



30<sup>th</sup> March 2025

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent



## *How can we be set free from the guilt trip and trap?*

I'd like to start by asking you a cryptic question.

*"Have you ever been on a trip ... which you later realized turned into a trap ... only to have the experience teach you an important truth?"*

I have. One mission trip to Thailand, we went into the jungle near Myanmar and found ourselves without bottled water. We were trapped, and I learned how thirsty one gets when you have to wait for water to be delivered the next day!

Even if you think, "I've never been on a trip like that," we'll soon discover that every one of us has joined a similar kind of trip, fallen into its trap, and had a teaching experience that helped us learn important truths!

What's the trip I'm talking about? It's the guilt trip!

Before I share one person's personal guilt trip, it's interesting to see flickers of this journey and its associated trap throughout our four passages.

In Joshua, we heard how the next generation of God's people were in the middle of their guilt trip, trapped in mindsets of shame and slavery from Egypt. To rescue them, they had to undergo circumcision, which the Lord said removed the reproach of Egypt (Joshua 9:5).

Then, in the Psalms, we saw the Psalmist deep in despair and shame over his sin. He confessed all his wrongdoings, confident of God's forgiveness, and praised the Lord's blessing that wiped away his guilt (Psalm 32:5b).

Jesus' warning about judging others surely struck guilt in his listeners, as we are all aware of our vulnerability to hypocrisy and judgementalism.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians will come up later, as it forms the basis of the important truth we need to learn.

Well, let's listen as a guy named Larry Harp describes his experience.

### **Point 1 | We are all susceptible to guilt trips**

*I had not really planned on taking a trip this time of year, and yet I found myself packing rather hurriedly. This trip was going to be unpleasant, and I knew in advance that no real good would come of it. I'm talking about my annual "Guilt Trip."*

*I got tickets to fly there on Wish I Had airlines. It was an extremely short flight. I got my baggage, which I could not check. I chose to carry it myself all the way. It was weighted down with a thousand memories of what might have been.*

*No one greeted me as I entered the terminal to the Regret City International Airport. I say international because people from all over the world come to this dismal town.*

*As I checked into the Last Resort Hotel, I noticed that they would be hosting the year's most important event, the Annual Pity Party.*

*I wasn't going to miss that great social occasion. Many of the town's leading citizens would be there. First, there would be the Done family, you know, Should Have, Would Have, and Could Have. Then came the I Had family. You probably know old Wish and his clan.*

*Of course, the Opportunities would be present, Missed and Lost. The biggest family would be the Yesterdays. There are far too many of them to count, but each one would have a very sad story to share.*

*Then Shattered Dreams would surely make an appearance. And It's Their Fault would regale us with stories and excuses about how things had failed in his life, and each story would be loudly applauded by Don't Blame Me and I Couldn't Help It.*

*Well, to make a long story short, I went to this depressing party knowing that there would be no real benefit in doing so. And, as usual, I became very depressed. But as I thought about all of the stories of failures brought back from the past, it occurred to me that all of this trip and subsequent "pity party" could be cancelled by ME!*

*So, I left the City of Regret immediately and left no forwarding address.*

### **Point 2 | The guilt trap many experience when they settle in Regret City**

Isn't it remarkable how many of us recognized the people and parties in Larry's story?

Just as we've all gone on a guilt trip, some people, including Christians, don't find that it's an annual trip—rather, they get trapped in Regret City and live there!

Because guilt is deeply unpleasant, we use strategies to appease or soothe our guilty feelings so they either go away completely or get dulled.

Some well-known strategies include:

- Denial: We tell ourselves, "It's not that bad. Everyone does this or that. I'm only human."

- Seeking reassurance: We find people who say, "Don't feel so bad. Others have done worse!"

The world now defines guilt as a "moral emotion" that happens when someone believes they've compromised their own standards or universal moral standards.

Notice how the world's definition makes no mention of God's moral law, holiness, or righteousness.

In contrast, God defines guilt as a gift. It stirs acknowledgment of our responsibility and the obligation to face the punishment or consequence of wrongdoing.

However, even Christians use unhealthy strategies to relieve their guilt.

- Self-righteousness: Some throw themselves into good works, thinking, "The more good I do, the more God will forget what I did."
- Self-loathing: Others believe God wants them to stay guilty to maintain humility. They feel proud of how broken they are!

Self-loathing is deceptive as it keeps us trapped. Jesus, however, taught a different mindset, one based on the freedom and righteousness that He obtained for His followers.

### **Point 3 | Are you trapped by guilt? Christ's cleansing Sacrifice can remove it once and for all**

Do you remember what the Psalmist sang in response to God's forgiveness? He called God his "hiding place" (Psalm 32:7).

However, let us not forget David's sins were *covered* under the Old Covenant—but now, through Jesus, our sins are *completely cleansed*.

The writer of Hebrews declares:

*"How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"* (Hebrews 9:15)

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that those who belong to Christ are no longer guilty before God, for they have been reconciled (2 Corinthians 5:19). When we accept Christ, we become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Are you willing to say that about yourself?

Or are you still trapped in guilt and self-condemnation?

For those who say, "I could never say that about myself," Hebrews reminds us:

*"Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, ... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."* (Hebrews 10:19-22 NKJV)

We are God's purified, forgiven, holy people! Yet many don't wear their robe of righteousness Christ obtained for them.

Apparently, however, some Christians either because they're trapped by 'self-righteousness' or 'self-loathing,' choose not to wear their robes of righteousness God gave them.

How do we know this?

Because Paul repeatedly tells us to *put on* Christ's new nature (Romans 13:14, Ephesians 4:24, Galatians 3:27). We're instructed to wear our robe of righteousness every day! (Romans 13:14, 13:11, Ephesians 4:24, 6:11-18, Galatians 3:27, Colossians 3:10)

*(Note to readers: There are over a hundred verses using the metaphor that when we accept Christ's sin-cleansing sacrifice, we not only have all our sins washed away, we are also given a robe of righteousness to wear (see Matthew 22:11, Isaiah 61:10, Psalm 132:9, Job 29:14, Revelation 6:11 and 19:8).*

## **Conclusion**

Let's remove the old rags of guilt and shame and put on our shining robe of righteousness! Then, as Hebrews instructs, we may,

*"Come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy and find grace to help us when we need it most."* (Hebrews 4:16)

*Let's pray,*

*Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of conviction that leads us to repentance and freedom in Christ. Help us to recognize when we are trapped in guilt and to fully embrace the cleansing power of Jesus' sacrifice. Teach us to put on the robe of righteousness you have given us, leaving behind the burdens of regret and shame. May we walk boldly in your grace, living as redeemed and restored children of God. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

## *Discussion and Reflection Questions:*

1. Have you ever found yourself on a "guilt trip" like the one Larry described? What emotions and thoughts tend to accompany those experiences for you?
2. In what ways do people try to cope with guilt—both in secular culture and within the church? Which of these strategies have you used in your own life?
3. How does the Bible's perspective on guilt differ from the world's definition of it? Why is it important to see guilt as a gift rather than a burden?
4. Paul teaches that believers are made righteous in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Do you find it difficult to fully embrace this truth? Why or why not?
5. What practical steps can you take to stop living in "Regret City" and instead walk boldly in the righteousness and grace God provides?