



A DOZEN
THINGS
GOD DID
WITH
YOUR SIN

*(And Three
Things He'll
Never Do)*

SAM STORMS
Foreword by Ray Ortlund

“Sam Storms has written a wonderful book on the cross of Jesus and how to live in the power of God’s forgiveness.”

Jack Deere, Associate Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Dallas Theological Seminary; author, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*

“For Christians who are being sanctified, wrestling with sin is an ongoing, never-ending struggle. This book beautifully underlines, makes bold, and highlights what God tells us he’ll do with our sins. If you’re struggling with a secret sin, battling a recurring sin, or continually regretting a past sin, this book will ease your soul and lift your head.”

Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, Senior Writer and Faith-and-Work Editor, The Gospel Coalition

“Sin and salvation are inextricably linked. Failing to understand or believe what Christ has done with our sins can cause us to question the validity of our salvation. That is not what God intended. Read this stellar book by Sam Storms to rediscover what it means to be cleansed. Start to dance with joy when you remember God trampled your sins underfoot, and draw near to him as you embrace the profound truth that he remembers your sins no more. Settle the issue of sin in your life, learn what God has done for you, and start rejoicing in your salvation! Storms will teach you how.”

Janet Parshall, Host and Executive Producer, *In the Market with Janet Parshall*

“This book, written with pastoral humility and prophetic insight, brims with gospel hope. Christ has defeated our sin once and for all—we now fight from acceptance, not toward it; from victory, not in hope of it. Every book I read by Storms both challenges and encourages me, and this one is no exception.”

J. D. Greear, Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina; author, *Just Ask!*

A Dozen Things God Did with Your Sin

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Sam Storms

Foreword by Ray Ortlund

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Foreword

God is morally serious. Our consciences know that. But what our consciences struggle to believe is that God is also mercifully generous. And without confidence that God is both morally serious and mercifully generous, our consciences will never leave us in peace.

At the cross of Christ, God displayed his morally serious way to be mercifully generous. The Bible says that God is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). God never cuts corners. He never trivializes our sin. But in God’s mercy, Jesus lived the virtuous life for us that we haven’t lived, and Jesus died the atoning death for us that we can’t die. God upheld and enforced all his standards in our substitute, Jesus.

So where do we come in? Our part is to receive Jesus with the empty hands of faith. We can defy conscience. We can dare to trust Jesus. God *wants* us to. At the cross of Jesus, God’s morally serious conscience and his mercifully generous heart combined *perfectly* to forgive us. God feels good about forgiving our sins. Which means we can feel good about being forgiven. Then, with our hearts at peace, we can finally get traction for newness of life.

But still, sometimes we find it hard to believe good news, don't we? The accusing voice within whispers, "Sure, go ahead and believe the gospel—up to a point. But what about *that* sin you committed, *that* betrayal, *that* hypocrisy—you at your worst? No, God is too disgusted with those sins! Maybe God will bless other people with peace and joy, because they haven't acted out the way you have. But you've sinned too far." Our merciless consciences would drag us back into anxiety, shame, and despair. That is why the Gallican Confession of 1559 counsels us to "*resolve to be loved in Jesus Christ.*"¹

In this new book, *A Dozen Things God Did with Your Sin (And Three Things He'll Never Do)*, our dear friend Dr. Sam Storms helps us form that wise resolve. He helps us hear the gospel speaking into our deepest failures. He helps us step into new freedom of heart.

Pastor Storms is not glib and shallow. He understands the power of what he calls "a defiled conscience." He knows—I am going to quote Sam here—how these terrifying questions can eat at every one of us:

How can I come to God and be received by him and reconciled to him when I feel so dirty and unworthy? How can I be at peace with God when my conscience incessantly stabs at me with reminders of sin and lust and greed and ambition and selfishness and idolatry? How can I be assured that he really enjoys me as his child? Is there any hope that one day I might feel the affection God has for me?

We need solid, biblical, satisfying answers to these profound questions of the heart. And that is where Sam guides us carefully

1 The French Confession of Faith, Apostles Creed (website), accessed August 10, 2021, <https://apostles-creed.org/>; emphasis added.

and thoughtfully. What awaits us in this book is a richer, fuller awareness of God's mercies that go down deeper than our very worst sin. And as we read all the way through no less than *a dozen things God mercifully did with our sin*, the layers of our disbelief can start peeling away, gospel relief can start entering in, and something of God's own joy can cheer our hearts.

Thank you, Sam, for serving desperate sinners like us with assurances from the Bible that are better than anything we could dream up on our own!

Now, as you are about to start Sam's book, I can't resist including one more thing. Let me leave you with a real-life illustration of how to fight for your own peace by the power of the gospel. Martin Luther, with his typical defiance, counseled us well:

When the devil tells us we are sinners and therefore damned, we may answer, "Because you say I am a sinner, I will be righteous and saved." Then the devil will say, "No, you will be damned." And I will reply, "No, for I fly to Christ, who has given himself for my sins. Therefore, Satan, you will not prevail against me when you try to terrify me by telling me how great my sins are and try to reduce me to heaviness, distrust, despair, hatred, contempt and blasphemy. On the contrary, when you say I am a sinner, you give me armor and weapons against yourself, so that I can cut your throat with your own sword and tread you under my feet, for Christ died for sinners. . . . It is on his shoulders, not mine, that all my sins lie. . . . So when you say I am a sinner, you do not terrify me, but you comfort me immeasurably.²

2 Martin Luther, *Galatians*, ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 40–41.

FOREWORD

Even so, may God use this new book by Pastor Sam Storms to cheer all of our hearts with thoughts of Jesus big enough for our biggest regrets.

Ray Ortlund
Renewal Ministries
Nashville

Introduction

What Can Be Done about My Dirty and Defiled Conscience?

THE ANGUISHED LOOK ON Marie's¹ face left no doubts about what was happening beneath the surface, in her heart. After several sessions meeting with me, she finally opened up. She winced every time I spoke of what the apostle Peter calls "joy inexpressible" and "full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). It got worse when I had her read Philipians 4:7 and she could barely mumble the words, "the peace that surpasses all understanding."

"Can you tell me," I asked, "why you struggle so painfully with the joy and peace that every Christian should experience? What prevents you from embracing and enjoying what Christ died to obtain? What is it that keeps you so far removed from such incredible blessings that God wants all of his children to receive?"

"My sin," came the brief but pointed reply. "My sin."

"But Marie, Jesus died in your place to suffer the penalty your sin required. And when you trusted him as Lord and Savior, you

1 The many individuals mentioned in this book are real, but their names have been changed.

were instantly and forever forgiven. All the guilt and shame of every sin you've ever committed or ever will commit is gone."

"I hear what you're saying. For heaven's sake, I read about it in my Bible almost every day. But the memory of my past sexual immorality still haunts me. And my life right now is a complete disaster. I can't seem to break free from the chains that enslave my heart. Will I ever be able to feel clean?"

Marie's struggle is all too familiar to many of you reading this book. And let's get one thing out of the way right up front. There are times when I feel exactly the same.

It's called a defiled conscience. I've been a Christian for over sixty years, but there are times when I fail to love my wife as I should or lose my temper or yield to certain temptations, and the piercing pain of condemnation strikes deeply into my soul. I hope that the frequency of my failures is decreasing the longer I know Jesus and the more I come to understand the majesty of his mercy to me. But all of us, both new believers and seasoned saints, will be confronted regularly with disquieting concerns that perhaps we've failed once too often and have pushed God to the limits of his grace.

There's no getting around the fact that this is why so many blood-bought, redeemed children of God continue to live bereft of the joy and peace that are two of the blessings Christ died to secure for us. We just can't bring ourselves to believe that God really loves us. How could he, when we have such a perpetual disdain for ourselves?

You know what your *conscience* is.² At times, it feels like our greatest enemy, and we wish it would just shut up! I'm talking about that spiritual dimension of the image of God indelibly imprinted

2 For a helpful discussion of what the New Testament means by "conscience," I highly recommend Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

on our souls by which we have the capacity to feel guilt and conviction when we do wrong and joy and comfort when we do right. It is that facet or function of our souls by which our moral deeds, be they good or evil, are subjectively registered within. Everyone has a conscience, even non-Christians who have not yet been born again by the Spirit.

And everyone knows exactly what I'm talking about when I refer to those occasions when your conscience feels dirty. I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within as you lie on your bed at night and reflect on the events of the day: the harsh words you spoke to your kids, the lie that you told your boss hoping to gain advancement, the pride you felt in your heart when someone praised your efforts.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you wake up in the morning and lustful thoughts and sinful fantasies race through your mind. "Where did that come from," you wonder aloud? "What will God think of me now?" "How can I profess to be a Christian when my heart is besieged by such vile thoughts?"

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you navigate your way through the day without giving God so much as an afterthought. It's terrifyingly easy for us to take him for granted, much like we do the earth beneath our feet and the breath we breathe and the constant blinking of our eyes. The fact that we could treat God with such indifference is profoundly unsettling.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you passed over in silence that incredible opportunity to share your faith and explain the gospel to a friend or coworker or neighbor. At the time, you convinced yourself you had a legitimate excuse to keep your mouth shut, but now all you can think

about is the possibility of their eternal damnation. You wonder silently, *Can God really love a coward like me? Can he forgive one? How can I gain the sort of courage and boldness that will enable me to speak up next time?*

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you reflect on your life as a whole and all you see is one failure after another, one shattered dream after another, one devastating relationship after another, one sin after another. The anger that rises up in your heart is scary, as you so often end up blaming God for a life gone awry. *If he truly cared for me, why has everything gone haywire?* And then you begin to wonder whether God can actually be trusted with your life. With that, your conscience feels the sting of having doubted his goodness and competency.

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within when you consider how infinitely holy and pure and righteous God is and how immeasurably unholy and impure and unrighteous you are. *If God won't settle for anything less than sinless perfection, what possible hope do I have?*

I'm talking about what you feel and sense deep within as you try to figure out what you can do to bridge the gap between you and God, what you can say or promise or make up for so that he will love you and accept you. And then that random thought races through your head, *Give it up. It's too late. God gave up on you a long time ago, so go ahead and give up on him.*

I'm talking about what happens in your heart when you finally realize that not all the good works in the world or charitable gifts to the United Way or days spent serving in the soup kitchen at your city's rescue mission will enable you to measure up. The feeling of being utterly disqualified from citizenship in the kingdom of God swallows up whatever joy or confidence you once had.

“But What If . . .”

Let me dig a little deeper into the problem that this book is designed to address. All of us at some time or another, to varying degrees, struggle with the fear and the apprehension that perhaps God has not dealt fully and finally with our sin. We read in Scripture, just like Marie has done countless times, about the “joy” of our salvation and we’ve tasted it, a bit here and a bit there. But there is often this unshakable sense of condemnation that simply won’t go away. It haunts us and taunts us and wants us to believe that there’s simply no way God could look with love and approval on us.

Some of you react this way because you are plagued by an overly sensitive conscience. Even the slightest moral misstep squeezes from your heart what little joy you worked so hard to attain. You can barely hear anyone talk about the importance of obedience in the Christian life without concluding that you have failed miserably and are on the verge of being cast out. Others of you were raised in extremely religious and legalistic homes, and the church you attended only made matters worse with its oppressive, rigid, heavy-handed approach to Christian living. The result is that I’ve heard people say things like:

What if I push God into a corner with my repeated failures as a Christian? Won’t he eventually get so fed up with me that he’ll lash out in anger and cast me aside forever?

Or,

No one can possibly be that generous and gracious and forgiving, not even God. There has to be a limit to his patience, too, doesn’t there?

Or,

I keep hearing this voice in my head that says forgiveness is for everyone else, but not me. After all, God's no idiot. He has to know the thoughts that enter my head and the words that come out of my mouth and the doubts and anger and frustration that I face every day.

Let me tell you why we think this way. Let me tell you why you aren't living in the fullness of the joy and peace and satisfaction in your relationship with God that you so desperately desire. It comes down to one thing and one thing only: *you and I have failed to believe what God himself says he has done with our sins*. What consumes us is what *we* have done by sinning. What ought to consume us is grateful meditation on what *God* has done with our sinning.

Most of us have been raised to think that anything that sounds too good to be true probably is. And nothing sounds better than freedom from that corrosive, gnawing anguish in our hearts that comes back each time we blow it. The problem is that our sin shouts so loudly that it often drowns out what feels like a barely faint promise from Scripture that God still loves us.

We're going to look at what God himself says he has done with our sin, as well as what he doesn't and never will do. But before we begin, one thing must be kept in mind. Everything I'm about to say about what God has done with your sin applies only to those who have repented and have run to the cross of Christ and have vested all their hope and faith and confidence in who Jesus Christ is and what he died and rose again from the grave to accomplish. If you do not know Christ as your Savior, I hope and pray what you read will persuade you that your only hope is in him. My aim,

therefore, is to comfort and encourage Christians and to convict and convince non-Christians.

Eternal Union and Experiential Communion

There is one crucial issue that needs to be addressed before we go any further. Some people today say that God has forgiven only your sins of the past and those in the present that you have confessed, but he has not forgiven those sins that you will commit at some time in the future. He can't forgive them, so the argument goes, until you acknowledge, confess, and ask that he do so. At the other end of the theological spectrum are those who say that since God has finally and forever forgiven you of all your sins, you never need to confess them again, far less to ask for their forgiveness. Both of these views are misguided, largely because they fail to recognize the distinction between our *eternal union* with God and our *experiential communion* with him. In other words, they are both using the word *forgiveness* to refer to different realities. Let me explain.

When I refer to our eternal union with God, I'm talking about our standing in relation to our Creator. I'm talking about what is true of every born-again, Christ-trusting child of God. If you have truly been born of the Spirit, have repented of your sins, and look to Christ alone for your salvation, the following is true of you:

- You are now and forever will be in spiritual, loving, unbreakable union with God; you are in him and he is in you (Col. 1:2, 27).
- All your sins have been forgiven. That is to say, the guilt that is incurred from your sins, past, present, and future has been forever and finally wiped clean. This is why Paul says there is “no condemnation” for those who are in Christ Jesus by faith (Rom. 8:1).

- You are now and forever will be an adopted child of God (Gal. 4:4–7). This is your identity that defines both who you are and what awaits you on the other side of the grave.
- You are now and forever will be redeemed or ransomed from the condemning power of sin and guilt (Eph. 1:7).
- You are now and forever will be justified in God’s sight, which is to say that through faith in Christ, God has imputed or reckoned to you the righteousness of Jesus and declared you to be perfectly acceptable in his sight, not because of what you have done but because of what Christ has done in living a sinless life and dying a substitutionary death for you (Rom. 3:28; 5:1).
- You are now and forever will be in spiritual union with Jesus Christ. Or, to use the words of the apostle Paul, you are by faith “in Christ” (Eph. 1:1).
- You are now and forever will be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18–19).
- You are now and forever will be delivered or saved from the wrath of God. You will never face the threat of divine wrath, as Jesus has faced it, endured it, and exhausted it in himself on the cross (Rom. 5:9).
- You are now and forever will be seated together with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2:4–7).

This is what I mean when I speak of your eternal union with God. It is your position as a saved, redeemed, forgiven, justified, adopted child of God. It is eternal in the sense that it lasts forever. Nothing can change it, undo it, or reverse it. But these are also *nonexperiential* realities. In other words, you don’t “feel” justification when it happens. You may feel an emotion of joy and gratitude

because you are justified, but justification is not something that you experience in your body or your hormones or even in your emotions or affections. Nothing that happens in this life can affect your eternal union. Your obedience doesn't add to it and your disobedience doesn't detract from it. It is perfect and complete and final. But that doesn't mean your disobedience has no effect whatsoever on your relationship with God. Be patient. I'll get to that momentarily.

Our eternal union with Christ is what Paul had in mind when he reminded us that neither tribulation nor distress, neither persecution nor famine, neither nakedness nor danger nor sword can separate us from the love of God in Christ. That union between the believer and the Lord Jesus is unbreakable and indivisible. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can break, undermine, diminish, or destroy our eternal union with God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:35–39). So, our eternal union with God is our standing, our position, our eternal and unchanging relationship with our great triune God.

But our experiential communion is something different. Note first the contrast between the words *eternal* and *experiential*. The word *experiential* refers to what happens to us and in us now, in time, as each day passes. We *experience* the blessings of the indwelling Spirit. We *feel* the freedom of forgiveness. We *enjoy* the joy of knowing that God loves us. We *experience* the intimacy of walking in close relationship with Christ day in and day out. We can *tangibly sense* the power of the Spirit operating through us when we exercise the spiritual gifts he has given us. That is the difference between what is *eternal* and what is *experiential*.

We should next consider the difference between the words *union* and *communion*. The word *union* points to what is true of us in our relationship to God because of his grace. I am *united* with Christ through faith. I will always be in union with him. Christ's life is my life. His righteousness is my righteousness. I don't feel or experience this union, but I know it to be true because God says it is true.

But the word *communion* refers to what I can feel, sense, enjoy, and experience today and every day thereafter. Whereas my union with God never changes, my communion with him does. My union with God is unchanged by my sin, but my communion most certainly suffers. Whereas God is now and always will be my Father, my experience of that truth can go up and down. One day, I might enjoy his fatherly affection, but on another day, I may have lived in such a way that this enjoyment diminishes. My sonship didn't diminish. My status as God's child is unchanged. But my capacity to enjoy and feel the glory of being a child of God can be undermined by unrepentant sin.

Many have failed to properly differentiate between these two realities. They don't fully grasp the distinction between what is eternal and what is experiential, and they don't carefully differentiate between what is true of my union with God and my communion with him. Some so emphasize our eternal union with God that they think any reference to or emphasis on the experiential dynamics of our relationship with him is contrary to grace. Or worse still, it borders on legalism. To their way of thinking, to say that I "should" obey God, and that if I don't and remain unrepentant in sin I will not "experience" the sense of joy and peace that comes with being his child, is legalism. It is a failure to celebrate grace.

No, it isn't.

Now, is it possible for people to live as though the daily experiential disobedience of the Christian can undermine or overturn his or her eternal union? Yes. But it can't. That's the glory of grace. But it is equally wrong to think that our daily experiential disobedience has no effect on our ability to enjoy God's presence and power. It most assuredly can, and does.

If you will keep clearly in your mind this difference between your eternal union with God and your experiential communion with him, you'll be able to make sense of all that follows.

The condemnation that comes with my sin and guilt has been forever removed because Christ took it upon himself. When it comes to my eternal union with God, I have been fully and finally forgiven of all my sins—past, present, and future. I need never again ask for forgiveness for sins when it comes to my salvation or my eternal union with God or my deliverance from guilt and the divine wrath it evokes. But when it comes to my sanctification or my daily experiential communion with God, I need to confess and receive forgiveness in order that I might fully enjoy and delight in and be satisfied with all that God has done for me in Christ.

This distinction explains why I can speak so confidently of what God has done with our sins and at the same time encourage Christian men and women to humbly confess their sins and seek God's forgiveness and the restoration of sweet fellowship. People who have opposed the idea that believers should continue to confess their sins and seek forgiveness do so, largely, because they are thinking of our eternal union with the Lord. When it comes to that aspect of our relationship to God, all sins have forever been set aside, forgiven, cast into the sea, and blotted out. We need only ask God once for forgiveness from our sins in order to be saved. When it comes to the establishment of that unbreakable union with

God, his forgiveness comes once and for all time. It is singular and unrepeatable. But when we are addressing the daily experiential failures that disrupt and undermine our capacity to enjoy intimacy with the Lord, confession is a daily duty, and forgiveness is always available (see 1 John 1:8–9).

In the pages that follow, you will see this issue come up again and again. My primary concern is with what God has done with your sin in order to establish that irrevocable eternal union with himself. So, when you come across statements that refer to the urgency of confessing our sins and renewing felt fellowship with the Father, be assured that I am not speaking out of both sides of my mouth. In the former case, I have in mind our standing as justified, redeemed, fully forgiven children of God. In the latter, I am talking about the experiential impact of unrepentant sin on your ability to rest in your eternal relationship with the Lord and to enjoy him on a daily basis.

Here is the bottom line. The frequent disruption of and damage done to our experiential communion with God often leads us to question the reality of our eternal union with him. And it is the rock-solid assurance that God has dealt finally and forever with the guilt of our sin that, in turn, empowers our capacity on a daily basis to enjoy what it means to be a blood-bought child of God. Well, I'm getting ahead of myself. So let's get started.

How Hebrews Helps

SOMETIMES PROFOUND TRUTHS are tucked away in obscure and neglected places. That is certainly the case with what we see in Hebrews 9:13–14. My guess is that many of you have never given much consideration to this passage, especially given its place in a book of the New Testament whose language and imagery are so seemingly out of touch with our technologically sophisticated world. And yet I am persuaded that there is immeasurably powerful and practical truth in this one text. In fact, there is a sense in which this passage is a banner over the whole of this book you are reading. There we read,

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Heb. 9:13–14)

I can think of no more pressing and urgent need than to have our consciences purified so that we might love and serve and live

for God and his glory. So, what do you do when your conscience feels dirty or when your soul feels soiled?

Here's what's remarkable. As different as our world is today from the world of the Old Testament when the tabernacle still stood and the rituals of the Mosaic Law were still in force, the most fundamental problem of the human heart is the same. The most basic need of every man and woman remains unchanged. In spite of our technological advances and the internet and our breaking of the genetic code and the existence of automobiles and deodorant and indoor plumbing, the most basic and fundamental and pressing need of your heart and of mine is no different from what it was for those Israelites who lived during Old Testament times when the tabernacle and later the temple were standing and in full operation.

And what is that problem? A dirty conscience. A defiled spirit. A stained soul. A heart that feels wicked and wayward and for all of its efforts can't seem to make its way back to God.

I find it fascinating that even after you spend an evening parked in front of the television with your family, staring at your computer, drowning your pain in alcohol, reading a book, or checking the results of movement in the stock market, you are still wrestling with one core struggle and seeking an answer to one essential question:

How can I come to God and be received by him and reconciled to him when I feel so dirty and unworthy? How can I be at peace with God when my conscience incessantly stabs at me with reminders of sin and lust and greed and ambition and selfishness and idolatry? How can I be assured that he really enjoys me as his child? Is there any hope that one day I might feel the affection God has for me?

What we find in Hebrews 9 is the only answer, the only solution to that problem. The only thing that will purify your conscience so that you can enjoy God and know that he enjoys you is “the blood of Christ” (v. 14). All that the offerings, sacrifices, and furnishings of the Old Testament temple could do was to cleanse the person outwardly so that he or she could join in with the rest of God’s people in worship and prayer. These offerings and sacrifices cleansed only their bodies, removing ceremonial defilement and qualifying them for life in the community of God’s people.

But their consciences were never fully and finally and forever cleansed of the defiling power of guilt that was the result of sin.

Virtually everything associated with the Old Testament tabernacle and its furnishings, together with the elaborate instructions that governed the offering of “the blood of goats and bulls” (v. 13) were designed to serve as a visual sermon declaring the holiness of God. The necessity for continual washings and cleansing of everyone and everything that entered the tabernacle was a constant reminder that God’s holiness is of such a nature that only the perfect and pure are acceptable to him.

The tabernacle and everything in it were also daily reminders not just of God’s holiness but of man’s sinfulness. Everything there shouted out, “Stay away! Do not draw near! If you come near to God, you will die!” That is why access to God’s presence was restricted to only one man, the high priest, on one day of the year, and then only if he brought to the altar a sacrifice of blood for both himself and the people.

But most important of all, the tabernacle and everything in it pointed to the coming of the person and work of Jesus Christ. May I remind you that when John the apostle described the incarnation of the Son of God, the entrance into human flesh and into the life

of this world of the second person of the Trinity, he wrote, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). And the word translated “dwelt” is more literally “tabernacled”! The mercy and grace and forgiveness and glory and beauty that the tabernacle embodied has now come to us fully and finally in the person of Jesus!

Set Free from the Bondage of Religion

The author of Hebrews arrives at his glorious conclusion in 9:14. Here he declares that over against the blood of bulls and goats that could provide only external ceremonial cleansing, the blood of our Savior cleanses our consciences and brings us the final and full forgiveness of sins.

And from what is our conscience purified or cleansed? “Dead works” (v. 14). He has in mind everything we have ever done thinking that it would redeem our souls; everything we’ve ever said hoping that our words would turn away God’s wrath; everything we ever gave, sacrificed, promised, turned away from thinking that it would put our conscience, heart, and mind at rest. They are “dead” because they have no power to reconcile us to God. They are “dead” because they come from hearts that are devoid of spiritual life. They are “dead” because they leave us feeling hopeless that anything could ever set us free from the condemning power of sin and guilt.

And it is only from a pure conscience, one made right and clean by the blood of Christ, that we can then serve God and love him and glorify him in the way that he originally designed when he created us.

Do you want another word in place of “dead works”? I’ll give you one: *religion*! Religion is the attempt to motivate people to

do “good works” on the basis of their *feelings* of guilt. The gospel calls people to “good works” on the basis of the *forgiveness* of guilt!

Religion says, “You’re obviously feeling guilty and dirty and defiled. So here’s what you need to do: go to work for God! Give more. Pray more. Serve more. Do more.”

The gospel says, “The problem isn’t that you *feel* guilty. The problem is that you *are* guilty! So here’s what you need to do: receive by faith the work God in Christ has already done for you!”

Are you still paralyzed by a dirty conscience? Does that feeling of moral stain on your soul leave you in despair and hopelessness? There is only one solution, only one thing that can cleanse and make you whole: the blood of Jesus Christ shed at the cross for sinners like you and me.

Charles Simeon was born in 1759 and died in 1836. He remembered well his conversion to Christ. It happened as he read about what happened on the Day of Atonement when the high priest laid his hands on the scapegoat, symbolizing the transfer of guilt from the people of Israel to the sacrificial offering. “The thought came into my mind,” said Simeon, “‘What, may I transfer all my guilt to another? Has God provided an Offering for me, that I may lay my sins on his head?’ Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my soul one moment longer. Accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus.”¹

You can do the same today and be cleansed and set free from a dirty conscience forever.

That’s what this book is all about. But it won’t come easily. That isn’t because there is some deficiency in what God has provided for us in Jesus Christ. It’s because *sin has hardwired us for*

¹ Cited by F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 194n56.

self-punishment. Our instinctive and initial response to personal failure is to demand from ourselves something that can never remove the stain of guilt. All of our promises and good intentions and self-help formulas, as well as the many ways we seek to inflict pain, be it physical or emotional, fail to secure for our souls what they so desperately need. Not even the multitude of sacrifices we make, together with all manner of self-deprivation and new rules we impose on our lives, can atone for our sins. Grace is simply too big of a pill for many to swallow.

Over the years, God has brought to my attention several young ladies who sought relief from a defiled conscience through cutting. In one case, while in my office at the church, I had to wrestle the razor blade from her hand before she could slice her wrists. In another, a student of mine at Wheaton College had to withdraw from school to seek intense counseling to find freedom from the compulsion to harm herself. More recently, I rejoiced when a precious young lady handed me a pack of box cutters, a token of the fact that she was eight years removed from the last time she had disfigured her flesh in an attempt to make things right with God.

I'm not suggesting that I have uncovered the underlying motivation in all those who struggle with the temptation to self-harm. It is a massively complex problem. But I can assure you that in many instances, there is the ungodly belief that the shed blood of Jesus on the cross wasn't enough to wash one's soul clean of the defiling presence of guilt. *Mine too is needed.* Or for others, it seems to be the only successful way to silence the silent screams of a desperate conscience that longs to be free and forgiven.

Regardless of what your greatest struggle or sin may be, our only hope is to listen closely to what the Bible says God has done with our sin, and to submit to this truth by faith in Jesus Christ.