

How to Save a Life: A Christian Perspective

Those who most feel guilt don't need to, while those who most need to feel guilt never do.

-Magic: the Gathering, *Scourge* Set, "Guilty Conscious"

Step one, you say we need to talk/He walks, you say sit down, it's just a talk
He smiles politely back at you/You stare politely right on through
Some sort of window to your right/As he goes left, and you stay right
Between the lines of fear and blame/You begin to wonder why you came

<Refrain>

Where did I go wrong?/I lost a friend
Somewhere along in the bitterness/And I would have stayed up with you all night
Had I known how to save a life

Let him know that you know best/'Cause after all, you do know best
Try to slip past his defense/Without granting innocence
Lay down a list of what is wrong/The things you've told him all along
And pray to God he hears you/And I pray to God he hears you

<Refrain>

As he begins to raise his voice/You lower yours and grant him one last choice
Drive until you lose the road/Or break with the ones you've followed
He will do one of two things/He will admit to everything
Or he'll say he's just not the same/And you'll begin to wonder why you came

<Refrain x2>

How to save a life/How to save a life

<Refrain x2>

How to save a life/How to save a life

-written by Isaac Slade, Joe King

Guilt is an important feeling for a Christian, as it can self-motivate one to make amends for a sin, and strengthen one's resolve to avoid a given behavior again. But like every other aspect of human behavior, it can be taken to excess by an individual, and even used as a weapon by others. Sadly, I know I never once was given guidance by religious leaders on how to deal with guilt, and I'm not aware of anyone else getting such instruction either. While I recognize the critical role guilt plays in moral development, I also feel we are doing a grave disservice by not teaching Christians how to access and deal with guilty feelings. Specifically, when guilt is appropriate and when some other feeling ought to be recognized. Socialists, in their deliberate and methodical attempt to destroy Christianity, are especially effective in guiltning Christians into self-destructive attitudes towards the faith.

I chose this song as my case study because I feel it perfectly exemplifies how an educated and

motivated protagonist, who spent much time and energy on an incorrigible friend, is so tragically guilt ridden for failing to do the impossible.

The Fray is a band whose origin was a group of friends and their brothers playing at Christian events. They retained Christian elements in their songs when they decided to pursue secular venues. "How to Save a Life" was the title track of their first album, and the second song from it to be released. Interestingly, it was not originally released as a single, but its first public appearance was on the medical drama "Grey's Anatomy," which helped this song reach #3 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. It stayed on the chart for an impressive 58 weeks, tying with Santana's "Smooth" for 7th place for chart longevity. It is the 4th best selling song in digital downloading. It also did quite well on other charts and internationally.

The song was inspired by a real life experience the lead singer and co-writer Isaac Slade had, although much literary license was taken in the lyrics. While volunteering to help troubled teens, he was asked to talk to a drug-addicted seventeen-year-old who lost his family and best friend to his addiction. Slade was asked to talk to the child because the teen was a bit of a musician himself, and it was hoped this connection might make the difference where other efforts had failed. It was a desperate long shot to reach the teen, and it failed like the other approaches did. Slade has commented on the event, claiming that there is no "user manual" for this situation, all one can do is try. Nonetheless, the guilt he felt in his failure can be seen in his own words describing his experience of the event: "Here I was, a protected suburbanite, and he was just 17 and had all these problems. And no one could write a manual on how to save him." I do not want to go off topic here, but those familiar with other works of mine should be able to see socialist influence on his way of thought. It is not that I am calling Slade a socialist, but I want to show how easy it is for socialist ideology to use guilt as a weapon against true Christian teachings. Why should Slade compare his upbringing with that of the teen? Neither chose the parents they had, but they both made choices on how live their lives.

The song was not written with the idea that a suicide took place, but rather the loss of life was metaphorical of a promising future destroyed beyond repair. Still, Slade freely admits that this song is wide open for interpretation. The death could be literal as well as metaphorical. The metaphorical death could be a point of no return for self-destructive behavior, or it could be a friendship that died because of the growing self-destructive tendencies. I believe this interpretation is especially meaningful for Christian teens and young adults who try to live their faith as their peers increasingly embrace worldly goals. For children and preteens, the death could be their parents divorcing, or a close relative dying from any cause. The common denominators are a painful separation from a loved one, and the unjustified sense of guilt that followed the separation.

With that being said, let's look at all the guilt the protagonist feels in the lyrics, regardless of what death actually manifested itself. The couplet "Where did I go wrong?/I lost a friend," is what tells us that guilt is the emotion being felt. Guilt is the proper feeling associated with doing something "wrong." Because he feels guilt, everything else in the song must be taken in the context of believing that he could have somehow stopped the self-destructive behavior before the crisis point. In the case that inspired the song, the already addicted seventeen-year-old was described as becoming depressed when his best friend left him. But this is pure speculation, as the boy might still have spiraled out of control no matter how "loyal" the best friend was. It is also unfair to the best friend, as we are not told what he went through. At some point, we all need to take care of ourselves ("Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit ... glorify God in your body" 1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and this does include getting rid of toxic people. One can certainly glorify God by helping others, but if it gets to the point where one is being poisoned by the other, then it is time to let go. A humble person knows when they are in over their

head; it is the prideful person who will pursue a bad idea to their own self-destruction. "Whoever will not receive you or listen to your words—go outside that house or town and shake the dust from your feet." (Matthew 10:14) remains sound advice today. Five-year-olds should not feel guilty because their parents separated, or because they couldn't help grandma when she fell and couldn't get up. As we grow older, what we can do to help others increases, but no one can do it all. Even Jesus needed help -- we have several explicit examples from the Gospels where Jesus needed the faith of others in order to perform miracles. If Jesus could not fix all Earthly ills on His own, then we should not feel guilty about our own limitations.

The next indication of unjustified guilt is the framework of the narrative. The protagonist goes over step by step everything he did during the confrontation. Despite the author's claim that he was not trained to deal with his real life encounter, the song's protagonist is well aware of what needs to happen and the pitfalls to avoid. The protagonist, who undoubtedly made minor mistakes, neither lost control of the situation nor made significant errors. Still, the desired results failed to materialize. I think that, with the devotion our society has for science, we have been programmed to think that if we do everything right, then a predictable (and desirable) result will always happen. While this is often the case with the material world, it fails when dealing with the transcendental. And free will is transcendental. We can certainly influence another's will, but we cannot control it. The determinists have been so successful in brainwashing our culture, however, that we no longer assign blame to another for their own bad choices. Instead, we blame ourselves for not "pushing the right buttons" to control them. I'm not saying that bad parenting and bad education standards do not play a factor in the overall picture here (they certainly do). I am specifically addressing the time when one consciously refuses good and sound advice to their own detriment.

Turning our attention to the specific lyrics, we see guilt manifesting in the first verse: "Between the lines of fear and blame/you begin to wonder why you came." Of course, this is not guilt being felt at the time the event transpired; it is discouragement. But it is part of the narrative explaining why he does feel guilty after the fact. Specifically, he feels guilty (at least in part) because he did not have sufficient patience. And this is perhaps the only time in the whole song where guilt is justified at all, but we all have to acknowledge we are not perfect. This is where the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confession) helps those in apostolic churches, as we have a venue to confess our weaknesses to Jesus in the flesh ("The confessor is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant" Catechism of the Catholic Church #1466, and supported by John 20:19, 22-23) and ask for help in the future. But regardless of which brand of Christianity one belongs to, an honest assessment of the situation can help. Problem people are not easy to deal with. If they were, then they would not be problem people. Feeling frustrated should be an expected experience, especially when there are things that need to be either handled delicately or simply avoided. But this couplet leads right into the refrain, where he specifically calls out "and I would have stayed up with you all night/had I known how to save a life." He is making an after-the-fact wish to change what had happened, and perhaps even appealing to the problem person for forgiveness. After-the-fact wishes are irrational. Asking forgiveness at this point is premature, as we have no idea yet as to how the meeting will go. But as we get to the rest of the song, we can see that it is absurd to ask for forgiveness. In the end, the protagonist reached the problem person; it was the problem person who chose death over life.

The second verse is huge. "Let him know that you know best/'cause after all, you do know best." The protagonist is coming across as feeling guilty for being a "know-it-all" at the time, but now he realizes he didn't know anything at all (at least not what he needed to know). It is true that we don't have perfect knowledge of other people's problems, but there are times when problems are self-evident. These are times when one must step up before it is too late to help. In such cases, bad advice cannot be

worse than no advice at all. It is better to try and fail, because not trying at all means an automatic failure. No matter how unlikely the chance of success is for trying, some chance of success is better than no chance. The middle of the verse shows just how careful the protagonist was in dealing with the difficult situation. But such knowledge does not assuage his guilty feelings. The prayer offered at the end shows just how humbled the protagonist really was, and how desperate he was to help the troubled friend despite his own weaknesses and failures. More evidence of just how unjustified the guilty feeling are.

In the final verse, the friend begins to react with hostility while the protagonist remains in control of himself. The friend has been reached; he has no rational way left of denying the problem. As the lyrics clearly state, a crisis point is at hand. Either the friend will choose life, or he will choose death. This is the only victory one can attain in matters such as this. Everything now rests on the problem person. This is understandably a terrifying place for the protagonist, as he is fully aware of what is at stake, yet he is unable to make the decision for the friend. But the legitimate mixture of fear and hope should not be confused with guilt. For the second time, the protagonist says "and you begin to wonder why you came." The feelings of despair and uselessness can be overwhelming if the friend chooses death. But these should not equate to guilt. The proper response here is pity. And not the guilty form of pity that leads one to an infinite number of attempts to fix the unfixable. It is a pity that someone, through his own free will, has chosen death. Pity that this person was so troubled that they gave up hope for despair. Pity that they have drawn so far into themselves, that they cannot see others in a meaningful way.

Dealing with someone in trouble is never easy. They are not rational. They are dealing with terrible things. They are looking for easy ways out, and trying to avoid further pain (which, unfortunately, leads to a greater pain than if they tried to get out of their situation). Those who want to help are often walking blind in a maze, and success is more a matter of luck than skill. Don't make these problems worse by adding undeserved guilt to the situation. While we are called to help others, in the end they are responsible for their own choices.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjVQ36NhbMk>

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