

The Forgiveness of Sins through Jesus

Introduction

One of the items that the New Testament emphasizes – over and over again – is that the sacrifice of Jesus allows our sins to be forgiven. For example, consider these passages:

Matthew 1:21 (ESV):

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

John 1:29 (ESV):

²⁹ The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

Matthew 28:27-28 (ESV):

²⁷ And he [Jesus] took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Ephesians 1:7 (ESV):

⁷ In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace

Colossians 1:13-14 (ESV):

¹³ He [God] has delivered 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.

As a result, many Christian churches teach that all that a person needs to do, in order for his sins to be forgiven, is to accept Jesus. Basically, those churches teach that if a person makes a **one-time** "statement of faith" in Jesus, then ALL of his sins – both past sins, and **future** sins – will be *automatically forgiven*. That, in turn, **guarantees** that the person will inherit everlasting life, in the Kingdom of God. The official name of this doctrine is "eternal security"; but it is also known as "once saved, always saved".

Of course, **any** given Church doctrine must be compared to the text of Scripture, in order to determine if that doctrine is consistent with Scripture or not. So, let us examine what Scripture has to say about the process of salvation – and about the forgiveness of sins – in order to determine if the doctrine of eternal security is supported by Scripture.

Inheriting the Kingdom

As listed above, Scripture does, indeed, state that Jesus allows our sins to be forgiven. However, does Scripture actually state that **all** a person needs to do is make a “statement of faith” in Jesus, in order for that person to inherit everlasting life in the Kingdom of God? To answer that question, consider the following passages:

Matthew 7:21-23 (ESV):

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (ESV):

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:19-21 (ESV):

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

James 2:14-17 (ESV):

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

In the first three passages above, Jesus and Paul tell us that flagrant sinners will not inherit the Kingdom of God! In addition, in the passage in Matthew, Jesus *explicitly states* that making a “statement of faith” in him does **NOT** guarantee a person eternal life in the Kingdom! As a result, those passages flatly **contradict** the eternal security doctrine – because that doctrine claims that *all* a person needs to do to inherit the Kingdom of God is to make a one-time statement of faith in Jesus – regardless of his behavior.

The fourth passage listed above, from James, tells us that “faith without works is dead” – in other words, that true faith requires people to change their behavior, as opposed to just **stating** their faith. As a result, that passage also contradicts the eternal security doctrine; again because that doctrine claims that a *single* statement of faith *guarantees* that people will be saved – regardless of their behavior.

An Apparent Contradiction

At first glance, the information in the above two sections is rather “puzzling”. First, the New Testament is quite clear that the sacrifice of Jesus allows our sins to be forgiven – with no “ifs, ands, or buts” about it. As a result, one might think that even if a person is a flagrant, *brazen* sinner, his sins will still be forgiven – and he will still have everlasting life in the Kingdom of God – as long as he makes a one-time “statement of faith” in Jesus.

However, the New Testament is **also** very clear that flagrant sinners will NOT have everlasting life in the Kingdom of God – *even if* they make “statements of faith” in Jesus! Scripture goes out of its way to tell us that habitual sinners will not inherit the Kingdom – and that true faith requires us to **change** our *behavior*.

As a result, it *appears* that we have a “contradiction” here. On one hand, Scripture tells us that the sacrifice of Jesus – by itself – allows our sins to be forgiven. On the other hand, Scripture states that flagrant sinners will not inherit the Kingdom of God – and that, in turn, indicates that “flagrant” sins are not “automatically” forgiven.

So, is there *any way* that this apparent contradiction can be resolved? As noted above, the New Testament repeatedly refers to the sacrifice of Jesus, as it relates to our sins. As a result, in order to investigate this issue, it is necessary to learn more about sacrifices. The section of the Bible which contains the “details” about sacrifices is the **Torah** – the first five books of the Bible. So, let’s see what the Torah has to say about sacrifices, as they relate to the forgiveness of sins.

Sacrifices in the Torah

The Torah contains quite a few passages, which describe the many different types of sacrifices that God commanded. Some of those sacrifices were mandatory, while others were voluntary. For the most part, the mandatory sacrifices were required in order for people’s **sins** to be **forgiven**.

There is one very important item that the Torah mentions about sacrifices, regarding the forgiveness of sins. That item is as follows: Sacrifices only allow unintentional sins to be forgiven. “Unintentional” sins are sins that person commits in *ignorance* – i.e., the person does not know that he is committing a sin.

Rabbis sometimes use the following phrase, to describe an unintentional sin: “A person does not know that lighting a fire on the Sabbath day is a sin – **or** he does not know that today is the Sabbath day.”

The passage below makes it clear that “unintentional” sins are ones that a person commits in ignorance:

Leviticus 5:17-19 (NET):

¹⁷ “If a person sins and violates any of the Lord’s commandments which must not be violated (although he did not know it at the time, but later realizes he is guilty), then he will bear his punishment for iniquity ¹⁸ and must bring a flawless ram from the flock, convertible into silver shekels, for a guilt offering to the priest. So the priest will make atonement on his behalf for his error which he committed (although he himself had not known it) and he will be forgiven. ¹⁹ It is a guilt offering; he was surely guilty before the LORD.”

Now that “unintentional” sins have been defined, consider the passage below. That passage **compares** unintentional sins with intentional (or “defiant”) sins:

Numbers 15:27-31 (NET):

²⁷ “If any person sins unintentionally, then he must bring a yearling female goat for a purification offering. ²⁸ And the priest must make atonement for the person who sins unintentionally—when he sins unintentionally before the LORD—to make atonement for him, and he will be forgiven. ²⁹ You must have one law for the person who sins unintentionally, both for the native-born among the Israelites and for the resident foreigner who lives among them.

³⁰ “But the person who acts defiantly, whether native-born or a resident foreigner, insults the LORD. That person must be cut off from among his people. ³¹ Because he has despised the word of the LORD and has broken his commandment, that person must be completely cut off. His iniquity will be on him.”

The above passage explicitly states that **unintentional** sins can be forgiven by sacrifices, but **intentional** sins can **NOT** be forgiven by sacrifices. This is an *extremely* important point – but unfortunately that point is not very well understood.

There are many, *many* other passages about sacrifices in the Torah as well. However, in every case where the Torah discusses sacrifices, alone, forgiving sins, it *explicitly* states that the sins being forgiven are **unintentional** sins – not intentional sins.

How Can Intentional Sins be Forgiven?

As mentioned above, sacrifices only allow unintentional sins to be forgiven – that is, sacrifices do NOT allow for the forgiveness of intentional sins. So, that raises an obvious question – **how**, exactly, can intentional sins be forgiven?

The Torah gives us an indication of how intentional sins can be forgiven. Consider the following two passages. The first passage discusses the **punishments** that the Israelites will receive, if they intentionally commit the sin of worshipping other gods:

Deuteronomy 29:22-28 (ESV):

²² And the next generation, your children who rise up after you, and the foreigner who comes from a far land, will say, when they see the afflictions of that land and the sicknesses with which

the LORD has made it sick—²³ the whole land burned out with brimstone and salt, nothing sown and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in his anger and wrath—²⁴ all the nations will say, ‘Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?’²⁵ Then people will say, ‘It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt,²⁶ and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them.’²⁷ Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book,²⁸ and the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as they are this day.’

The above passage describes the severe calamities that will occur, if the Israelites intentionally sin, and serve other gods.

However, *immediately* after that passage, the Torah describes how people can be **forgiven** for that intentional sin:

Deuteronomy 30:1-4 (ESV):

“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you,² and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul,³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.⁵ And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it.

The above passage states that people need to return to God – and to obey Him – in order for God to forgive **intentional** sins.

The Hebrew word for “return” is *teshuvah*. Basically, the *literal* translation of teshuvah is “return”; but a more accurate translation is: repentance – i.e., returning **to God**. So, the above passage demonstrates that repentance is required, in order for intentional sins to be forgiven.

There is one **additional** item to note about intentional sins as well. Scripture indicates that if a person commits a very “egregious” intentional sin, then justice demands that God must execute that person **immediately**. In other words, a person who commits a particularly **severe** intentional sin will be executed “on the spot” – with **no chance** to repent at all.

However, there is one “exception” to the above rule. Basically, if a righteous person **intercedes** for people who sinned, then God will give the sinners the opportunity to repent. That is, **one** person’s righteous behavior can prevent **many** unrighteous people from being *immediately* executed. After that, if the unrighteous people repent, then they will be forgiven.

There are several examples of the above situation in the Torah. On multiple occasions, the Israelites commit horrific, intentional sins against God – sins which demanded that the people be *immediately* executed. As a result, in those situations, God tells Moses that He is going to wipe out the entire Israelite community. However, on each of those occasions, Moses intercedes for the Israelites – and because he does that, God does not execute the people. Instead, God gives the Israelites the **opportunity** to repent.

The most well known example of the above situations is the sin of the golden calf. Basically, while Moses is on Mt. Sinai – receiving the Torah – the Israelites get impatient waiting for him, and build a **golden calf** to worship as their god. As a result, God tells Moses that due to that sin, He is going to destroy all of the Israelites. However, Moses intercedes for the Israelites; and that intercession allows God to not destroy the Israelites immediately; but rather to give them a chance to repent – and the Israelites do repent. Moses then asks God to make the Israelites “His people” again – i.e., to renew His covenant with them – and God grants Moses’ request.

At the very end of that situation, God tells Moses that the reason *why* his request was granted is **because** Moses is righteous – i.e., because Moses has “found favor” with God:

Exodus 33:12-17 (ESV):

¹² Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have been saying to me, ‘Bring this people up,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. But you said, ‘I know you by name, and also you have found favor in my sight.’ ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your way, that I may know you, that I may continue to find favor in your sight. And see that this nation is your people.”

¹⁴ And the LORD said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

¹⁵ And Moses said to him, “If your presence does not go with us, do not take us up from here. ¹⁶ For how will it be known then that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not by your going with us, so that we will be distinguished, I and your people, from all the people who are on the face of the earth?”

¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “I will do this thing also that you have requested, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

Here is a brief summary, of the above information about “intentional sins”:

- If a person commits a severe intentional sin against God, then justice demands that that person be executed immediately.
- However, if a righteous person **intercedes** for the sinner, then God will not execute the sinner immediately. Instead, He will give the sinner the opportunity to repent.
- If the sinner then **repents** – i.e., if he regrets the sin, and sincerely tries to return to God – then his sin will be forgiven.

From the above, there are **two** separate requirements, in order for intentional sins to be forgiven:

1. A righteous person needs to **intercede**, for the person who committed an intentional sin;
2. The person who committed the sin needs to **repent** – i.e., to return to God.

If both of those requirements are met, then a person's intentional sin will be forgiven.

How does this Relate to Jesus?

The above sections described the differences between unintentional and intentional sins – and how those sins can be forgiven. All of that information is explicitly listed in the **Torah** – the first five books of the Bible.

The next question that arises is: How does that information relate to the sacrifice of Jesus? In particular, is there still a distinction made between **unintentional** and **intentional** sins, in the New Testament?

With that question in mind, take a look at some of the more well-known passages in the New Testament:

Luke 23:33-34 (ESV):

³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Acts 3:17-18 (ESV):

¹⁷ "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled.

The above passages explicitly state that the people who crucified Jesus are forgiven of that sin – through the sacrifice of Jesus – because they sinned unintentionally. In other words, those people did **not know** that they were sinning when they crucified Jesus; and therefore Jesus' sacrifice – alone – allows that sin to be forgiven.

Of course, the above description of unintentional sins being forgiven is exactly the same as the description in the Torah. In other words, the Torah **also** states that unintentional sins can be forgiven by sacrifices, alone.

The New Testament also describes **intentional** sins – i.e., sins in which a person knows that he is sinning. With that in mind, take another look at the following passage:

Matthew 7:21-23 (ESV):

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

The above passage indicates that the people being described have committed intentional sins – and they have **not** repented from those sins. That, in turn, explains why those people are not forgiven – because repentance is required for intentional sins. Also note that those people are not being forgiven, *despite* the fact that they made “statements of faith” in Jesus.

The following New Testament passage is even *more* explicit, about intentional sins:

Hebrews 10:23-27 (ESV):

²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

The above passage *explicitly* states that if people sin deliberately – i.e., if they commit **intentional** sins – then there is no longer a sacrifice for their sins. In other words, the sacrifice of Jesus does NOT allow **intentional** sins to be forgiven! This is the **exact** same information as listed in the Torah – i.e., that sacrifices do not forgive intentional sins.

Finally, the New Testament **stresses** the need for repentance – over and over again – in order for intentional sins to be forgiven, so that people can inherit the Kingdom of God. That fact is stated both before and after Jesus was crucified. Consider these verses:

Matthew 3:2 (NET):

In those days John the Baptist came into the wilderness of Judea proclaiming, ² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Matthew 4:17 (NET):

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach this message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Mark 6:12 (ESV):

¹² So they [the disciples] went out and proclaimed that people should repent.

Luke 13:2-3 (ESV):

² And he [Jesus] answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Acts 2:28 (ESV):

³⁸ And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 3:19-20 (NET):

¹⁹ Therefore repent and turn back so that your sins may be wiped out, ²⁰ so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and so that he may send the Messiah appointed for you—that is, Jesus.

Acts 8:22 (ESV):

²² Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”

Revelation 2:4-5 (ESV):

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Revelation 3:19-20 (ESV):

¹⁹ Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. ²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

There is one final item to note. This distinction between **unintentional** sins and **intentional** sins resolves the apparent “contradiction” listed in the beginning of this article. Basically, when the New Testament states that the sacrifice of Jesus – alone – allows our sins to be forgiven, it is referring to our **unintentional** sins. When the New Testament states that flagrant sinners will not inherit the Kingdom of God, it is referring to our **intentional** sins. In other words, the sacrifice of Jesus – by itself – forgives unintentional sins, but **not** intentional sins. As shown above, repentance is required, in order for intentional sins to be forgiven.

Conclusion

Scripture is completely consistent, about how sins can be forgiven. In other words, both the Torah, and the New Testament, tell us the following about the forgiveness of sins:

- Unintentional sins – i.e., sins that people committed in ignorance – can be forgiven by **sacrifices**. Basically, if a person commits a sin without knowing it, then a sacrifice – alone – will allow that sin to be forgiven.
- Intentional sins – that is, sins that people commit deliberately – can NOT be forgiven by sacrifices. In other words, if a person **knows** that what he is doing is sinful – but he commits the sin anyway – then a sacrifice will not allow him to be forgiven. In order for intentional sins to be forgiven, **two** items need to occur:
 1. A righteous person needs to **intercede** for the sinner. The intercession of a righteous person will give the sinner the opportunity to repent. If that intercession does not occur, then the sinner will be condemned **immediately** – without any chance to repent.
 2. After the intercession, then the sinner, himself, needs to **repent**. That is, the sinner needs to regret the fact that he sinned – and he needs to make a **sincere** effort to return to God.

So, the “basic requirements” for sins to be forgiven are identical, between the Torah and the New Testament. The only difference is in the “specific details” listed in those two sections of Scripture. Here is a comparison of those “details”, between the Torah and New Testament:

- Unintentional Sins: In the Torah, the Israelites could have their unintentional sins forgiven, by making sacrifices in the Tabernacle (and later in the Temple). In the New Testament, **everyone** can have their unintentional sins forgiven, by the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus.
- Intentional Sins: In the Torah, Moses interceded for the Israelites, when they committed intentional sins – and then the Israelites, themselves, needed to repent, in order for those sins to be forgiven. In the New Testament, Jesus intercedes for **everyone**, when we commit intentional sins – and then we, ourselves, need to repent, in order for those sins to be forgiven.

As mentioned, the basic requirements for sins to be forgiven is the same in the New Testament, as it is in the Torah. In particular, **repentance** is still required, in order for **intentional** sins to be forgiven. The reason why that point is so important is because some Christian churches assert that repentance is not required in the New Testament. Basically, those churches claim that **all** that is needed, in order for ALL of our sins (unintentional and intentional) to be forgiven, is to make a single “statement of faith” in Jesus. From all of the information listed in Scripture, that claim does **not** appear to be correct. On the contrary – all of Scripture – **including** the New Testament – stresses the need for repentance, in order for intentional sins to be forgiven.

I hope that this article was a blessing to you!