

# When You Believe in God but Are Ashamed of Your Past

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Date: 09 September 2018

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[ 0 : 00 ] If I'm in the car about half past five in the evening driving along and I turn on the radio, I always feel slightly uplifted and excited when I hear the sound of this.

What am I talking about? Does anyone listen to this? Yeah, I'm talking about Simon Mayo's Confessions. Does anybody listen in to Simon? Yeah, okay. Just in case you might not know what I'm talking about, it's a Radio 2 show during drive time. It's been running for ages.

And listeners write in, email in, phone in with their stories. And they're read out and then they discuss it in the studio as to whether or not they deserve to be forgiven.

Here's a classic. Dear Simon, this confession makes me shake every time I think of it. I hope you can forgive me.

It goes back to one festive season many years ago in my youth. For some reason we didn't get our usual Christmas presents from Uncle Eric and Auntie Sheila in Australia.

[ 1 : 18 ] But then a mysterious pot of exotic smelling herbs and spices arrived from Oz. Mum was delighted with the gift and she put them in the Christmas pudding and it tasted great.

We ate half the pudding and kept the rest in the fridge. About a week passed and we heard from Auntie Sheila.

Very sadly, Uncle Eric had died. And she asked had we received his ashes to bury in our garden in Britain. Fortunately, our father happens to be a minister.

So we were able to have a little service of interment in the garden for the remainder of the pudding. Or should that be the remainder of Uncle Eric?

We are really, really sorry. We wouldn't have eaten Uncle Eric if we'd known. Can we be forgiven? Sometimes it's a struggle to keep hold of the steering wheel when those come on.

[ 2 : 31 ] But at the risk of killing comedy by dissecting it, isn't it often the case that the reason we find something funny is because of the way in which it connects somehow with our experience.

Now, okay, that experience and a lot of the things you'll hear on that show may not exactly correspond with what you've experienced. But I think probably we can all experience, connect in some way or other, with that experience of looking back on something in our past that we wish hadn't happened.

And as I listen to those stories, although they may not chime with my experience directly, time and time again, I'm thinking, okay, that hasn't happened to me, but I can put myself in the shoes of what that person must have been feeling and probably feels as they look back on it right now.

And the reason I think I can say that confidently is every single one of us has a past. A past that contains things that when we look back at, gives us a sense of cringe.

We squirm. We feel that if only we could have rewound and start again. We just wish that hadn't happened. We feel a sense of shame. We feel a sense of regret.

[ 3 : 54 ] In our series, The Christian Atheist, seems a bizarre phrase, doesn't it? But it's basically focusing in on this idea that you can be a Christian in terms of what you say you believe, but you can actually live like an atheist by living as though God actually wasn't real at all.

And we think of today the issue of shame. Because if it is the case that God is real, then we are called to live by the reality of that God.

And the reality of that God in Jesus Christ is that we are forgiven from our past. We're set free. But the challenge that we look at today is, do we really live our lives by that conviction that those things in our past we are genuinely released from?

When I was about 10 years old, there was a series of books out that I absolutely loved. They were called Choose Your Own Adventure books. I don't know if anybody remembers them. But they were game books in which the reader assumes the central character of the story.

And the way they work, they're very cleverly written. You would read a couple of pages and then you find yourself in a scene where you're faced with a choice. And it's a multiple choice thing. And if you choose one particular course of action, then it would say turn to page 47.

[ 5 : 28 ] Another one, page 25 or whatever. That took you to another scene at which you then eventually faced another choice. And then so on and so forth. And so the story would be different depending on the consequences of the choices.

They actually produced one of these that actually was never-ending. It was impossible to bring the story to a close. But of the 30 or so titles that were made, I think each book on average, it was something like tens of thousands of possible combinations that that story could actually take.

The story could be very long. It could be very, very short depending on the choices that you made. But the thing I loved about those choose-your-own-adventure books was that you could read them so many times and you could be as radically risk-taking and as adventurous as you wanted because you knew that even if it all ended very horribly, very suddenly, you could just close the book, reopen it, and start again all over.

I may have been only about 10 years old when I was into these, but that was old enough to understand that we don't have that luxury in real life.

That we just wish that we could rewind, we could start all over again. You know, the reality is that we can't change what's happened in the past. We can't.

[ 6 : 50 ] We can change the way that we look at the present and the future. You see, the thing is, is our past, when it gets a hold of us with that sense of shame, means that the things that we have done in our past that we feel guilty about, we can be sucked into those things to the point that our past mistakes, the things that make us feel guilty and ashamed, actually become our identity.

So that we carry around that living past that we cannot let go of, we cannot break free from and walk away from. We can become slave to it.

Now, I need to say, before I go any further, that there is such a thing as positive guilt. Guilt can serve a very creative function.

If there's something that has happened and you recognise that actually it ought not to have happened and you begin to feel bad about it and that bad feeling causes you to take action and to try to put things right again, that's good.

It's a bit like physical sensitivity. You know, something's really hot, you touch it, ouch, that shouldn't have done that. You know, if you didn't have that sensitivity within the moral world, then we're done for.

[ 8 : 18 ] Guilt can serve a creative purpose. A story I shared a couple of months back, you may remember, was about a guy who couldn't sleep at night.

He wrote a letter to the Inland Revenue and enclosed a cheque for £100. And he said, in his letter, he said, I'm sending this cheque for £100 to you because I cannot sleep at night.

I omitted to declare this on my tax return. He paused and went back and added to the letter, if I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest.

Guilt has a purpose. And in fact, we wouldn't be human if we didn't have that sensitivity.

But not all guilt and shame is creative and constructive in that way. 20 years ago now, a film called Saving Private Ryan was released.

[ 9 : 27 ] Anybody familiar with that film? I've watched it once and I can't watch it again and yet I think it was one of the greatest films ever made. Set in the Second World War, it tells the story of how four brothers of the Ryan family, three of them, were killed in action, in battle.

And to save their mother's agony of losing all four sons, a group of soldiers are given instructions to go into enemy territory in France to rescue the last remaining surviving son, one Private James Ryan.

Captain John Miller, who is played by Tom Hanks, receives his instructions and he's not impressed with what he's got to do.

He feels that there are greater priorities than just saving this one lone soldier. And Miller, when he receives his instructions, says this kid had better be worth it. When all this is over, he'd better go home and cure some incurable disease or invent a longer-lasting light bulb.

It's a harrowing film. Although it so compellingly reconstructs the horrors, the harrows of being a young soldier at war. But eventually, the group of soldiers are successful in their mission. [10:55] They find and rescue and bring back to safety Private Ryan. But not before Captain Miller takes the bullet that costs him his life.

And there's this awesome scene towards the end of the film where John Miller is lying on the bridge in front of the young Private Ryan.

And as he draws his final breaths, he reaches out and pulls Ryan's head towards his and whispers into his ears, James, earn this.

Earn it. That scene comes to a close and then we fast forward some five or so decades later on and a now elderly James Ryan is standing in Arlington National Cemetery in front of thousands and thousands of war graves.

And he's standing before John Miller's grave with his family behind him. And as he looks at Miller's grave, he says to him, every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge.

[12:13] I've tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. And then with tears welling up in his eyes, he turns to his wife and almost with a sense of desperation in his voice says, tell me I've led a good life.

Tell me I've been a good man. Now, in many ways I found that film deeply inspiring, albeit very harrowing.

It reminded me of, in a way that no other film has, of the extent of the sacrifice that was made for our freedom. The horrors that people went through for our sake.

And the words that James Ryan heard, earn this, earn this, in a sense, were creative words because they inspired him to live his life the best he could.

But, as that story, that final closing scene, is presented before you, you can't help but wondering whether the words, earn this, earn this, have become something of a haunting whisper in James' ear throughout his entire life.

[13:25] You see, guilt can work like that. When it's outgrown its creative function, it just dogs us and tells us that if only you do that extra one thing, it just might outweigh the bad stuff that you've done.

If only you just try that little bit harder, if you just work a little bit more on here and there, if only you do that extra act, then you might just, it might just assuage the way you feel about your past. It's good to be inspired.

It's good to be prompted. It's good to be energised in love. But guilt and shame in the very worst and ugly sense actually is that itch that can never be scratched away.

It can never, ever be satisfied. It can haunt us. It can become our worst enemy. You see, continually looking back at our past with anguish can nurture an outlook that faces the future not with hope, not with redemption, but with despair.

And the more we feed it, the harder it gets. A few years ago, I was out on my bike one day and a girl, she looked about eight years old and very closely behind her was, I assume, was her dad, came cycling towards me at a speed that would have seriously made her a contender for the Tour de Britain.

[14:57] She was going so fast. And they absolutely shot right past and they were both laughing, this girl, I assume it was her dad.

But as they shot past, he just called out to me, he said, well, it keeps her moving. And only as they went past could I see what was taking place.

Because she was really, really going for it. He was behind her, but obviously he's a lot older, a lot bigger, but attached to his handlebars and extending by about a metre and a half and brushing against the side of this girl's leg was the biggest whopper of a stinger nettle I've ever seen.

Yep, it worked. And I would be lying through my teeth if I was to say to you that in telling this story there wasn't just one moment that I thought to myself, actually, why have I never thought of that? But they were laughing and I think it wasn't too serious, but that is the way in which our past can chase us.

[16:20] When guilt lays a hold of us, when our guilt and our shame and the list of things that we are ashamed of actually becomes our identity, where we look back and not only see the things that we've done that make us squirm, but actually they've become us.

That's a problem. And no matter how hard we try to push ourselves forward, our past generates that dynamic.

Haunted by shame, we try to move forward, but it's always there lurking, chasing us, haunting us. We try to move forward desperately with greater speed, focusing on the future, but that past just won't let us go.

Paul writes, which we heard just now, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. If we say we believe in God, but we're dogged by that sense of shame, then either we don't really believe in God, or the God that we believe in, is a very different one from the one that Paul is talking about.

[ 17 : 39 ] I say this not to rub the guilt in more, but in the hope that it might just set us free that little bit more. Because when we're hounded by that sense of earn this, earn this, because you've done that wrong in the past.

When we're chasing, we feel chased by that thing that's going to sting us. We're thinking about the wrong kind of God. The God of the New Testament says, you are a new creation, you are set free. That is the new identity. Those things that you would otherwise let define you, don't.

You're a new creation. It means listening to the voice of a dying man who does not say, earn this, earn this, but listening to the voice of a dying man on a cross who says, it is finished.

You can't change your past, but you can change your future because God has changed us. two very brief references to scripture that I want to share with you as we come to pray.

[ 19 : 01 ] The first is the words that Jesus says right at the start of his ministry, when he calls his disciples together. And at the beginning of Mark's gospel, we're told that Jesus comes on the scene and says, the time has come, the kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news.

For years I used to think that repent meant stop. It doesn't. It means go. It's a dynamic word. It means to turn around. To go back to Clive's analogy this morning with a windmill, it means to stop going with your back against God and turn and face in God.

Change direction, move, but move in the direction of God. Move in the direction that God wants you to go in. That's what repent, metanoia, means. Thing is, is that we perhaps tend to, in a sense, rightly emphasize the importance of making a decision as a moment in time for Christ.

To say, I'm going to commit my life to Jesus and I'm going to make a decision there. That's important. It's the most important decision you'll ever make. And in a sense, the church is right to emphasize that as a decision-making moment.

moment. But the danger with it is we can, in emphasizing the importance of making a decision as a single event in our lives, is that we can forget that to repent is not just a one-moment-in-time thing, it's a lifelong thing.

[ 20 : 31 ] That means that whether you become a Christian suddenly or whether it's been a gradual thing, that that meaning of moving, of traveling, of metanoia, repenting, is an ongoing thing every day of our lives.

It doesn't mean to say that we're continually looking at our guilt and shame. It means the very opposite. To repent as an ongoing thing, as a process, refers to that lifelong learning and lifelong coming to terms with Christ's forgiveness.

That's why Paul writes in Philippians that we are to work out our salvation. Yeah, coming to terms with the fact that Christ has said on the cross, it is finished.

Which means every time we're confronted with that sense of guilt or shame from the past, where we feel we're going to get stung again or we hear that word, earn this, we're actually reminded once again of the words of Christ on the cross, it is finished.

You're a new creation, it is finished. And working that out, that ongoing process of repentance is that's kind of coming to terms with it. Every time we need to be reminded, oh, really? We are forgiven.

[ 21 : 34 ] Yes, you are. We are forgiven. Yes, you are. You are forgiven. Yes, you are. It's a daily message that we need to be reminded of again and again and again. Metanoia, repentance, continually moving in God's direction.

Yes, there's a time when that might happen for the first time, but it's an ongoing reality every day of our lives. The second thing, second thing, Psalm 23, Psalm 23.

I'm going to read it in just a moment. It's probably the most famous psalm that exists in the Bible. The thing is, is if you ever look back at your life and you see something that makes you squirm,

makes you cringe over the sense that I really wish that hadn't happened, that itself is a sign that the growth and the maturity of Christ in you is taking place.

The very fact that you wish it hadn't happened is a sign that God's Holy Spirit is working in you and putting that distance between that thing that makes you ashamed and the way you feel about it now. So be encouraged by that.

But it's a lifelong process and in Psalm 23, which I'm going to read, we have a hint here of how God is caught up in that throughout our whole lives.

[ 22 : 57 ] Let me read it to you. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Now get this. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.

Now this psalm starts off with the imagery of a shepherd shepherding the sheep. But it is reckoned by some biblical scholars that a rendering of the Hebrew in which this psalm was originally written actually ends up using hunting terminology.

So we have the image that starts with a shepherd and ends with a hunter. So when we read in our English translation, surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.

[ 24 : 03 ] What the psalmist actually was getting at was the image of a hunter. Surely goodness and love will hunt me down. Now, think about that for a few moments.

Think about whatever it might be that resonates in your own experience of past that you wish hadn't happened. That sense of trying to let go of it, that sense of being haunted by words that might say, earn this, earn this, or the sense of being stung by something that's out to pursue you.

In Christ, you're being hunted down by something else. And when we stand before God at the last, we will see a God who is continually about the business of chasing us, tracking us down, hunting us down as the determined hunter, not the one who's out to get you through wanting to beat you up and to punish you, but the one who relentlessly hunts and tracks us down because he wants us to know that he loves us unconditionally.

Surely goodness and mercy will hunt you down. It's been chasing you your whole life. You may not recognise it.

You may have occasionally caught the odd glimpse of it. Eventually we'll all see it. But God calls us in this psalm to see it now.

[ 25 : 29 ] He's there and he's determined.