

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Scripture makes it plain that sin creates a breach in our relationship with our Creator. This breach needs to be repaired if, as God's children, we are to enjoy the blessings of a restored relationship with Him now, and to take advantage of His offer of everlasting life in His coming Kingdom. It has fairly been observed that every part of the Bible has something to contribute to the story of how this can be achieved.

Sin is disobedience to God's commandments, and it demonstrates an attitude of mind with no regard for God and His ways (see also Romans 14:23 and James 4:17):

"Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (1 Jno. 3:4).

When we sin, we fall short of the standards of behaviour He asks of us as His creation:

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

No wonder, then, that the first sin resulted in punishment, when Adam and Eve broke God's commandment in the Garden of Eden and were condemned to death for it. Although we are not responsible for their sin, as their descendents we have inherited the mortality they incurred as a result, and on top of this we have our own sins to worry about too:

"through one man [Adam] sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because [literally, 'upon which'] all sinned" (5:12).

With only one exception—the Lord Jesus Christ—no man or woman is without sin:

"there is no one who does not sin" (1 Kgs. 8:46).

Sin is therefore a universal problem, affecting every one of us, and requiring our urgent attention if we are not to perish for ever, unforgiven and without hope. Dealing with sin truly is a matter of life and death.

God is righteous, and as the supreme arbiter of right and wrong He is just to condemn sin. But if we are all guilty of sin, and God is to enforce his death sentence against each of us as a result, how then can any of us receive forgiveness of our sins and hope to inherit eternal life at the return of the Lord Jesus? To unravel this conundrum is to gain an insight into the very mind of God Himself, and to avail ourselves of His grace in a wonderful way.

After the appearance of sin in the world, God in His mercy initiated a marvellous rescue plan by which He could enforce His righteous condemnation of sin without compromise, yet still provide hope for all those who desire to be at one with Him. This is how we can reconcile what at first sight seem to be contradictory 'sides' of God's character, but which are in fact are merely two aspects of the God we worship. Moses puts this beautifully when he pleads with Him to forgive the nation of Israel, knowing that "The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression", yet at the same time appreciating that He "by no means clears the guilty" (Num. 14:18).

Central to God's merciful rescue plan for mankind was sacrifice. In Old Testament times, particularly under the Law of Moses, a person who recognised his sin could take an animal which had been prescribed and offer it in sacrifice to God. The animal whose blood was shed did not die *instead of* the sinner; rather, by placing his hand on the head of the flawless animal being sacrificed (for example, Lev. 4:29), the sinner identified with it, acknowledging his guilt in the sight of God and symbolically *dying with the sacrifice*. Sacrifice thus taught the sinner a number of important principles:

- Death was God's righteous punishment for sin
- There was a cost to the sinner in being reconciled with God

- The perfection of the sacrifice symbolised the perfection God asked of the offerer but which he had not shown
- Forgiveness of sin required the shedding of blood, showing that life was forfeit
- There needed to be a strong connection between the offerer and the sacrificial offering

If these principles were recognised, not only would they provide powerful motivation against sinning again, but, more immediately, God in His mercy would forgive the sin which had been committed. As Leviticus puts it, the sacrifice would “make atonement for him” (v. 31), meaning that the sin would be covered, no longer regarded by God.

If animal sacrifices were so effective, why are we not still required to offer them for sin to be forgiven? The letter to the Hebrews explains that they could never be the real answer to sin:

“the law [of Moses] . . . can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect . . . But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. *For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins*” (10:1,3,4).

Sacrifices of animals were only a temporary way of dealing with sin until the time came when God provided the ultimate solution—a solution by which sins would not be merely covered, but completely taken away and remembered no more.

The true sacrifice God has provided is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ. By his sinless life and obedient death, he showed us all that God asks of us. And just as it was possible under the Law of Moses for a repentant sinner to receive forgiveness by becoming involved in the death of the God-given sacrifice, associating himself with the perfect offering, so it is in Christ now. However, our involvement is shown not by killing an animal, but by repentance (rethinking our position and seeking a change of direction in life) and baptism. See how Paul explains this in Romans 6:

“as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” (v. 3);

“Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death” (v. 4);

“we have been united together [‘with him’] in the likeness of his death” (v. 5);

“our old man [our former way of life] was crucified with him” (v. 6);

“we died with Christ” (v. 8).

In a very real sense, therefore, Christian baptism fulfils all those principles we saw in the animal sacrifices of Old Testament times, yet it gets to the heart of the matter in a way the death of an unthinking animal never could. By acknowledging the Lord Jesus Christ as the standard God is looking for in us, and seeking to associate ourselves with his sinless life and sacrificial death, we simultaneously acknowledge the righteousness of God’s condemnation of sin and take advantage of His gracious offer of forgiveness. And the life we seek to live thereafter as a disciple of Christ is no longer our old life, but the life of Jesus himself:

“For if when we were enemies [separated from God] we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10).

The reconciliation with God we achieve in this way not only means the forgiveness of our sins now, but gives us hope of acceptance on the day of judgement to come:

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (vv. 1,2).

(All quotations from the New King James Version)

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