



WHEN ARE SINS FORGIVEN?

(Source: Appendix from *Free to Choose*)

To understand *when sins are forgiven*, a number of biblical contrasts provide important insight. In addition, a number of key considerations must be addressed to gain clear perspective. These are discussed on the following pages.

Biblical Contrasts

*Old Testament
Reconciliation
versus
New Testament
Reconciliation*

Old Testament reconciliation between God and man was by means of a blood sacrifice, “making atonement.”¹ The substitutionary animal sacrifice took the person’s place and resulted in the symbolic removal of sin. “It was the symbolic expression of innocent life given for guilty life.”² Old Testament reconciliation was to remove alienation and establish harmony between God and man. Whether individual or national, blood was required. On the national Day of Atonement, one goat was sacrificed and a second goat, the scapegoat, “was released...to symbolize the total removal of sin.”³ While it was “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4), these sacrifices looked forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ.

Even though reconciliation, leading to the new birth and justification, is not elaborated on in the Old Testament as it is in the New, there are similarities. Following Nicodemus’s failure to grasp being “born again,” Jesus said, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” (John 3:10). Nicodemus showed inexcusable ignorance of the Spirit’s work in bringing about the new birth. Likewise in the Old Testament justification was not a novel concept. Going back to Genesis 15:6, Abraham was declared righteous by God through faith alone. This event was addressed by Paul in Romans 4 and by James in James 2. In both cases the ultimate sacrifice of Christ was anticipated.

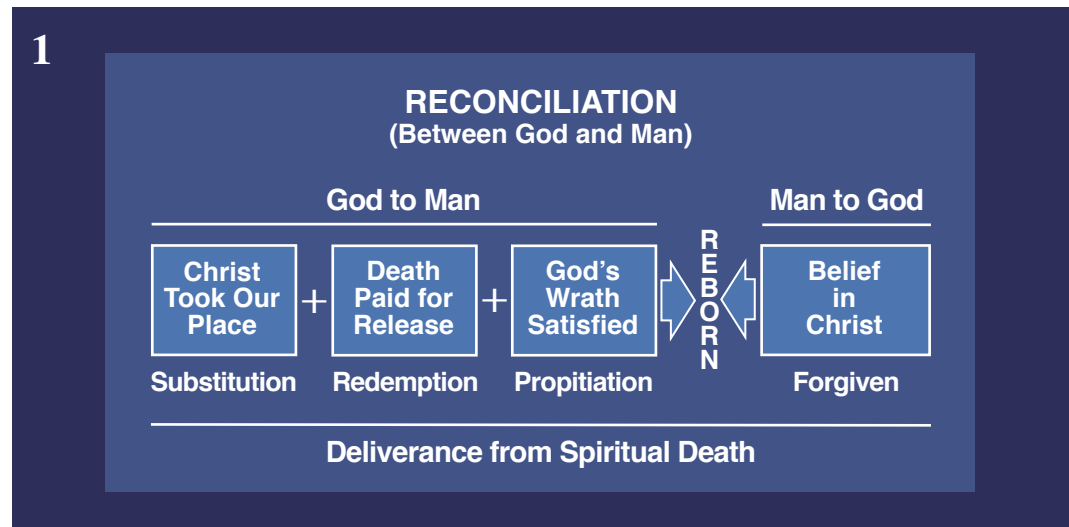
Reconciliation in the New Testament parallels that in the Old Testament. The substitutionary blood sacrifice of Christ on the cross was the realization of the Old Testament promise. The Lamb of God entered into history to “take away the sin of the world” (John 1:29) and to provide a complete “propitiation [satisfaction] for our sins...for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). All mankind is the recipient of the reconciling work of Christ. As Paul wrote, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Reconciliation for salvation should be addressed from two perspectives: (1) God’s work and (2) man’s response. By the substitutionary death of Christ He judicially paid for the sins of the entire world. God is completely satisfied with Christ’s work on the cross and is reconciled to mankind. Notice the need is not deliverance from sin, that was accomplished by Christ, but deliverance from spiritual death. On the other hand man must respond to God’s favor. Through faith in Christ alone, man is born again and made spiritually alive. At that moment God is in harmony with man and man is in harmony with God. A relationship

*Salvation
Reconciliation
versus
Sanctification
Reconciliation*

between God and man is established. The new believer is “cleared of every charge of sin and granted a perfect righteousness before the bar of God’s justice.”⁴

The chart 1, *Reconciliation*, shows the summary of God’s work (substitution, redemption, and propitiation) that resolves the separation between God and man. Likewise, belief in Christ, who made reconciliation possible, results in the new birth and harmony with God. Abraham is an illustration of this truth in the Old Testament. He responded to God through faith alone in the promises of God. The anticipated sacrificial offering of the “woman’s seed” (Gen. 3:15), who would take away the sins of the world, was the basis for both God’s reconciliation with man and the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law.



Reconciliation for sanctification also should be addressed from the same two perspectives: (1) God’s work and (2) man’s response. God’s reconciliation for sanctification is identical to reconciliation for salvation. The judicial demands incurred by man’s sin have been satisfied by complete payment on the cross by Jesus. Christ’s accomplished work need not to be repeated.

Sanctification concerns the walk of those who already have an established relationship with God. Since God does not change, the issue is whether the believer will continue this ongoing harmony through an obedient walk with God. Sustaining shared experiences with God, through intimacy in fellowship with Him, is the concern. The believer’s life can align with or depart from God’s Word. The choice belongs to the believers. If poor and ungodly choices are made, fellowship and harmony is broken. Restoration of fellowship is based on the believer acknowledging his sin to God through confession. Confession restores harmony with God and applies equally to the Old Testament (Lev. 4:27-31; 5:5-10)⁵ and the New (1 John 1:9).

He shall confess in which he has sinned. He shall also bring his guilt offering to the Lord for his sin which he has committed...So the priest shall make atonement on his behalf for his sin which he has committed, and it will be forgiven him (Lev. 5:5-6, 10).

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

We have discussed the fact that reconciliation is the judicial result of Christ’s work on the cross. And man’s response to God involves (1) establishing a relationship with Christ through the new birth and (2) sustaining fellowship with Christ, following initial salvation.

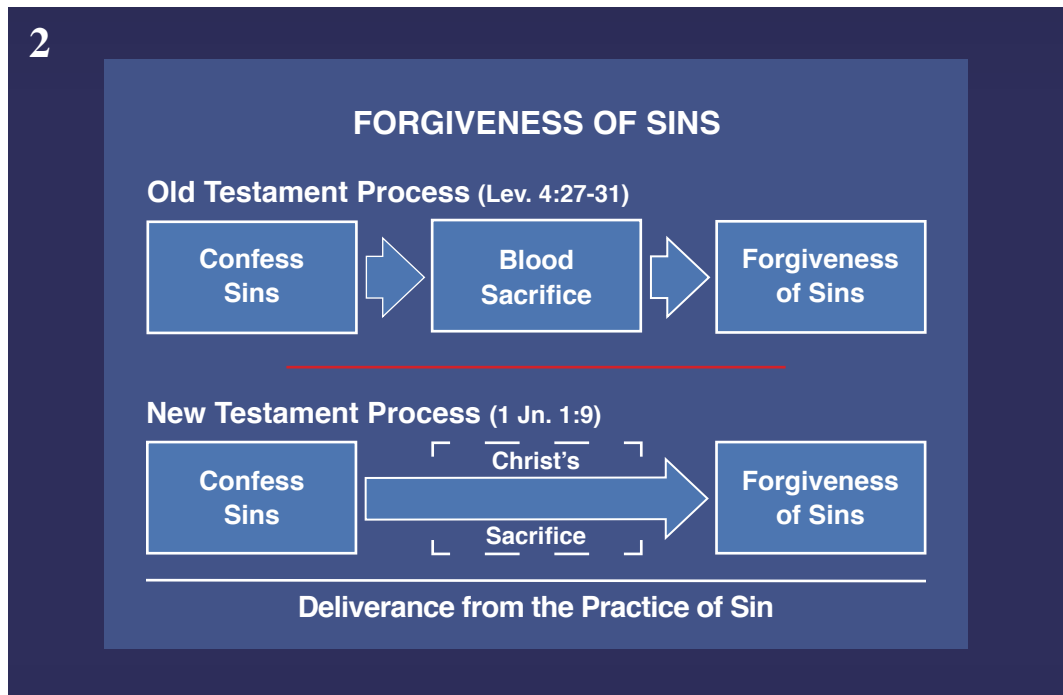
*Reconciliation
versus
Forgiveness*

Christ's payment for sin reconciles God to man. Belief in Christ alone establishes harmony between man and God at initial salvation. Sin disrupts harmony during sanctification, and confessing sin restores harmony.

Many believe all sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven when Christ paid for our sins on the cross. Payment for sin supposedly corresponds to forgiveness of sin.⁶ If sin is paid for, then, we are told, they also must be forgiven. However, not one single passage teaches this concept. It is only inferred from particular texts (e.g., Matt. 26:28; Rom. 3:25; Col. 2:13; Heb. 9:22).

This confusion exists because the *cause* of forgiveness is not correctly understood. The actual cause of forgiveness at initial salvation is not Christ's death for sin, but rather man's belief in Christ as Savior (see chart 1, *Reconciliation*, on page 185). While forgiveness cannot be offered without a blood sacrifice (Heb. 9:22) or without being reborn (Col 2:13), belief in Christ, which results in harmony with God, is the actual cause of God's forgiveness. Forgiveness for past sins is bestowed on every new believer in Christ.

While *belief in Christ* is the *cause of relationship forgiveness* (initial salvation), forgiveness for sins in the Christian walk is a different matter. *Confession of sin* is the *cause of fellowship forgiveness*. Agreeing with God (confession) regarding disobedience to the Word, the believer's sin is forgiven. The chart 2, *Forgiveness of Sins*, shows the difference in receiving forgiveness of sin in the Old Testament and then in the New. In Leviticus 4 and 5, Moses showed God's covenant people how to receive forgiveness whenever they sinned. Confessing their sin resulted in forgiveness. The offering of an animal blood sacrifice was the basis of forgiveness (Heb. 9:22). The New Testament process is identical, except for the blood sacrifice; it has already been offered up once for all. Confession, the cause, produces forgiveness, the effect. Since the ultimate sacrifice has already been made, no further blood sacrifices are now required (Heb. 10:10).



The argument for a distinction between judicial forgiveness and parental forgiveness typically is stated as follows:

A father/child relationship is established at the child's physical birth. That relationship is binding and cannot be severed. That father is always the father of that child. On the other hand their shared experiences are a different matter. If the child is disobedient to his father,

*Judicial Forgiveness
versus
Parental Forgiveness*

fellowship between the father and the child is fractured. A barrier of hostility festers and grows, resulting in a communication gap and a loss of shared experiences.

This is also true of the heavenly Father/earthly child relationship. Once a relationship is established with God the Father through faith, it is unalterable. However, fellowship with God is determined by the believer's obedience. Disobedience creates a barrier between God and the believer. That barrier must be addressed in order for fellowship to be restored and shared experiences resumed.

Some Bible teachers, however, state that the relationship established between the Father and the child is a legal issue. *Judicial forgiveness* for sins is explained by using a courtroom illustration. We are told that *all sins*—past, present, and future—are legally forgiven at initial salvation. Yet the parent/child example explains ongoing fellowship between the Father and the child. When fellowship is broken and barriers are raised, it is restored through confession and *parental forgiveness*.

This view on parental forgiveness is seen in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24). However, the courtroom example is absent from Scripture. Zane Hodges correctly notes that “forgiveness is *not* a judicial issue.”⁷ A judge’s “only concern is with the question of guilt or innocence.”⁸ God’s reconciliation to man addresses only the judicial demands of man’s sins. God is completely satisfied with the substitutionary death of Christ which provided a payment for our sins. But forgiveness of sins is a different issue. Christ’s legal payment for sin only establishes the basis of reconciling God to man.

To teach that both the courtroom scene and the parent/child relationship refers to forgiveness of sins erroneously suggests that one’s sin are forgiven twice: once judicially and again parentally. But double forgiveness presents a theological problem, a fallacy that will be addressed later.

At initial salvation, a person is justified by faith. At that moment forgiveness relates to the *past sins* of the new believer. Paul wrote in Colossians 2:13 that “He [God] made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us *all our transgressions*” (italics added). While most understand “all” to refer to the forgiveness of past, present, and future sins, this perspective forces an interpretation on the text. This position sees all sins paid for and forgiven simultaneously. However, all sins—past, present, and future—were completely *paid for* by Christ’s death on the cross, but only the sins previously committed, *past sins*, are the ones forgiven at salvation.

In the believer’s walk with Christ following salvation, he experiences progressive sanctification as he is obedient to God’s Word. Choices he makes result either in a growing or a disrupted fellowship with Christ. If the latter, sin is experienced. Then to restore fellowship, the believer must confess his sin to experience forgiveness. Forgiveness in the Christian life concerns *present sins* that obstruct fellowship. They are not forgiven until they are confessed. They were not forgiven at the cross, but they most certainly were paid for at the cross.

Unfortunately many equate the Old Testament Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 with the initial salvation experience. The *first misconception* is to superimpose Israel’s Day of Atonement (when the nation’s sins were forgiven) on the New Testament salvation experience. This error misses the reason for the Day of Atonement. As the nation exited Egypt, they left as a redeemed people. Based on faith in God’s promise, blood was placed on their doorposts, which meant the Angel of Death bypassed (“passed over”) them. By faith in God, they followed Moses out of Egypt. God then gave His covenant community the conditions in the Law for maintaining fellowship with Him. The Day of Atonement relates to fellowship with God for a nation that already possessed a relationship with Him. Initial salvation should not be confused with the Day of Atonement.

The *second misconception* is to confuse “forgiven us all our transgressions” at initial salvation (Col. 2:13) with “forgiveness of our sins” for continual fellowship with God (1 John 1:9). Many read, “On this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse

Past Forgiveness
versus
Present Forgiveness

Day of Atonement
versus
Initial Salvation

you; you shall be clean from all your sins before the Lord” (Lev. 16:30), and assume the text concerns salvation. While all past sins are forgiven at salvation based on the blood sacrifice of Christ, faith is the means by which salvation is appropriated and those past sins are forgiven. By making national confession and offering animal sacrifices that anticipated the final sacrifice of Christ (Lev. 16:21-22), national forgiveness was experienced and fellowship was restored. In Leviticus 16, the only forgiveness in view concerns the sins during the year that created a hindrance to fellowship with God. Confession of sin, based on a sacrifice, produces forgiveness, not salvation.⁹

Considerations

All sins (past, present, and future) are not forgiven at salvation

There is no double forgiveness for the same sins

Ultimate excuse for not confessing sin

Unforgiven sins do not keep you from going to heaven

At initial salvation only the new believer’s past sins are forgiven. To allow for continued fellowship with a holy God, present sins of both Old Testament saints and New Testament believers are addressed through confession, which results in forgiveness.

The idea of double forgiveness says that forgiveness of all sins—past, present, and future—is required at initial salvation. In this view when the believer sins, he must confess those sins and he is again forgiven for those same sins once more. The judicial-versus-parental forgiveness concept is typically used to support this view.

Forgiving-the-already-forgiven-sins approach is both illogical and contradictory to the biblical data. A sin is either forgiven or it is not. Once forgiven, it is forgiven. It does not need to be forgiven again. Obviously, if a believer repeats the same sin, once again that sin must be addressed through confession in order for him to be forgiven. Sins at salvation or during sanctification are forgiven as required, but not by doubling.

If it is true that all sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven at initial salvation, consider the implication on the need for confession in the Christian life. First John 1:9 tells believers that confession of sins provides forgiveness and restored fellowship with Christ. Unless the importance of that teaching is properly grasped, would the typical churchgoer possibly misunderstand the necessity for confession? He may rationalize, “I am already forgiven, so what’s the rush?” This misunderstanding supports an environment in which most believers are not ready or willing to accept the responsibility of Christian commitment or even take seriously their accountability for their Christian walk. The view that all one’s sins are already forgiven continues to have a devastating impact on the church.

If it is true that all sins are *not* forgiven at initial salvation, the question may be asked, “Can I go to heaven with unforgiven sins?” In response, we need to remember that a person does not go to heaven because his sins are forgiven, but because he has eternal life based on his faith in Christ, who paid for those sins on the cross.¹⁰ The believer is positionally reconciled to God and He to the believer.

However, one’s walk in sanctification is based on obedient choices in regard to His Word. Disobedience is sin and sin must be addressed by confession in order to be forgiven and fellowship with Christ restored. John pleaded with believers to continue to abide in Christ, thereby experiencing unbroken, intimate fellowship with Him. John wrote, “Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming” (1 John 2:28).

The picture John painted refers to a believer’s reaction to Christ at His second coming, this time as a Judge. A verdict of heaven or hell is not the issue. That has already been settled. But not walking with Christ at the moment He appears will be shameful and regretful, revealing unforgiven sin in the believer’s life. Each Christian must account for his works at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). And the outcome of that evaluation depends on whether the believer has been abiding in Christ and obedient to Him.



Endnotes

1. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:452-53.

Unfortunately the connotation of “covering over” or “pacifying” sin is usually associated with “making atonement.” However, the biblical evidence suggests otherwise.

2. *Ibid.*, 453.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Zane C. Hodges, *Harmony with God* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 2001), 105.
5. Leviticus 4:27 refers to an Israelite who because of some sin “becomes guilty.” Then Leviticus 5:5 adds, “So it shall be when he *becomes guilty* in one of these [sins], that he shall *confess* that in which he has sinned” (italics added). When a person in the covenant community “became guilty,” he was responsible to “confess” that sin.
6. Hodges, *Harmony with God*, 71.
7. *Ibid.*, 72 (italics added).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Ken Neff, *Hold Fast* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2010), 119-26, 185-93.
10. Hodges, *Harmony with God*, 71.