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Series: FROM BONDAGE TO FREEDOM!

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Overcoming Guilt

I have a story for you from *Time* magazine. It happened in 1970. A woman named Katherine Power, who was a student at Brandeis University in Boston, was leader of a radical group called the National Student Strike Force. She and several others planned to rob a bank for money to buy guns.

Kathy drove the getaway car for the other robbers. But something happened to upset the robbery. The bank triggered a silent alarm to inform the police. The first police officer to arrive was a man named Walter Schroeder. The robbers shot and killed the policeman. That night Kathy began twenty-three years of life in hiding. For many years, she was on the FBI's most wanted list.

In the late 1970s, this woman moved to Oregon. When she arrived, she changed her name to Alice Metzinger and settled down. She started a new life in the restaurant business, bought a house, gave birth to her son, and got married. She became involved in the community. She seemed to be a good woman who had a peaceful life.

But at the age of forty-four, Kathy Power felt depressed and tired from the guilt of her role in killing that police officer. The guilt was oppressive. Finally she gave up and decided to end her guilt. In September 1993, she went to Boston police and informed them that she had been involved in the robbery. When they asked why she was turning herself in, she told them, "The reason why is because I need to be open and honest. This is better than continuing to hide my shame and guilt."

It is true that shame and guilt are feelings from which you cannot run and cannot hide. If we want to experience freedom, we must face up to the truth with people and with God. The Apostle Paul understood this. You may know that Paul was a murderer. He had killed Christians. Then God stopped him, convicted him and changed his life. Paul became a bold preacher. Imagine the guilt Paul could have had...tremendous guilt for killing people in his past. That guilt could have destroyed him and made him feel depressed. Paul faced the truth. God forgave him and used him. He experienced peace with God.

Are you overwhelmed with guilt? Is there something from your past that bothers you and continues to burden you? Let Paul encourage you with these words from Philippians 3:12-14.

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

For those of us who are overwhelmed with guilt, there are three lessons we can learn from Paul in this passage. These three words begin with the letter "F" to help you remember these lessons.

First, seek **FORGIVENESS**. Ask God to forgive you and ask other people to forgive you, too. In verse 12, Paul shared that he knew he was not perfect. Paul knew that God had forgiven his sins. This relieved him from the burden of guilt.

One deaf woman I know shared this story with me about her experience with guilt. At work, she became inwardly frustrated with her boss. Finally, one day she became very upset with her boss, and she swore at him. Her boss fired her from her job immediately. She left and went home. Over the next two weeks, she experienced overwhelming guilt for her sin until she couldn't stand the burden of her guilt anymore!

She decided to ask God to forgive her. Then she decided to go to her former boss and ask for his forgiveness. Her boss forgave her, too. This woman told me that once she experienced forgiveness, she felt like a huge burden of guilt had been lifted off her shoulders, and she was free again.

Do you have sin from your past that needs to be forgiven? I encourage you to ask God to forgive you. Also, if you have sinned against another person, go to that person and ask for his forgiveness, too.

The second lesson from Paul is to **FORGET** the past. Paul wrote in verse 13, *"Forgetting what is behind."*

You may be wondering and asking yourself, "How can I truly forget the past? I remember everything that has happened in my life. It is hard to put it all behind me." Yes, the truth is that it is hard to do this. Why? Because of our mind. The way our brain works makes it very difficult for us to forget. Dr. Wilber Penfield, director of the Montreal Neurological Institute, said in a report to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC, "Your brain contains a permanent record of your past that is like a single, continuous strip of moving film. The film records your whole waking life from childhood on. You can relive those scenes from your past, one at a time...feeling exactly the same emotions you did during the original experience."

It is amazing how the mind works! Now, I think it is important to understand that when Paul talked about forgetting the past, he did not mean that we can erase the past

completely and not remember these things anymore. I do not believe Paul meant that. We know, for example, in our experience with computers, that we can store and save information on them. Then later, when we do not need it anymore, we can hit the delete key to get rid of the information we don't want to store in our computer any longer. Now some people assume that once they hit the delete key, the information is removed permanently and is not there anymore, since they cannot see it. But we know that is not what happens on computers. When a person hits the delete key, the information disappears from the screen so they cannot see it, but the information is really still in the computer's memory. Although it has been deleted, a computer expert can still go in and find that information. So the information is there permanently and cannot be completely removed.

It is the same with our past. We cannot remove it completely. So now think about what Paul wrote. What does it mean to forget the past? It seems like a contradiction. Really, how can we remove something that is already established in our mind and emotions? Why would he encourage us to do that?

I believe Paul is saying that we are to forget the past in the sense that we do not allow our past failures, hurts and disappointments to keep us from experiencing God's best for our lives today. For many people, their past has taken them hostage. They are being held hostage by past failures, mistakes and disappointments.

Now, I want to share one story told by Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey in the book *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*. They said that people who have a leg amputated often have a false feeling that the leg is still there when it is really not. This is called "phantom limb." Somehow their brain still believes the limb is there even after it has been cut off. They think they can still feel the leg and can move their toes. Some people will try to stand up and will fall because they have forgotten that they do not have a leg.

And for some people, after the leg is cut off, they still experience false pain. It does not matter that the leg is not there, because they think it is there. Doctors can only watch, because they cannot do anything to help alleviate false pain. Why? Because nothing is there. One such patient was a medical school administrator named Mr. Barwick, who had a serious and painful circulation problem in his leg but refused to allow the recommended amputation.

As the pain grew worse, Mr. Barwick became bitter. "I hate it! I hate it!" he would mutter about the pain in his leg. Finally, he relented and told the doctor, "I can't take it anymore. Go ahead and cut off the leg." Surgery was scheduled immediately.

Before the operation, however, Barwick asked the doctor, "What will you do with my leg after it has been removed?"

The doctor replied, "We may take a biopsy or explore it a bit, but afterward we will burn it."

Barwick then made a bizarre request. He told the doctor, "I would like you to give me

the leg in a jar with preservatives. I will put it on my shelf at home. Then, as I sit in my armchair, I will taunt that leg, saying, 'Hah! You can't hurt me anymore!' " The doctor told him, "O.K. Sure." But you know what? That leg really had the last laugh. Let me explain why.

After the surgery was finished, Barwick experienced false phantom limb pain. He was still in terrible pain, even though the leg was gone. The wound healed, but he could feel pain in his leg. He could feel the muscles cramping, and he could do nothing to control it. His intense hatred for the leg had caused the pain to lodge permanently in his mind.

To me, phantom limb pain is similar to false guilt. Many Christians become obsessed by the memory of some sin committed years ago. Some Christians cannot overcome that. They allow the guilt to cripple their ministry and lessen their commitment to God. It influences their relationship with others. They live in fear that someone will discover their past. They work overtime trying to prove to God that they are truly repentant. They erect barriers and do not allow God's grace and peace to overcome their guilt. I encourage you not to become like Mr. Barwick, taunting and shaking his fist at his leg until it consumed him. Deal with your guilt.

First John 3:19-20 says, *"This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."* He can help us rest and have peace.

The third, and final, lesson from Paul in this passage is to look **FORWARD**. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:14, *"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* What does this mean? Look ahead. Press on! Don't give up! Don't dwell on the failures and mistakes of your past. Don't let your past and the guilt of your past distract you from your goal. Don't let guilt pull you away from God.

I have a story for you. On March 6, 1987, Eamon Coughlan from Ireland, who was the world record holder at 1500 meters, was running in a qualifying heat at the World Indoor Track Championships in Indianapolis. With two-and-a-half laps left to run, he was tripped. He fell, but he got up and with great effort managed to catch the leaders. With only 20 yards left in the race, he was in third place, which was good enough to qualify for the finals.

As he neared the finish line, he decided to look over his left shoulder to make sure no one was coming. He did not see anyone so he let up. But that was a mistake! He did not notice another runner on the outside, who passed him and finished ahead of him. He did not qualify for the finals of the championship. Why? What happened? He took his eyes off of the finish line, and his great effort was wasted.

It is the same with us. I know we are tempted to give up. It is tempting to look back to our sin and guilt. But I encourage you to finish well in the Christian race. It is important to look forward and keep your eyes on the goal of being in heaven with Christ Jesus. That will help you to press on.

You do not have to carry the burden of sin and guilt. Seek forgiveness. Jesus died on a cross for you. He did this so your sins can be forgiven. He did this so He can remove your guilt. He did this so you do not have to carry the burden of guilt.

And when you have been forgiven, what should you do? Forget the past and look forward!



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