarding that because our feelings of shame, guilt, are going to, it's not unusual for those to come up again.

I feel them as well. So, I mean, Anne, you take any comfort in that. And so I have to deal with that myself and go back and remind myself of my position before God and that he sees me in Christ.

There has been what I describe in the story of reality, the exchange, the marvelous exchange is what the Reformers called it. The trade where he took our sin and our punishment for it and we take our His righteousness. And so we are seeing in Christ Christ, we are clothed with Christ God sees us that way, even though we know ourselves to be different in the past and even in the present.

So I think, I mean, to sum up, this is not an unusual thing to experience. I experience it

myself and I have to remind myself of the truth of the matter and go back to the texts that speak that truth clearly. There is forgiveness that is complete as far as the East is from the West.

If your sins be as scarlet, whitest snow, etc., etc., etc. That's exactly what I was going to say, Greg, that the key is to remind ourselves of the truth. And so I want to mention some things that you can remind yourself of, Anne, as you're thinking about this.

And the first thing is the centrality of the Gospel and Christianity. And what I mean when I say that is Jesus died on the cross because we are sinners. So if you want to hide the fact that you're a sinner, you're not actually bringing glory to God.

And I'm not saying you're glorifying Him by sinning, but what I am saying is that your past sin is an opportunity to glorify God. The whole reason Jesus came was to forgive us of our sins. It's not a mystery.

It's not a hidden thing that nobody knows about that we need to hide from everybody. It's actually the whole purpose of Jesus coming. So your past is actually an opportunity to remind yourself of that.

Maybe even remind others of that. I don't know if you talk to others, other people about your past sins. But every time you do, it's an opportunity to glorify God because He has taken that away.

So maybe if you look at it, not in terms of your feelings, like you have to hide what has happened, but change that into a feeling of, I'm going to proclaim the fact that I was a sinner and you forgave me. And this is a way to glorify you. So turn that into praise of God and turn away from yourself and turn towards God.

I mean, that's what Paul says too. Turning away from what is past, I press on. Right.

So let me inch three. Right. So he's pressing on towards sanctification and he's forgetting what's behind him because he has been forgiven.

And he says there, not that I have attained it yet. He's still working forward. So the next little bit of practical advice I have for you would be from, I think Paul gives us a clue about how to deal with this issue.

Here's what he says in 1 Timothy. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy so that in me as the foremost Jesus Christ might demonstrate his perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in him for eternal life.

In other words, if he can save me, God saved me so that you would know he could save

you. Right. And so my practical advice here would be to read about people who have done this.

Now Paul's one, you could go read about Paul's life. You could meditate on what God did in his life. John Newton.

That's exactly who I was going to bring up. John Newton, who you don't get more wretched. Yeah.

And a slave trader. Oh my gosh, he was such a mess. He was a huge mess.

And I have read a few different things about his life. Well, it's not just trading slaves. It's all the debauchery that's associated with the slave trade and the vulnerability of slaves and all of that.

And he was rebelling against God too. Yeah, I'm not going to go into details, but he was a big mess. Well, he wrote an autobiographical piece.

He did. And it's called an authentic narrative. The life and spirituality of John Newton.

I think you can find it on Amazon. One of my favorite books. And what's amazing is that, and he doesn't even, I mean, I've learned more about what was going on in his life.

And I don't, he doesn't even go into that much detail there. But he was a pretty bad guy. So what amazes me when I read that, and I think about, it's like two different people because you have his letters now that are so wise and so moving.

And the person he became was so wise and so moving. And when I try and think about the two together, I cannot help but glorify God and just think, how did this person become that person? Right. And yet he was forgiven.

And that fueled his entire life. You know, amazing grace. How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

And you want to know who are wretches, go read about his life. And then that will help you to understand that God forgives sinners. And sometimes, sometimes we say those words that don't really mean much, mean much until you start looking at actual real people, start reading about their lives, that will get into your soul in a way that I think will make a bigger difference to you than just even thinking about the fact that God forgives.

It's even this magnificent life he had as a Christian pastor and hymnist. He was a pastor. And in this picture, an amazing grace of him swabbing the floor in rags in the movie, the amazing grace.

You know, it's so it's a false characterization of John Newton. I don't know why they did that. I like the movie in general, but it was that that characterization is just flat out false.

And but his his his capability as a as a spiritual communicator, all the letters he wrote. There's there's a series about Christian significant Christian people in their lives. I have one on CS Lewis.

I think Crossway publishes it, but there's one on Newton as well. Different authors handle it. And I've read that about Newton, but he is he ends his life by saying, after you see all of this magnificent decades and decades of magnificent contribution to people's lives.

And he ends his life by saying, I am a great sinner and Jesus is a great savior, you know, something to that effect. So it is, it is, he was, he never lost sight or a sense of what he was rescued from. And you're actually in a position, if you are somebody who has sinned greatly in the past and been forgiven, Jesus said those who are forgiven more love more.

Right. You're actually in a position to have experienced something that not everyone experiences and and you are in a place where you can help other people to understand God's forgiveness and you're in a position where you can know what it means for him to forgive you maybe in a better way than other people could know who not that we don't need it as desperately, but a lot of times we're not aware of how bad our sin is. If you are aware that use that as an opportunity to understand the greatness of God.

And so if you can look at it in ways that you can glorify God by having this past, I think that could help you. Now the next question is somewhat similar. This one comes from Joel.

What can I do to help my partner overcome doubt? She believes in God but doesn't know how he can love her. Easy ones today, Greg, right? Well, this is not my forte. The doubt here is not about God but about his love for her.

And the evidence of God's love is what he did to rescue for God so loved. By the way, the so loved is mean he he loves so much that I don't think that's what is being communicated there. It means he loved in this way for this is the God loved by man and his love was manifest in this way that he gave his only son.

John 3 16, I'm paraphrasing a little now, but so that whoever believes in him would not perish, would have everlasting life. God's love was manifest in an action that cost him in order to rescue us. Looking at the cross, I think, which for myself is hard to fathom the significant zone.

Whenever I talk about this with God, I say God, I'm so emotionally far removed from really understanding what you did for me. I know it in a certain sense, doctrinally and intellectually and all that, but to have this sense that God paid this price through his son for me. And I think our fallen nature is getting the way of that.

We won't know fully until the resurrection. Now we look through a glass darkly, but in any event, we still can think about that. It goes back to this other issue.

You know, what has God done for us? And in our fallen state, he has demonstrated his love. There we go. In that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

It's a verse also. I think it's Romans 5. So there are these passages that actually speak directly to the circumstance. Here's the way Joel, we have Joel.

We don't have his partner's name, what her name is, but it's like for Joel because here is the way God loved you. He gave his son for you. And he did it even before you are still in rebellion.

Even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And the way Paul explains it there in Romans 5 is he might die for a just man, but who's going to die for somebody who's not just an enemy. Yet that's exactly how God responded.

I guess that's that again meditating on the truth and reflecting on the truth. Some people dispositionally have a more difficult time accepting that. And that has to do with experiences in their lives, whatever.

And so emotionally it may not have the same impact. You can still, I think, you can still have an exercise of will in which you put your trust in Christ, even though you don't feel that God loves you enough to forgive you. You can take that mustard seed of faith and invest it in Jesus.

And he will do for you what you can't do for himself. Even trust him. I think trusting in faith is a gift in itself.

And as you step forward in an exercise of trust, then God responds. It's like a person who doesn't like flying. They're afraid they're not going to get to their destination.

There's people like that. They hate flying. They don't mind driving, which is, you know, magnitudes more dangerous, but they don't like flying.

Their trust is not expressed in their emotions. It's whether they get on the plane. And if they go and get on the plane and entrust themselves to the capability of that machine and the pilots, etc, then they're all in.

Even though emotionally they're still petrified that something's going to happen between take off and landing. So there's a difference between an act of trust and a feeling of comfort regarding the thing that you're trusting in or about. So I think that's a fair distinction.

I think there's a place for people to still trust Christ, even in the midst of their own doubts. I think of the gospels. I believe helped my unbelief.

So much of the Christian life coming comes back to us just reminding ourselves about the truth. So this has come up over and over. I think in the last couple episodes.

And Greg, one thing that one part that comes to mind specifically is Ephesians. So Ephesians 1 through 3, Paul spends a great deal of time describing the gospel, describing God, saving those who were his enemies, who were by nature, children of his wrath, who didn't deserve it, who were saved by grace. He goes to the whole thing.

And then when he gets to chapter 3, he ends with this prayer that they would know that you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ. And to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. So what we see here is first a focus on what God's done, as you described Greg.

And then you see a prayer that they would be able to grasp what that love means. And then he says that so that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. And he goes on to describe how having that fullness, then we act in ways that reflect that we're patient with others because God was patient with us, we're unified with them because God brought us together, all sorts of things.

But the idea is, I would reflect on the truth of God's love and also pray that prayer with her every day and see how God works in her heart. Now, I think there are a few different reasons why she might be feeling it. It's not clear in this question.

It could be that she has passed sin. So she doesn't believe that God can love her because of that. And that's the case we just discussed that.

It could be that she's suffering something. And I know this is where I start to question God's love emotionally when I'm suffering in some way. And if that's the case, she needs to think about suffering more carefully.

And there's certainly plenty in the Bible about that. First Peter, back to first Peter again. Always comes back to first Peter lately.

But there's certainly a lot of people who suffer. And there are a lot of people who have suffered. Johnny Eric's Intotic comes to mind.

She's written a lot of books about suffering. She was in a diving accident. She was paralyzed.

Then she had chronic pain for decades. She had cancer a couple of times. And so she has thought about this topic a whole lot.

So look up her books. Johnny Eric's Intata. You might say that.

J. O. N. I. Right. Johnny. So it could be her passing.

It could be suffering. And it could be just anxiety driven. There are some people who just maybe they ruminate on the idea that maybe God, what if God doesn't love me? What if

God doesn't love me? Now if that's the case, and actually I think in all three cases what I'm about to say could help.

But Gary Habermas wrote a book called *The Thomas Factor*. It's available online. Just look it up.

It's on his website. H A B E R M A S. He talks about the different kinds of doubt. And one of them is emotional doubt.

It's this what if what if what if kind of thing. And he gives a whole and we've talked about this on the show, but he gives this whole way of reshaping your mind so that you stop doing that. And he uses Philippians for praying, giving thanksgiving, thinking about the truth, finding, we've also talked about this, finding where in your thoughts you are telling yourself something false and replacing that with the truth and continuing to do that when these ideas come up.

So when the idea comes up that God doesn't love her, she could say, well, but look at Ephesians one through three and look at the cross and look at all these, these evidences that God actually does love me. So he gives a whole explanation of how to work on that. So I recommend that.

By the way, Hoppermas is an apologist, especially specializing in the resurrection. This antidote is for emotional doubt, not for rational doubt. If you have rational doubt, it's a different matter.

It requires a different kind of response. And this is where his apologetics are coming in. But he is identifying that doubt could have different sources.

And so they have a different R X. Thanks for pointing that out. So any way that you can be reminding yourself about God's love, I think is good. There's another book called *Gentle and Lowly*.

And I can't remember the subtitle. It's something like *The Heart of Christ for sinners and sufferers* or something like that. And then I've mentioned *Delighting in the Trinity* on the show before.

And I think that gives you a really good idea of God's love in a way. Maybe you haven't thought about it before. And then of course you have Ephesians 1 through 3. So whatever ways you can do to immerse yourself in the love of God, again, sometimes it takes more than just somebody telling you the information.

It has to sink into your soul. And sometimes that just comes with quantity, thinking about it a lot, seeing it from different angles, hearing it from different people. And hopefully there are a lot of things in the last question that will give you ideas for how to think about his love also.

Yeah, and just one other thought. Because we're fallen and we are broken and injured people, not just sinful but broken and injured too, we have different capacities in this life for a kind of receiving that love, not just from God but from other people too. And so there are disciplines one can follow and Amy's been describing them that will help.

But this doesn't mean that the difficulty is going to go away in this lifetime. It may be a struggle to continue to remind yourself of the love of God. It doesn't change the truth of the love of God or the work of the cross on our behalf.

But it does mean that our apprehension of that in a way that makes a difference for us emotionally is always going to be somewhat partial. Ironically, I was just reading the other day, I was reading the end of Martin Lloyd Jones life, biography of Martin Lloyd Jones. So he's preparing for death.

And he's citing John Owen, who was like a 16th century Puritan, a great, the death of death and the death of Christ, a magnificent contributor to incredible theology. And even John Owen was saying that our Constitution is not made in a certain sense for perfect faith. All things considered.

I wish I could get the exact quote. But it's when we approach difficult times, we're going to have doubts or challenges. He doesn't use the word doubt, but I wrote it in the margin because it seemed to me this is what he was talking about.

This is John Owen. And so it is normal in our fallen nature for this, you know, four score and ten that we have in this lifetime to be in struggle with those things. And some people are going to be more successful overcoming it.

Some are going to be less successful. It doesn't change the underlying reality of God's love and what he's done. Okay.

So don't make a perfectionist demand upon yourself in terms of dealing with this. Francis Schaeffer said all utopian demands end up being cruel because they can never be fulfilled. And sometimes we make those demands on ourselves.

We see other people that seem to be like, oh, everything's wonderful and they're always happy in the Lord and maybe they are. Maybe they're not. And that's just the way the impression they're giving because they don't want to be transparent about their own struggles.

But I'm just saying because I don't want even the RX that Amy is offering to be taken as a panacea, it's going to solve it all. It's going to help. All these things can help.

But we are still fallen people living in a fallen world. As I mentioned earlier, Lewis says, the cross comes before the crown and tomorrow is Monday. We're back in the real world, as it were, and have to live with the contingencies of a fallen world.

And this is where faith comes in. And when I use the word faith, I mean trust. Even if you feel like maybe God doesn't love you, even if that's your feeling, you need to trust that he does.

It actually reminds me, we were talking about John Newton, but he helped out. Now I can't remember his first name. It was William Cooper, C-O-W-P-E-R.

It's a William. It's pronounced Cooper. C-O-W-P-E-R.

As far as I know. But he suffered with all sorts of doubts about God's love and even his salvation. He had a lot of trouble with depression and things like that.

He was suicidal, terribly suicidal. John Newton saved him from suicide so many times. And he was a wonderful hymnist.

Yes, he wrote hymns. So that's the thing. You continue, despite whatever troubles you have emotionally, you continue on in trust and faith.

And that's all we can do. Because like you said, it's a fallen world and it's not going to be perfect and we're all going to have different issues trying to live the Christian life. Lewis was distrustful of feelings.

I remember just reading this. I saw the film "Reluctant Convert." It's now on Amazon Prime for \$5.00 you can rent it. And it's our nine minutes.

It's magnificent. I loved it. But it sent me back to some of the writings like "A Weight of Glory" that are cited in there as part of the dialogue.

And so I've just been refreshed a little bit about some of these things from Lewis. But that was another thing he mentioned. He's suspicious of them because they have their own liabilities.

And we feel like everything is right. When we feel like everything is right, we think everything is right. When we don't feel like it's right, then we don't think it's right.

And this is where the truth has to govern our thinking about what is true, regardless of what we're feeling in the moment. And on that note, Greg, I think we're done. We went over a bit, but hopefully you all found this to be helpful.

So thank you, Anne and Joel, for your questions. Send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockel for "Stand to Reason."

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