

Can God Forgive Me?

Josh was filled with emotion as he sorted through his father's belongings. After a long battle with cancer, it was hard to believe his father was gone. Reflecting on the past fifteen years, Josh had plenty of regrets. He always had a rebellious streak; dishonesty and disrespect had cost him more than one job and numerous relationships. His many exploitative sexual encounters, drinking binges, contempt, and extravagant spending had left Josh's life in shambles. He couldn't help wondering if his escapades and regrettable lifestyle had been too much for his father, hastening his death.

But even at the end, Josh's father repeatedly told him he loved him. He seemed to be thrilled every time Josh visited him at the hospital. Now Josh would never be able to visit him or talk with him again. Feeling very alone, tears began rolling down his face. Just before he died, Josh's father asked him to start attending church again. Josh had agreed but wondered if there was any point. He doubted that God would forgive him for all he had done.

Will God Really Forgive All of My Sins?

God knows we are not perfect. We make mistakes (Romans 3:22-23). David lied, murdered, and committed adultery yet God forgave him and identified him as "chosen" (I Kings 8:16) and "a man after his own heart." (I Samuel 13:14). Paul persecuted and ordered the torture and murder of Christians. At times Paul failed to do the right things and described some of his actions as "evil" (Romans 7: 19, 25). He called himself the "worst of sinners" (I Timothy 1:15) yet knew he was forgiven and his salvation secure (Ephesians 1:13-14). If a man who considers himself to be the worst sinner was saved, you can be forgiven no matter what your sins are. James said, "We all stumble in many ways." (James 3:2) If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar (1 John 1:10).

In spite of our mistakes, God promises total and absolute forgiveness to those who accept him (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). When God forgives us for our sins, we are forgiven immediately and completely (1 John 1:9). Because God always keeps his promise, it's not necessary to continue asking for forgiveness. Once a sin is blotted out or erased, it is irrevocably gone. It will no longer be counted against us and the slate is wiped clean.

*Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him (Romans 4:7-8).*

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

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).

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:8-12).

Why does God forgive us?

God forgives us because he loves us. No matter what we do, God will continue to love us (Eph. 3:17; 1 John 3:1; John 3:16) and desires reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). God forgives us because he has the power to wipe the slate clean (Hebrews 10:17-18). Jesus intercedes and communicates with God on our behalf (Hebrews 4:14). With the forgiveness of our sins, we are promised absolute salvation--not a salvation determined by how often we fail or how close we are to the Christian ideal. God offers kindness, tolerance and patience (Romans 2:4). God's love is that of a father who loves his children even when they misbehave. He is patient with us because he wants us to be in heaven with him forever (2 Peter 3:9; 15). As a loving parent, God will not rest until we are home with him forever.

How long does forgiveness last?

God sent Jesus to pay the price for our sins (Colossians 2:13). Christ died so our sins could be removed forever. The debt owed because of our sins are completely blotted out because Christ made the payment on our behalf. Like civil courts here on earth, there will be no double jeopardy. We will not be tried again for sins for which payment has already been made.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood (Romans 3:23-25).

Is there a sin which cannot be forgiven?

Mark 3:28-29 and Luke 12:10 identify a particular sin (blasphemy) against the Holy Spirit as an unforgiven sin. This unforgiveable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit involves refusing to acknowledge the deity of Christ and instead attributing Jesus' works to Satan and claiming that Jesus was empowered by evil.

I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin (Mark 3:28-29).

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Luke 12:10).

An example is given in Acts 19:9 when Paul was speaking in the synagogue: *"But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them."* When persons malign the Holy Spirit, the Spirit has ceased to be with them because they are no longer "with Jesus" and do not believe in Christ's divine power. In Matthew 12:22-32, the Pharisees and Scribes were unable to recognize God's will even when it was fully displayed and attributed Jesus' work to Satan. They were so caught up in their own personal agenda, their hearts were hardened and unrepentant. They could not and would not hear the message of Jesus. Jesus told them, "He who is not with me is against me. . . anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come."

The reason such a sin is unforgiven is:

1. Every sin for which one can repent can be forgiven.
2. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven because the heart becomes so hardened that repentance is impossible since that person has forever turned away from God.
3. Therefore, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgiven because the heart is so unrepentant he or she fails to acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

Again, in order to commit this sin, one must have a heart so hardened that it is impossible to repent and turn back to God. If a person can and desires to ask forgiveness and repent of misdeeds, the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not an issue.

When we ask God for forgiveness, what does God ask of us?

God asks that we believe that our salvation comes from him with the sacrifice of his son Jesus as payment for our sins. Although it is important to study the bible for understanding, strength and knowledge, God does not require that we fully understand his word to receive salvation. We need only to believe, trust him and know the source. We do not have to fully understand the complex physics of electricity to utilize it. All we have to know to take advantage of it is that when we turn on the light switch, the light bulb comes on.

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:43).

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).

God asks that we acknowledge or "own" our sins and be sincerely sorry for what we have done. Sincere remorse means commitment to avoiding the sin in the future. We are also asked to confess our sins to others and pray for each other (James 5:16).

Repent, then, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out. (Acts 3:19)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret. (2 Corinthians 7:10)

An agent is a person acting or doing business for another. Because we are God's agents or ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5: 20), he wants us to model his forgiveness by forgiving others. In other words, he wants us to pass it on so that others can understand how God's love works.

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you (Colossians 3:13).

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:14-15).

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).

Only God is able to forgive in an instant. For us, forgiveness is a process and not typically an immediate event. In the forgiveness process, it is important to hold the offending party accountable. Luke 17:3 describes this: "Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him, And if he sins against you seven times in a day and comes back to you seven times, saying 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Seven is the biblical number of completeness. To forgive seven times means to maintain a forgiving spirit.

A Bible Story of Total Forgiveness

In Luke 15:11-31, Jesus told a story of forgiveness to the tax collectors and sinners who gathered to hear him. The story goes like this:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger son asked the father for his share of his inheritance. The father granted the request and gave him his portion. The young son set off to a distant country and eventually squandered his money on wild living. The country was ravaged by a great famine and the son found himself living in poverty.

In desperation, the son took a job feeding pigs. He was so deprived of food that he began to crave the pig's food. At that point, the son "came to his senses" realizing that the hired hands on his father's estate were better fed than he. The son decided

to go back to his father, tell him he was sorry and ask him to let him work as a hired hand. As he returned home, his father saw him from a distance and ran to him, kissing and hugging him. The remorseful son told his father how sorry he was for his actions. The father reacted by telling the servants to bring him a fine robe, sandals and a ring for his finger. A magnificent feast was prepared to celebrate the son's return. The older brother became jealous of the attention lavished on his younger brother. The father told him: "We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

This story illustrates God's complete forgiveness and desire for reconciliation. He is the loving father and we are the children who are always forgiven after we make foolish choices. When we "come to our senses" (Luke 15:17), we realize what God offers us—unfailing love and a place with him forever. Like the father in this story, he always rejoices and receives us with open arms when we return. He wants us to be with Him forever.

A Forgiveness Quiz:

Mark each of the following items true or false:

1. _____ Sins today are different than those in bible times.
2. _____ When God forgives us, our sins are not counted against us.
3. _____ God forgives us and desires reconciliation.
4. _____ We are God's agents and our job is to model God's forgiveness.
5. _____ When we commit a sin, we must ask God to forgive us over and over.

Thought Questions:

1. Why does God forgive us?

2. How long does forgiveness last? How do we know?

3. When we ask God for forgiveness, what does he ask of us?

4. Why is God's forgiveness contingent on our forgiveness of others?

5. How is Josh's story similar to the story that Jesus told of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-31?

--Scriptures are from the New International Version of the bible.