

What does “Forgiveness of Sin” Mean?

Introduction

One item that Scripture emphasizes, over and over again, is that *every* human being has committed sins. For example, consider these verses:

Ecclesiastes 7:20 (ESV):

²⁰ Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

Romans 3:10-12 (ESV):

¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one.”

1 John 1:8 (ESV):

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Sin **separates** us from God, of course – so sins need to be *forgiven*. In the Old Testament, there are numerous verses which state that **sacrifices** – especially animal sacrifices – can forgive sins. The book of Leviticus, in particular, contains very explicit statements to that effect. For example:

Leviticus 4:25-26 (ESV):

²⁵ Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering. ²⁶ And all its fat he shall burn on the altar, like the fat of the sacrifice of peace offerings. So the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin, and he shall be forgiven.

Leviticus 5:10 (ESV):

¹⁰ Then he shall offer the second [bird] for a burnt offering according to the rule. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.

Leviticus 19:22 (ESV):

²² And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the Lord for his sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed.

In fact, animal sacrifices were made for forgiveness of sins **throughout** the Old Testament – i.e., even before God gave the Mosaic Law to the Israelites. Consider this example from Job – who lived hundreds of years before Moses was even *born*:

Job 1:4-5 (NIV):

⁴ His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵ When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, “Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.” This was Job’s regular custom.

Interestingly, it appears that the very **first** “animal sacrifice” was made in the Garden of Eden. Consider this passage, which occurred shortly after Adam and Eve had committed their first sin against God:

Genesis 3:21 (ESV):

²¹ And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

Presumably, these “garments of skins” were made of *animal* skins – and if so, the animals in question surely would have been killed.

Also note that those animal skins would have provided both *physical* coverings for their bodies – and also *spiritual* “coverings” for their sins.

An Apparent Contradiction

The New Testament also contains many references to animal sacrifices. However, in the New Testament, Jesus, himself, is usually referred to as our “animal sacrifice”, so to speak. For example:

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!”

1 Corinthians 5:7 (ESV):

⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

Ephesians 5:2 (ESV):

² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Due to verses like the ones listed above, most Christian churches have the following, basic belief:

During Old Testament times, animal sacrifices **were** able to take away people’s sins. However, now that Jesus has been sacrificed for us, animal sacrifices can **not** take away sins any longer.

However, consider this passage from Hebrews, regarding animal sacrifices and sin:

Hebrews 10:1-4,11 (ESV):

1 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

The above passage is very instructive. First of all, verse 1 states that animal sacrifices could never make people perfect. Similarly, verse 4 states that it is impossible for animal sacrifices to take away sins. Finally, verse 11 reiterates this concept – by saying that animal sacrifices can never take away sins.

In other words, the above passage indicates that animal sacrifices could **never** take away sins – not even in Old Testament times!

So, we have an apparent “contradiction” here. Many passages in the Old Testament **explicitly** state that animal sacrifices can forgive sins. However, the above passage in Hebrews appears to indicate that animal sacrifices could never forgive sins – not even during Old Testament times.

Of course, I do not believe that Scripture ever contradicts itself. So, what can we make of this *apparent* contradiction?

Two Different Meanings of “Sin”

In many cases, a specific word in Scripture can have multiple meanings. That is, in some cases, the *same* word can mean *different* things – depending on the context.

For example, the word “heaven” has at least **four** separate meanings in Scripture. There is another blog post on this site that goes into those four different meanings; that post can be found [here](#).

It appears that the word translated as “sin” *also* has multiple meanings. The most common Greek word which is translated as sin is *hamartia* – ἁμαρτία. Consider the following definitions of hamartia:

error; offence, sin, Mt. 1:21; a principle or cause of sin, Rom. 7:7; proneness to sin, sinful propensity, Rom. 7:17, 20; guilt or imputation of sin, Jn. 9:41; Heb. 9:26; a guilty subject, sin-offering, expiatory victim, 2 Cor. 5:21

As shown above, there are five separate, *different* meanings of hamartia. In particular, though, take note of the first and third meanings:

Meaning 1: **error, offense, sin**

Meaning 3: **proneness to sin, sinful propensity**

Meaning number 1 is what most people think of, when they hear the word “sin”. Basically, this meaning refers to a specific error or offense that a person has committed. For example, if a thief stole 100,000 dollars from a bank, on December 2, 2012, then that is an example of a specific sin – as per meaning 1.

Meaning number 3 is completely different. This meaning does not refer to any specific sin that has been committed; instead, it refers to our general “inclination to sin”. In other words, it refers to people’s overall “urge to commit sins”. This concept is usually referred to as man’s “sin nature”.

In the example above, a thief stole 100,000 dollars from a bank. That particular theft was an example of a *specific* sin, as per meaning 1. However, the thief also has a “sin nature”, which **incited** him to steal the 100,000 dollars in the first place – and which **continues** to prompt him to commit *additional* thefts in the future. This “sin nature” is the general idea behind meaning 3 of sin.

Animal Sacrifices and Sin

From what I can see, in every case where an animal was sacrificed as a sin offering, the sin in question was a **specific** sin – i.e., meaning 1 of sin. In other words, animal sacrifices **were** able to forgive *specific* sins that a person had committed.

However, animal sacrifices were never able to take away the “sin nature” of the person in question. That is, animal sacrifices were never able to affect meaning 3 of sin.

So, for example, if a person committed a *specific* theft, then an animal sacrifice could forgive him for that specific sin. However, the animal sacrifice was not able to change the person’s *sin nature* – which means that the person would **still** have the inclination to commit *future* thefts.

The reason why the above information is important is because it resolves the apparent contradiction mentioned earlier in this post. Basically, the book of Leviticus explicitly states that animal sacrifices can forgive sins – but the book of Hebrews indicates that animal sacrifices could never take away sin.

This apparent contradiction is explained by the fact that Leviticus is referring to **specific** sins – meaning 1 of sin; whereas Hebrews is referring to **sin nature** – meaning 3 of sin. Animal sacrifices can forgive specific sins (as stated in Leviticus); but they can not take away our sin nature (as stated in Hebrews).

So, there isn’t any contradiction between Leviticus and Hebrews – the two books are simply referring to different *meanings* of sin.

What about the New Testament?

As mentioned in the last section, the animal sacrifices listed in the Old Testament were never able to take away people’s “sin nature” – so that people still had the inclination to sin, even after animal sacrifices were made.

So, the next question that arises is: what about the New Testament? In particular, did the crucifixion of Jesus, itself, **immediately** take away Christians’ “sin nature” – so that Christians do not have any inclination to sin any longer?

The letters written by the apostles provide the answer to that question. First of all, the apostles consistently encourage people to **stop** sinning, and to follow God – i.e., they exhort people to avoid sin. For example, consider these passages:

James 4:7-8 (ESV):

⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

1 Peter 1:13-15 (ESV):

¹³ Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

1 John 2:15-17 (ESV):

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

As mentioned, in all of the above passages the apostles exhort Christians to *avoid sin*. Now, if Christians no longer had sin natures – so that they no longer had **any desire** to sin – then there would not have been any *need* for the apostles to write those passages. After all, if a person does not have any urge to sin, then there is no need to exhort him to avoid sin.

To put it another way: The fact that the apostles did write the above passages indicates that Christians still do have sin natures.

Not surprisingly, the apostle Paul also had many things to say about this overall subject. Most notably, Paul *explicitly* told us that he continued to sin – even **after** he had become a follower of Christ. Here is one of his most famous passages about this:

Romans 7:15-20 (NIV):

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

In the above passage, Paul explicitly states that he has *continued* to commit sins – and the reason **why** that is so is because he still has a “sinful nature”! Basically, Paul bemoans the fact that he sincerely *wants* to “do good” – i.e., to obey God perfectly – but he does not have the *ability* to do so, because of the “sin living in him” – that is, his “sin nature”.

Spiritual Bodies, in the Age to Come

There is one final item to note, about this overall subject. Scripture tells us that there are two basic “types” of bodies that people can have – “natural” bodies, and “spiritual” bodies. Another post on this site goes into detail about the differences between those two types of bodies; that post can be found [here](#).

From the above post, a “summary” of the differences between natural bodies and spiritual bodies is as follows:

- Natural bodies are mortal, but spiritual bodies are immortal;
- Natural bodies are kept alive by blood, but spiritual bodies are kept alive by Holy Spirit;
- And, most importantly – natural bodies have a sin nature, but spiritual bodies do **not** have a sin nature.

All of us have natural bodies, of course – because all of us are subject to death. However, when Jesus returns, he will resurrect his followers, and give them spiritual bodies – so that they will *never* die again.

Also, as noted above, people who have natural bodies do have sin natures – but people who have spiritual bodies do NOT have sin natures!

So, it appears that followers of Christ will be freed from their sin natures – when Jesus grants them spiritual bodies. Of course, no Christian has a spiritual body *yet* – so all Christians currently have sin natures – but Christians will obtain spiritual bodies in the future; and when that happens Christians will no longer have *any susceptibility* to sin.

There is one other item to note: In John 3:5, Jesus stated: “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 15:50, Paul said: “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”. It appears to me that Jesus and Paul were saying the following: “People with *natural* bodies cannot inherit the Kingdom of God – it is necessary for people to be granted *spiritual* bodies for them to do so.”

Conclusion

Here is a summary of the items that were discussed in this post:

- There are two basic meanings of “sin” – **specific** sins that have been committed; and the **sin nature**, which incites people to commit sins.
 - Animal sacrifices are able to forgive *specific* sins; but they can never take away a person’s *sin nature*.
 - Christians still have sin natures in this age, which is why Christians continue to commit sins during this age.
 - When Jesus returns, he will give Christians spiritual bodies – and spiritual bodies do not have sin natures. So, Christians will not have any desire to sin, in the age to come.

Assuming that the above assertions are true, they provide answers to two rather “difficult” issues in Scripture.

First of all, the book of Ezekiel indicates that the temple will be rebuilt, after Jesus returns – and that animal sacrifices will be made in the temple. In other words, animal sacrifices will be made in the temple, during the millennium. That fact has been a source of confusion to many Christians; because most Christian churches believe that animal sacrifices cannot forgive any sins *at all* any longer.

The above information makes it clear why animal sacrifices will be made in the future. As mentioned, animal sacrifices cannot change sin nature – but they can forgive specific sins. Also, there will be many people living during the millennium, who are **not** followers of Jesus – and as a result, those people will still have natural bodies. That, in turn, means that those people will *still* commit sins.

So, the animal sacrifices during the millennium will evidently be for the benefit of people who commit specific sins – since animal sacrifices *can* forgive specific sins. However, the only way for those people to obtain “permanent” forgiveness – and to obtain spiritual bodies – is for them to become followers of Jesus.

The second “difficult” issue is that in numerous places, Scripture states that everyone – even *little babies* – are “sinful”. For example, Psalm 51:5 says: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Similarly, Genesis 8:31 contains this statement: “every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood”.

This issue causes all sorts of confusion for many Christians – because after all, a baby (presumably) does not even *understand* the concept of “committing a sin”. As a result, many Christians have no idea why a baby could be classified as “sinful”.

Once again, this issue is explained by the fact that there are two different *meanings* of sin. It is certainly true that a baby does not have the ability to *knowingly* commit an offense against God. However, babies do have **sin natures** – just like everyone else does. In other words, since babies have natural bodies, they still have the *inclination* to sin. This is evidently why babies are called “sinful” (just as adults are sinful).

This also explains why babies who have died are not “automatically” saved. Basically, babies have a sin nature, just like the rest of us – because we all currently have natural bodies. Also, the only way for a person to be “freed” from his sin nature – by being granted a spiritual body – is for him to consciously follow Jesus. Presumably, babies do not have the ability to consciously follow Jesus – and therefore, babies will not “automatically” be granted everlasting life, with a spiritual body, when Jesus returns.

However, it *definitely* appears that babies who have died will have the **opportunity** to follow Jesus, *after* he returns. A post on that very subject can be found [here](#).