

How Does God Forgive Sin?

by Tim Hegg

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Introduction

In a recent newsletter sent out by a Colorado based ministry, the author came to the conclusion that there are several ways God forgives sin. The whole issue arose in the author's mind when asked "How do Jewish people think their sins are forgiven since there is no blood sacrifice without the Temple?" The response to the question went on to suggest that when Hebrews 9:22 states "without shedding of the blood there is no remission of sins," it misrepresents the meaning of Moses in Leviticus 17 which emphasizes that the "life of the flesh is in the blood." The conclusion of the article was that God forgives sins on the basis of sincere repentance apart from any sacrifice. With regard to the role of sacrifice, the article concludes: "The blood sacrifice has a unique and vitally important place but it is not the only means of atoning for sin and being forgiven."

What is the answer to the question of how God forgives sin? Are there several ways? And if so, why was Yeshua's sacrifice necessary? In fact, why were any of the sacrifices necessary?

What is Sin?

The initial question we must ask ourselves is what constitutes sin in the first place. A number of Hebrew words are used to represent the concept of "sin." חַטָּאת, *aven* emphasizes "injustice" (Ps. 66:18) or actions that are contrary to man's created purpose, and thus "worthless" (Ps. 36:3). The verb חָטָא, *chata'* and its corresponding noun חַטָּאת, *chataat* (and related nouns) mean "to miss the mark," "to act against the moral norm." עָוֹן, *avon* is usually translated "transgression" and describes actions which are contrary to what is right. While there are a number of other terms used to nuance the concept of "sin," these three words and their related forms cover the basic sense of "sin" or "transgression" in the Hebrew Bible.

The point that should be obvious to us is that in each case, "sin" is defined against a standard of holiness. "Missing the mark" or "acting against the moral norm" means there must be a standard that defines what is righteous and what is not. It is the measure of what is right that defines sin. In the Torah, that standard is God Himself: "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 19:2; 20:7,26; 21:8). Sin is failing to act in accordance with the standard of righteousness set forth by the very character of God.

This helps us understand Paul's words in Romans 3:23 when he writes, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." When Paul speaks of God's glory in relationship to man's sin, he is connecting the concept of "glory" with "holiness," just as Isaiah did. Note Isaiah 6:3— "And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is Adonai of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.'" The visible manifestation of God's holiness is the radiance of His glory, and in Isaiah's vision, the immense holiness of God is seen by the fact that His glory fills the whole earth. We may now understand what Paul means when he equates sinning with "falling short of the glory of God." To "fall short of the glory of God" is to fail to measure up to the standard of righteousness revealed in God Himself.

Man's Created Purpose

But could mankind ever measure up to the glory of God? Was that what he was created for in the first place? The answer to that question lies in the mystery of mankind being created in God's image. In some manner, mankind was created as the image bearer of God: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness . . .'" (Gen 1:26). A clue as to what is meant by this statement is

found in the notice about Adam's generations: "When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth" (Gen. 5:3). In the same manner that a son portrays the father through the likeness they share, so mankind is to portray his Creator. Mankind was created to reveal the glory of God.

Sin, however, turned this created purpose on its head. Instead of honoring the Father and showing forth His glory, mankind turned to honor himself. Believing the lie of Satan that God was actually "holding back the truth" ("has God said?"), and that there was a way to become equal with God (and perhaps even exceed Him), mankind turned to self-worship, the first kind of idolatry. Man was broken and unable to accomplish the purpose for which he had been created. But what is more, like an inferior item made by a supposed craftsman, the sin of mankind appeared to diminish the glory of God. If God had created mankind to bear His image, and if mankind instead had turned to self-worship and sin, the only conclusion was that God had failed—His handiwork turned out to be inferior. The purpose for which He had created man appeared to have failed.

Thus, mankind's sin reflected poorly upon God—it appeared to diminish His glory. But God was not to be undone. He set Himself, in accordance with His eternal purpose and sovereign power, to redeem mankind unto Himself and restore in Him the image which had been tarnished by sin. This, dear reader, is the plan of deliverance or salvation (יְשׁוּעָה, *yeshuah*).

Promised from the very beginning (Gen 3:15), the "seed of the woman" would deal a fatal blow to the head of the serpent, a fitting metaphor of the salvation which would be won by the Messiah. The interpretation of Genesis 3:15 as pertaining to Messiah is not some Christian innovation. Targum Yonatan interprets the final remedy for mankind as coming in the days of Messiah:

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between the seed of thy son, and the seed of her sons; and it shall be when the sons of the woman keep the commandments of the law, they will be prepared to smite thee upon thy head; but when they forsake the commandments of the law, thou wilt be ready to wound them in their heel. Nevertheless for them there shall be a medicine, but for thee there will be no medicine; and they shall make a remedy for the heel in the days of the King Messiah.

From the very beginning, then, the remedy for mankind's sin comes from God, not from mankind himself. He would be unable to "pull himself up by the bootstraps." His only hope would be in the "seed of the woman."

Payment for Sin

The story of God's deliverance for sinful mankind unfolds throughout the Torah and Prophets. And from the very beginning, it is clear that sin requires payment. This is so because sin is an affront to God's holiness and glory. God's justice demands payment for sin, and any lack of proper payment would reveal God to be less than just.

When the prohibition is given to Adam and Chavah regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the penalty for disobedience is clearly given: "in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die" (Gen 2:17). Death was the payment for sin. God would not allow His image in mankind to be falsely portrayed. Yet there was a way of redemption—a way for mankind to return to his noble status as the bearer of God's image. Foreshadowed by the death of the animal necessary to cloth the naked Adam and Chavah, the principle of substitution in God's plan of salvation was revealed. A life in exchange for a life—that was God's plan.

To think otherwise is to reveal a miscomprehension of God's holiness. From our perspective, sin is just a "mistake," a trip on the path of life. But this is not how the Scriptures speak of sin. "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Sin, regardless of its relative magnitude in the mind of man, is infinitely wicked when put against the stark backdrop of

God's perfect holiness. When Isaiah was afforded a clear view of the three-times holy One, he had only one response: "Wow is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, Adonai of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). When one receives the true understanding of God's holiness, one recognizes that in and of himself, there is no hope. Isaiah's first thought at seeing the Holy One was not of repentance, or sorrow. He immediately recognized that he was ruined, finished, destroyed.

The reason why Isaiah saw his situation as hopeless is because in the light of God's holiness, he saw himself as a sinner. Before understanding the sacred grandeur of the Almighty, he was whole. But it was God's holiness that made him aware of his sin, characterized as "a man of unclean lips." One's speech is the sum of one's life. As James teaches, one who is perfect in tongue is perfect throughout (James 3:2). Sin is manageable in man's estimation, but when viewed in the blinding light of God's holiness, sin is seen for what it truly is: the attempt to diminish the glory of the Creator.

The remedy for Isaiah's sin comes from outside of himself. One of the Seraphim takes a burning coal from the altar of incense with a tongs and touches it to Isaiah's lips. The metaphor is obvious: the sin of Isaiah is burned away by the coal from the Golden Altar. The altar of incense represents the priestly intercession on behalf of the people (incense is a symbol for prayer in the Scriptures, cf. Psa. 141:2; Rev. 5:8; 8:3). Ultimately, the daily burning of incense upon the altar is fulfilled in the Messiah who "always lives to make intercession" for His people (Hebrews 7:25). It is the work of intercession that remedies Isaiah's helpless condition. Here, as in all aspects of the Tabernacle and Temple, the lesson is played out again and again: payment for man's sin, required by the unflinching justice of God, is made and applied through the work of God's chosen priest.

Different Kinds of Sin

"Still," some may argue, "unintentional sin is different than intentional sin. Perhaps God forgives unintentional sin strictly on the basis of sorrow and repentance by the sinner." A study of the words "unintentional" and "intentional" when describing sin reveals something different, however. In Leviticus 6:1-7, the sins for which a person may bring a guilt offering (אָשָׁם, 'asham) include lying, theft, fraud, perjury, and debauchery. Yet in Leviticus 4, the sins of a leader or a common person for which a guilt offering may atone are called "unintentional" (בִּשְׁגָגָה, bishgagah). That is actually not a very good translation, however, for it makes it appear as though one can lie, steal, defraud, perjure oneself, and engage in all manner of debauchery without direct intent to do so! Actually, this word does not describe one's attitude or intentions in the matter, but simply the class of sins for which there existed a prescribed sacrifice. The basic meaning of the word is "mistake" (and thus the English translators' "unintentional") but it also simply means "unacceptable behavior." What is striking is that nowhere in the Torah are "intentional sins" described. Rather, the opposite of so-called "unintentional" sin is the sin "of a high hand" (בְּיַד רָמָה, b'yad ramah) as in Numbers 15:30. This describes rebellion, a sin for which there is no expiation. Thus, as long as a person persists in his rebellion, there is no means of forgiveness. Only when he turns from his rebellion and seeks atonement through the prescribed sacrifice is he forgiven. There are therefore only two classes of sins described in the Torah: bishgagah (usually translated "unintentional") for which there is expiation, and b'yad ramah, the "high hand" for which there is no expiation.

Moreover, the idea that the sin or guilt offering atoned for "unintentional sin" while the Yom Kippur offering atoned for the "sin of the high hand" simply cannot be sustained. The regular sin or guilt offering brought by the penitent sinner demonstrated his own desire for forgiveness, and confessed his dependence upon the innocent victim to affect atonement. The Yom Kippur sacrifice, however, demonstrated God's willingness to deal with sin on a final and complete basis. Occurring only once in the yearly cycle, the Yom Kippur sacrifice spoke to the complete and final atonement rendered on behalf of all those who "afflicted their souls," that is, who were repentant and were not characterized by the sin

of rebellion ("high hand"). Together, the two demonstrated both the need for the sinner to seek God's atonement, and the willingness of God to provide it. Here we see the satisfaction of God's justice by the death of the innocent sacrifice, and the mercy of God in providing a way for the sinner to be forgiven. It is in God's salvation that mercy and justice meet: "Lovingkindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps. 85:10).

The bottom line is simple: sin, by its very definition, is an affront to God because it appears to diminish His glory. Sin renders mankind, God's creation, incapable of fulfilling the purpose for which he was created. God's justice therefore demands payment. If God were to forgive sin without also requiring payment for sin, He would prove Himself to be unjust. Justice is not satisfied until damages for transgressions have been repaid.

That forgiveness is based upon redemption is clear from Scripture. God offers forgiveness only to those He has already redeemed. There was no forgiveness extended to the Egyptians, Philistines, Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, or Persians. Only those who were constituted as God's covenant people were in a place to receive God's forgiveness. This is why Paul is concerned that the Gentiles realize they have been "brought near" to the commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:12-14). Having been redeemed through payment of the required price, those who constitute God's family have forgiveness extended to them. God is able to forgive them because His justice has been satisfied in the price of their redemption. He remains righteous even though He declares the sinner righteous: He is "just and the justifier" of those who believe in Yeshua (Rom. 3:26).

Someone might point to Nineveh as described in the book of Jonah. It appears as though Nineveh repents, and that as a result, they are forgiven and the judgment of God is averted. "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). Nowhere, however, does it say that God forgave them, He simply withheld the calamity or destruction that their evil deeds deserved. God can do that! If He were to always dispense His judgment whenever evil is committed, who would remain? Indeed, it is the kindness of God that leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4). History tells us, however, that Nineveh, and the Assyrian nation which she represented, did not experience genuine repentance. Not more than two generations later, God would bring upon Assyria the destruction that their evil deeds demanded (cf. Nahum 2:4-14). In fact, the primary message of the book of Jonah is not the repentance of the Ninevites but the sovereignty of God Who is able to accomplish His purposes in spite of a disobedient prophet.

Does God Count a Sinner's Repentance as Payment for Sin?

It is the teaching of modern Judaisms that God accepts personal repentance as sufficient means for the forgiveness of sins before the bar of Divine justice. A text which is often used to substantiate this claim is Ezekiel 18:

Ezek. 18:21 "But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 22 "All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. 23 "Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord GOD, "rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?"

Taken out of context, it appears as though a person gains his own "salvation" by keeping the *mitzvot* and not lapsing into unrighteousness. And if he does lapse into living a life of iniquity, when he repents and lives a life of righteousness, he will save himself from God's punishments. But the key to the whole chapter is found in the conclusion:

Ezek. 18:30 "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct," declares the Lord

GOD. "Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. 31 "Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."

The conclusion makes it clear that one's conduct is the fruit which demonstrates the character of the heart. Those who live righteously and repent of their transgressions, have proven that they have a genuine heart of trust and faithfulness in God. Those who live unrighteously have likewise proven themselves to be false and not to be genuine members of the covenant God made with His people. *Actions are the proof of one's covenant status, not the means of gaining covenant status.* And the message of Ezekiel which follows chapter 18 is that Israel, left to herself, cannot make for herself a new heart nor gain a new spirit, something vitally necessary for living righteously. In fact, it is the prophetic promise of Ezekiel that God Himself will cleanse Israel, giving her a new heart and placing His Spirit within her:

Ezek. 36:22 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. 23 "I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD," declares the Lord GOD, "when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. 24 "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. 25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

The result of this divine action is also stated by the prophet:

Ezek 36:31 "Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations. 32 "I am not doing this for your sake," declares the Lord GOD, "let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel!"

Ultimately, the sovereign work of the Almighty in cleansing the House of Israel and giving her a new heart and a new spirit is that Israel repents and lives faithfully to God within His covenant statutes and ordinances. The final result is given in the last clause of the passage: "Then they will know that I am the LORD."

Ezekiel's message is not one of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." He did not preach a message of earning one's forgiveness through one's own righteous deeds. He rather preached a message of genuine repentance that seeks the mercy of God and falls before Him, accepting His way of salvation—a salvation bought with the price of redemption, and one that results in a new heart, something only the sovereign Creator can do.

What is Repentance?

The reason that repentance is seen as the path of forgiveness in the Scriptures is because repentance is the mark of those who have been redeemed. Based upon the Hebrew word שׁוּב, *shuv*, "to return," repentance presumes redemption. When one "returns" it means he comes back to where he belongs. Only those who are already God's redeemed can "return" to the place of redemption, that is, to the place of fellowship and communion which redemption afforded. Only those who are already His may "return" to Him. One cannot "return" if one has never been there. So throughout the Scriptures, repentance is the mark of those who are God's chosen people. Illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal,

the wayward son returns because he is a son, not in order to gain the status of a son. The father-son relationship is restored, not created.

Thus, all who initially repent of their sins before their Creator, and who continue to repent of their transgressions, are those whom God has sovereignly chosen to be His. They "return" to Him because they belong to Him. They have been redeemed by payment of the price necessary for their sins to be forgiven. God will not lose what He has purchased. He therefore grants repentance to all who are His (Acts 5:31; 11:18; Rom 2:4; 2Tim 2:25): repentance is God's gift to His own, not something the individual musters up himself.

Why All the Sacrifices?

The idea that personal sorrow for sin could constitute a sufficient basis for God to forgive sinners neglects a very important issue in God's revelation of His way of salvation: sacrifice. Nothing characterizes the service in the Tabernacle and Temple more than sacrifices. The Torah is replete with the various regulations, procedures, and variations of the sacrifices. Indeed, during the days of the First and Second Temples, the priests were continually busy with the whole matter of sacrifices. And in all of our prayer services, whether daily, Shabbat, or Festivals, we pray for the soon return of the Temple and the fire offerings of Israel.

Why? Why should we hope for the return of the sacrifices? But even more to the point is the historical reality of the Messiah's own sacrifice. If there were a way for God to forgive sin apart from sacrifice, then the Messiah died needlessly. But of course, there is no other way. In the Temple, the sacrifice was not acceptable until the blood had been poured upon the altar. Ultimately, as seen in the Yom Kippur ritual, the sacrifice was not acceptable until the blood had both been dashed upon the altar, and also applied to the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. This was the point of the author as He wrote to the Hebrews. When he wrote that "without the shedding of the blood there is no remission of sins" (9:22), he is referring to the pouring of the blood on the altar. In Leviticus 4:7, the priest "pours out" the blood on the altar. The Lxx uses the same root word for "pour out" as the author to the Hebrews used (translated "shedding"). We should understand his words thusly: "without the pouring of blood there is no remission of sins." Indeed, throughout the Leviticus legislation, the pouring of the blood is an integral aspect of the sacrificial procedure.

This idea, that an innocent substitute is needed for atonement, is also recognized by the Sages. In rabbinic literature, it was understood that Isaac died on Mt. Moriah. What is more, it was taught by the Sages that his ashes atone for the sins of Israel:

When Israel offer up the daily sacrifices on the altar, and read this verse, viz. 'Zafonah before the Lord' (Lev 1:11, a play on the word "northward") the Holy One, blessed be He, remembers the binding of Isaac. (Mid. Rab. *Leviticus* 2.11)

"On this day" (i.e., Yom Kippur, Lev 16:30) on the mountain of the Lord, Isaac's ashes shall be seen, heaped up and standing for atonement. (*Rashi*, on Genesis 22:14).

The Sages also recognized that there would be a suffering Messiah, and that by His suffering the sins of Israel would be atoned for:

The Rabbis said: His name (Messiah's name) is 'the leper scholar,' as it is written, Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God and afflicted" (b. *Sanhedrin* 98b).

Why did the Sages see the need for someone else to atone for Israel's sins if they believed individual repentance was enough? No doubt they recognized in the Temple service and in the sacrifices

that characterized that service, that more was needed than individual repentance, and that this "more" was bound up with the vicarious atonement made by an innocent victim on behalf of the repentant sinner.

What About the Half-Shekel Tax?

Some have pointed to the payment of the half-shekel tax as an example of atonement without sacrifice and therefore as proof that forgiveness of sins is possible apart from the shedding of blood:

Exodus 30:11 The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying, 12 "When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, so that there will be no plague among them when you number them. 13 "This is what everyone who is numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as a contribution to the LORD. 14 "Everyone who is numbered, from twenty years old and over, shall give the contribution to the LORD. 15 "The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the LORD to make atonement for yourselves. 16 "You shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD, to make atonement for yourselves."

If one is to read this text in isolation from the whole of the Torah, then it could appear that God has offered a monetary means for atonement, a kind of "pay-your-way-to-forgiveness scheme." But obviously, this is not the meaning of the text. First of all, the language used here for "numbering" (כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפָקְדֵיהֶם, literally, "when you lift up the head of the sons of Israel to muster them") is that of mustering the army of Israel. The "census" is of males 20 years and older, the age for going to battle (Num 1:3).

Secondly, the payment of the half-shekel is twice called a "contribution," or more literally, "a heave offering" (תְּרוּמָה, *terumah*). Indeed, the half-shekel is for the maintenance of the Tabernacle as Exodus 30:16 makes plain, and is considered a contribution of the man who is called up for service in the army of Israel. What is striking in this regard is that no where else in the Tanach is the idea of "atonement" attached to the "heave offering" or "contribution" offering. This should immediately raise a question as to what is meant by the word כִּפֶּר translated "atonement" in our text.

Thirdly, then, we should understand that the verb כִּפֶּר, *kiper* can also mean "ransom" without the sense of "covering for sin" (=atonement). In Exodus 21, for example, the laws pertaining to an animal who gores someone are laid down. In the case of a negligent owner, the damages caused by the animal bring liability upon him, and the text states:

Ex. 21:30 "If a ransom is demanded of him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is demanded of him.

Here the word translated "ransom" is the root word כִּפֶּר, *kopher*, the same word translated elsewhere as "atonement."

How does this help us understand the Exodus 30 text and the paying of the half-shekel by soldiers mustered for battle? Quite simply, the soldiers confess that they belong to God since He has redeemed them from Egypt. As such, in paying the half-shekel, they acknowledge before battle that God is their King and that their lives (souls) are in His care. The half-shekel stands as a payment to their King in view of the fact that they are going out into harm's way. Since God is the owner of their soul, they pay a token offering as a way of expressing this relationship. The loss of their own life would be a loss to God since each soldier belongs to Him. That the poor and the rich pay the same amount tells the clear story: everyone one God redeems is of equal value to Him.

As we can see, nothing in the passage speaks of sin. Yet in other places where atonement for sin is

taught, we often see the attended phrase, "and his sin will be forgiven" (Lev. 4:20,26,35; 5:10,13; 19:22; Num. 15:25,28). Such wording is lacking in the Exodus 30 text. Thus, the word *kipper* in this text does not mean "make atonement for sin," but rather "offer a ransom" for one's soul in view of entering battle. The idea of forgiveness of sins is entirely foreign to the context.

Don't Be Lead Astray

Many voices appeal to us in our times. Some come with clever arguments; others with "newly discovered secrets" in the text of Scripture. Still other voices appeal to the long history of the Sages and the wisdom contained in their writings. But in a world where many voices come to us, calling us to this way or that, the Bible itself stands as our sure guide and standard. How can one discover if a stick is straight or crooked? By putting a stick known to be straight next to it. So we are called, once again, to the sure and eternal word of God. And what does it say to us, time and time again, regarding how God forgives sins? That He forgives on the basis of the eternal and sufficient payment for sins made by His own Son, Yeshua in His death for us upon the execution stake. And if we are willing to view the Scriptures as a whole, we see how the sacrifices of the Tanach foreshadowed and revealed the ultimate sacrifice in the Lamb of God.

Colossians 1:13 For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.