

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

How God can and does forgive us

by Ern Baxter

I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

These words form part of the Apostles' Creed, Christianity's oldest statement of belief, and have been recited by countless thousands of believers down through the centuries.

Forgiveness of sins is the heart of the Christian message. Our Lord instructed that "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:47 NIV). Peter obeyed this order on the day of Pentecost, urging his audience to "repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38 NIV).

In Paul's first recorded sermon he makes forgiveness of sins the theme of the gospel, declaring that "through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you" (Acts 13:38 NIV). Much later, when being questioned by King Agrippa, Paul tells how the Lord commissioned him on the road to Damascus:

"I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:17-18 NIV).

Sin is a stubborn reality that offends God, contaminates the individual, and defiles society. There are really only two ways of dealing with this universal scourge — man's and God's! Human attempts to deal with sin range all the way from despair to denial. For the Christian,

there is a better way — "the forgiveness of sins" and all that statement implies.

The Nature of Sin

Before we look at forgiveness, however, we need to consider the nature of sin as revealed by God in the Scriptures. The essential nature of sin is first seen at the point of its entry, which is recorded in Genesis. Adam and Eve — our first parents — decided to rebel against God's sovereign government in their lives, and to assume that government themselves. They decided to do things their way. Isaiah writes, "We have turned every one to his own way" (Is. 53:6). That is the essence of sin — doing what we want as opposed to what God requires.

Sin manifests itself in many forms. Intellectually it is people formulating philosophies of life apart from God's revelation. In the area of the will it is the individual and society becoming their own god. In physical behavior it is doing what one wants, challenging God by eating forbidden fruit. We have not seen the seriousness of sin until we understand that first and foremost it is rebellion against God! Sin has been defined as lack of conformity to the law of God. Therefore, even when our sin appears to be only against another person, it is still against God in that we have violated His law governing interpersonal behavior.

The Result of Our Sin

When we consider the various words used in the Bible to define *sin*, we are faced with a devastating description of the human condition. The late William Barclay, master

and popularizer of Bible words, summarized the various words for sin: "Sin is failure; sin is perversion; sin is rebellion; sin is the state in which sinning finally leaves a man."

As a result of sin, people have to contend with guilt and pollution. When we choose to ignore the divine truth concerning sin, we then try to downplay guilt and redefine pollution. Neither of these works. Barclay writes that guilt is debt or obligation to suffer a punishment proportionate to the iniquity of the sin. Guilt is inevitable and unavoidable when we have broken God's law. Calling it by different names does not alter it. Judgment and punishment inexorably follow. So with pollution, redefinition does not change it; the stench of moral corruption is not reduced by calling it something different.

Two scriptures address God's attitude toward sin: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (Hab. 1:13 NIV). "For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee" (Ps. 86:5). On the one hand, the very nature of God requires His uncompromising hatred of wickedness: "You love righteousness and hate wickedness" (Ps. 45:7 NIV); "The wicked shall be turned into hell" (Ps. 9:17). On the other hand, His mercy has made a way for the wicked to be forgiven: "...forsake his way, and...return unto the Lord" (Is. 55:7).

This brings us to the second part of our creedal confession. If we believe the Scriptures, we have to say, "I believe in sin." That's easy because sin is so obviously

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real. Saying "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" brings us into the realm of faith. It is common for people to find it difficult to believe that God can forgive sins, especially when they have any clear comprehension of the true nature of sin. How can a God who is so holy forgive sins? He cannot do so at the expense of compromising His holiness. If He did that, He would cease to be God. And yet He does forgive sins. How is this done? The answer is a matter of revelation.

The Meaning of Forgiveness

Let us first look at the meaning of the word *forgiveness* and its synonyms, as they are used in the Bible. The most common synonym for sin is *remission*.

Barclay tells us there are three Hebrew words for forgiveness. One literally means "to hide." The picture is that sin is hidden, put out of sight. The second one literally means "to lift up" or "to lift away." Sin is a burden, and forgiveness lifts it away from a man. The third Hebrew word means "to send away." Sin begets debts; sin merits punishment; sin involves guilt.

But in forgiveness the debt and the punishment are remitted, sent away. Covering, lifting away, sending away—all three ideas express the same thing, the forgiveness of sin.²

In the New Testament the most common word for *forgiveness* is similar to the Hebrew word that means "to send away." It also means

...to set free, as cattle are set free in a field, as doves are set free to fly away, as people are set free from some captivity to go their own way. It is man's liberation from the awful liability to God in which His sin has involved him.³

How can and does God forgive sins? The Scripture links several words with forgiveness: Christ, blood, mercy, grace, repentance, baptism, human forgiveness, confession. How do we put these together? Is



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there some kind of order to the manner of God's forgiveness?

Let us start with blood. It is bluntly stated in Hebrews that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22 NIV). This has been true from the occasion of the first sin at which time God slew an animal in Eden and covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve with the animal's skin. Throughout the Old Testament the forgiveness of sins is related to divinely prescribed blood sacrifices. There certainly can be no doubt as to what Jesus meant at the inauguration of the Holy Communion meal when He said as He blessed the cup of wine, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26:28 NIV). These words are especially significant when we recall that John the Baptist had introduced Jesus as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29 NIV).

We cannot talk about blood without talking about Christ's blood. The references to forgiveness through Christ have to do with the uniqueness of His death. The first words in Paul's definition of the gospel are that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). To the Romans he writes, "Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). He also reminds the wavering Galatians that Christ "gave himself for our sins" (Gal. 1:4). Many other scriptures could

be cited.

According to the Scriptures, sin merits death: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Man cannot change that. He is powerless to do anything about that death sentence. Paul says, "When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly....God demonstrates his own love for us" (Rom. 5:6, 8 NIV). We should die for our sins, but instead "Christ died for our sins." Grace, mercy, and love combined to provide through Christ a way God could justly forgive our sins.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Is. 53:4-6 NIV).

God has laid the ground of forgiveness in the death of Christ.

The Need for Repentance

But what about the other words we mentioned: mercy, grace, repentance, baptism, human forgiveness, and confession? The ground of forgiveness has been laid, but as we read earlier in Luke 24:47, repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations. The good news of God's loving and merciful willingness to forgive must be declared everywhere with a view to people's response.

The first divine requirement for forgiveness is repentance. John the Baptist came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk. 1:4 NIV). Then, Jesus came actually forgiving sins, not only because of who He was, but also on the basis of repentance (see Mark 1:15). When Jesus sent the twelve disciples on a preaching tour, their message was "that people should repent" (Mk. 6:12 NIV).

What does it mean to repent? It means to change one's mind. The sinner left to himself does not think right about divine things. So

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God says:

Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord (Is. 55:7-8 NIV).

In response to the gospel, men must follow this command to receive pardon or forgiveness.

The Apostle Peter says that when we first come to Christ for forgiveness, we must "repent, and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). Baptism is the God-ordained way to express our initial repentance and faith. When a person repents and believes the gospel, he gladly obeys the command to be baptized (see Acts 2:41).

But after receiving initial forgiveness and becoming a member of God's redeemed family we still sin and so we need parental forgiveness. This requires dealing with the sin and confessing it to our heavenly Father with the promise that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9).

One other factor is involved in forgiveness. It is the necessity of our forgiving those who have sinned against us. Even though one may not want our forgiveness, we must have an attitude of forgiveness that stands ready to respond. This is explicit in the prayer taught by our Lord: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Mt. 6:12). After the "amen" our Lord emphasizes the statement:

"For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt. 6:14-15).

Forgiveness is the heart of the gospel and nourishes the heart of the redeemed community.

Believing in Forgiveness

Even after I know God can forgive my sins without compromising His holiness, it is still quite difficult

to receive it. I have no problem believing I am a sinner, because sin is very real and none of us is sinless. But I continue to have a problem believing a holy God will forgive my sins. It is evident that God understands this tension, because He emphasizes and reemphasizes His desire and willingness to forgive, and also has used many comforting illustrations to show what happens to my sins when forgiven. Let's look at seven of these illustrations:

1. *My sins are forgiven and covered.* King David writes, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity" (Ps. 32:1-2).

David was God's servant, but he sinned grievously. At first he kept silent about his sin, but God's hand was heavy upon him (see verse 4). Then, he says:

I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" — and you forgave the guilt of my sin (v. 5 NIV).

When he confessed his sin, God forgave it (took it away), covered it (put it out of sight), and didn't charge it (impute) to him. Paul quotes this passage in the New Testament when dealing with justification (see Romans 4:6-8). God has always dealt with sin the same way. Because of the sin-bearing death of Christ, God can freely forgive and not charge the sin to the repentant sinner because another has died for it. This is sheer blessedness! How happy the man who experiences this release! This is divine mathematics; subtract sin and add joy!

It is said that Luther, during a serious illness, seemed to see Satan coming to him with a great scroll on which were written all the sins and errors of his life. With a triumphant smile, Satan unrolled it before the saint and said, "There are your sins. There is no hope of your going to heaven."

Luther read the long list with growing consternation when suddenly it flashed upon his mind that one thing was not written there.

He said aloud, "One thing you have forgotten. *The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.*"

2. *My sins are swept away.* "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist" (Is. 44:22 NIV).

Israel was much tempted to idolatry. In Isaiah chapter 44, God brings a stinging denunciation of idols, and then reminds Israel that He alone has the right to forgive sins. And when He does, it is like the elimination of a dark threatening cloud overhead, and the disappearance of a morning mist before the rays of the rising sun.

3. *My sins are not remembered.* "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (Is. 43:25 NIV).

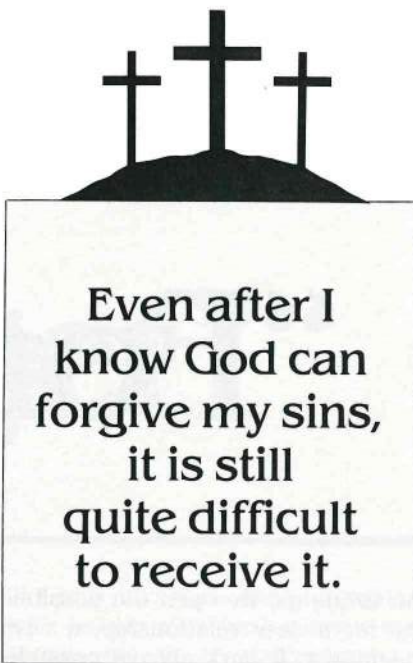
Here we have a bookkeeping reference. The transgressions recorded in God's book are erased—not only are they no longer charged to me, but there is no possibility of their reappearing in God's accounts, for He chooses to forget them.

A charming Celtic legend says that the angel of mercy was sent to a certain saint to tell him that he must start for the celestial city. The saint received the messenger and his message with gladness, and at the appointed hour, they started off together. As they passed up the shining way beyond the bounds of this world, the saint was suddenly troubled with the thought of his sins. "Mercy," he said, addressing his angelic guide, "where did you bury my sins?"

"I only remember that I buried them," he replied, "but I cannot tell where." Then, he added, "As for the Father, He has forgotten that you ever sinned."

4. *My sins are cast into the depths of the sea.* "You will...hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19 NIV).

This is a graphic picture of the disposition of forgiven sin. It is the action of the One to whom Micah had just addressed this question: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression?" (v. 18 NIV). As God drowned the Egyptians when they pursued Israel, so God has made an end of our forgiven sins. We are assured



that they are buried in the depths of the sea.

It is said of Dr. A. J. Gordon, a prominent Bostonian Baptist of the last century, that when he preached on this text, he forgot to put in "the depths." He merely said that God would cast them into the sea. When he arrived home, his little boy said, "Father, why didn't you tell the people that sins were heavy like lead, and sank out of sight in the water? They might think they were like corks, floating around on top where they might be seen."

5. *My sins cannot be found.* "The iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found" (Jer. 50:20).

There is a fascination about sin, especially the sins of others. It seems to be the favorite occupation of some to investigate them. We are not referring here to legitimate handling of wrongdoing, but to the self-righteous desire to discover another's failures. But if we go to God hunting for forgiven sins, He will tell us they have been so completely disposed of that they cannot be found.

6. *My sins are cast behind God's back.* "For thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back" (Is. 38:17).

Sin is sometimes seen as standing between God and man. Here sin is declared to be behind God's back. Furthermore, God is the one who put it there. So when sin is

forgiven, God takes responsibility for its disposal, and "behind His back" joins "the depths of the sea," the banished "mist," and other illustrations to assure us of the complete erasure of forgiven sin. There is also a sense in which God takes charge of my sin, and anyone wanting to get at it must face God.

7. *My sins are removed as far as the east is from the west.* "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12).

The psalmist did not say "as far as the north is from the south." If a person would travel north, and keep on traveling, he would eventually come to the north pole, and then he would go south until he came to the south pole. Then, he would again be going north. The distance is measurable. This is not true in going east or west. If a person would start west and continue going, he eventually would go around the world and come to the starting point and still be going west. This is immeasurable. God has moved our sins an immeasurable distance from us.

A man said to an elderly Christian woman: "Does the devil ever bother you about your past sins?"

"Yes," she replied.

"What do you do?"

"I send him to the east."

"Does he come back after that?"

"Yes, but then I send him to the west. I just keep him going between east and west."

I believe in the forgiveness of sins. □

Footnotes

¹ William Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed for Everyman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 306.

² *Ibid.* pp. 316-317.

³ *Ibid.*



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