

What does God do with our sins?

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GLADEWATER, Texas—As we take notice of the ways of the world, it is apparent we realize that sin exists in great abundance around the planet. The apostle Paul explained to the Romans the *righteousness of God* and that our righteousness would be nonexistent if it were not for the justification, redemption and grace through the blood poured out during the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Romans 3:21-26). Paul wrote that "all have sinned." The concept of forgiveness of our sins is a marvelous concept to understand.

The Bible has many other difficult concepts for us to grasp, and some seem quite impossible. How could God come up with a plan for our salvation? We know God is Eternal and has existed from infinity in the past and will live forever toward infinity in the future. Our lives are but a mere short span of time from the day we are born until the day we die—a few years.

God forgets

God created all things and knows the future and the ancient past. But often we read that God "remembered" something or "forgot" something, which somehow implies that He has "limits" to His mental capacity.

Of course, God has no limits to His mental capacity. So I conclude that God deliberately forgets certain things. I am very glad to know that my sins, after they are forgiven, will not be remembered anymore. My problem is that I don't forget them and from time to time I repeat them and bring them up to God again. God has already forgotten them and I am bringing back old skeletons from the closet and showing them to God again. Because I don't easily forget what others have done to me, my carnal mind thinks that God is the same way. Unwittingly, I am making God *in my own image*. God forgets—totally and completely. Consider the following:

- "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will *remember no more*" (Jeremiah 31:34).
- "I have *blotted out*, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins" (Isaiah 44:22).
- "And I will *not remember* your sins" (Isaiah 43:25).

- “And I will *not remember* your sins” (Ezekiel 33:16).
- “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will *remember no more*” (Hebrews 8:12).
- “Their sins and their lawless deeds I will *remember no more*” (Hebrews 10:17).
- “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins *may be blotted out*” (Acts 3:19).
- “All the *righteousness* which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which *he is guilty* and the sin which he has committed” (Ezekiel 18:24).
- *David prayed*: “Hide Your face from my sins, and *blot out* all my iniquities” (Psalm 51:9).

God remembers

In some cases of conspicuously bad and unrepented sins, God has to remember what was done in order to do justice.

- “For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has *remembered* her iniquities” (Revelation 18:5).
- “He *will remember* their iniquity; He will punish their sins” (Hosea 9:9).
- “Now He *will remember* their iniquity and punish their sins” (Hosea 8:13).
- “Because *you have made your iniquity to be remembered*, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all *your doings* your sins appear” (Ezekiel 21:24).
- *Jeremiah prayed*: “Provide no atonement for their iniquity, *nor blot out their sin* from Your sight; but let them be overthrown before You” (Jeremiah 18:23).

Can we really forget?

In moments of anger God says that He will forget His people, as if an infinite God can forget anything: “Therefore behold, I will surely *forget you* and *cast you away* from My presence, along with the city which I gave you and your fathers” (Jeremiah 23:39).

Another related question to this topic about God “forgetting” is what God expects of us, since, when God forgives, Scripture says He does *not remember our sins*. Does God expect us to actually forget the sins committed against us as part of our forgiveness of them? I feel it is easier to forgive than to forget. Does God feel that we haven’t truly been forgiven unless we have forgotten the sin as well? Who *really* can do that? My carnal mind does not let me *forget*.

Remember and forget in the Hebrew language

Understanding the Hebrew words that we translate *remember* and *forget* can give us several important insights. In contemporary English, our definition of the word *remember* focuses entirely on the idea of recalling memories and bringing ideas into our thoughts. To forget is the exact opposite: to fail to bring a certain memory to mind. We are concerned entirely and exclusively with mental activity and whether information is present or not. So, for us, remembering and forgetting are entirely *a mental activity*.

In contrast, in Hebrew the word, No. 02142 in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, *zakor*, which means "remember," has a much wider definition. It includes both *remembering and the actions that are taken* because of remembering. It can often imply that a person did a favor for someone, helped him or was faithful to a promise or covenant. This helps us understand verses like the following:

■ "But God *remembered* Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided" (Genesis 8:1).

■ "Then God *remembered* Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22).

The passage about Noah doesn't mean that God suddenly recalled that a boat was floating out on the flood and then realized He should do something about it. When God remembered Noah, He acted upon His promise that Noah's family and the animals would be rescued from the flood. In the other passage, God did a favor for Rachel by answering her prayer for a son. The verb is focused on the action, not the mental activity on God's part. God paid attention to her needs, listened to her prayer and answered it. Here, *remember* means "to intervene," focusing on God's action.

Interestingly, the Hebrew words for *forget*—Strong's 07911, *shakach* and 05382, *nashah*—are not exact opposites with *zakor*, "remember." To "forget" in Hebrew also means to ignore, neglect, forsake or willfully act in disregard to a person or covenant. It is to act as if you have forgotten. Frequently the Bible says, "Do not forget the Lord your God," meaning do not forsake Him; be loyal to Him. To "forget" usually has a negative connotation close to what the American slang term "to blow off" means today. For instance:

"So watch yourselves, that you do not *forget* the covenant of the LORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the LORD your God has commanded you" (Deuteronomy 4:23).

The idea is that they would willfully ignore their covenant, not necessarily forget that they made it. And, in the passage quoted earlier (Jeremiah 23:39), when God says He will "forget" His people, it means He will spurn them as His people, not lose their memory from His mind.

When we read with an emphasis on action rather than mental activity, we can clarify that God is not necessarily losing information from His mind. For instance:

“How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1).

The psalmist is saying: “Why do You ignore my prayers and not intervene in my crisis?” God doesn’t forget, but sometimes it seems as if He does.

What does God do with our sins?

It seems to me that God does two things with our sins: He *forgives* them and *forgets* them. To forgive our sins, God expects us to be sorry for what we’ve done in breaking His perfect law of liberty. He does not want us to be in bondage to sin. God offers atonement for our sins. Atonement means “covering.” Our sins have to be covered with the blood of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36). As a result of our repentance, which God graciously grants us, we are inducted into His church. The word *church*—*ekklesia* in the Greek language—means a group of “called-out ones.” I would also like to refer to the church as the “purchased people.”

Paul made exactly the same point when addressing a group of elders of the church in Ephesus: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which *He purchased* with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

So we, who are Christians, have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ.

■ “In Him we have redemption *through His blood*, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Ephesians 1:7).

■ “. . . We have redemption *through His blood*, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:14).

To achieve forgiveness of sins we need to surrender our wills and carnal nature to God. We need to ask Him to remember how feeble and powerless we are. We go to God to remind Him that we are flesh, not that God forgets what we are.

The psalmist reminds us: “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14).

After we are forgiven of our sins, we ought always to remember that we are blessed. Peter writes that we have been given “exceedingly great and precious promises” (2 Peter 1:4).

David wrote: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Psalm 32:1).

Paul wrote to the Romans: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered” (Romans 4:7).

A covenant of promises, forgive and forget

In Hebrews 8 we are introduced to a new covenant. Paul enumerates features of it in Hebrews 8:10-13:

- New and future: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days" (verse 10).
- A godly heart: "I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts" (verse 10).
- God will be *our God*: "I will be their God, and they shall be My people."
- Mercy and forgiveness: "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness" (verse 12).
- Forgetting: "Their sins and their lawless deeds *I will remember no more.*"

All these promises are awesome. The God we worship can and will deliver on these "exceedingly great and precious promises."

The Day of Atonement

After this introduction to the New Covenant, Paul launches into an explanation of the events and ordinances of divine service on the Day of Atonement in the earthly sanctuary.

He explains that the earthly high priest went alone once a year behind the veil to the Holy of Holies, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance. But today "Jesus Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the *blood of goats* and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:11-12).

The reference of this passage is to the ceremony of the two goats in Leviticus 16. Moses had noted that "this is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you" (Hebrews 9:20). The Old Covenant required blood. In the wilderness and in the temple, the blood of goats was required once a year as a token of the covenant God made with His people. The New Covenant also requires blood, except that Jesus Christ's blood is so precious that it needed to be offered only once—"so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9:28). Jesus "with His own blood entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

Let's refresh our memory about the ceremony that took place on the Day of Atonement. "The LORD said to Moses: 'Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil . . . And he shall take from the congregation of the children of Israel two kids of the goats as a sin offering . . .'" (Leviticus 16:2, 5).

Then Aaron, and subsequent high priests, had to cast lots for the two goats. One goat was to be designated by lot to be for the Lord and the other goat for "Azazel."

Azazel is a most interesting word. It is listed as Strong's No. 05799. The reference shows two meanings of the translation as "scapegoat": It "refers to the goat used for sacrifice for the sins of the people," and "it is to be noted that *Young's Literal Translation* uses the words 'the goat of departure.' "

Azazel is derived and referenced from two other Hebrew words:

- *Ez aze*—Strong's No. 05795, meaning female goat, she-goat, goat, kid.
- *Azal*—Strong's No. 0235, meaning to go away; to go about; and to be used up, be exhausted, be gone, evaporated.

The two goats

One goat, the *Lord's* goat, will be used to provide the blood for the atonement.

"Then he (Aaron and future high priests until Jesus Christ) shall kill the goat of the *sin offering*, which is for the people" (Leviticus 16:15). This goat is sacrificed as a sin offering for the people. Why? "Because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions, for all their sins" (verse 16).

The other goat, the *azazel* goat, "shall bear on itself all their iniquities to an uninhabited land; and he (Aaron and future high priests until Jesus Christ) shall release the goat in the wilderness." (verse 22).

Before the release "Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a *suitable* man" (verse 21).

My next inquiry was into the word *suitable*: Strong's No. 06261, *ittiy*, an adjective meaning fit, timely and ready.

The element of time has to do with its meaning because it comes from Strong's No. 06256, *eth*, meaning time, season, occasion, experiences.

The second goat was to take on its head the sins and transgressions of the people and be taken away *from* the people. Once this goat was in the wilderness, this goat was forgotten. It was to be used up, be gone, be exhausted, be evaporated. The goat was not to be let loose and go away by itself. It required the services of a man competent, fit and ready for the job of taking this goat as far as possible from the people and then come back to the camp and clean himself up. Obviously, this man had to be a rugged individual to be able to take the goat up into the wilderness quite far away from the people. This man would have been fasting on the Day of Atonement, yet he would have been required to take the goat away right after the high priest laid hands on it. Time would have been of the essence.

After this goat was taken away from the tabernacle area, Aaron would come into the tabernacle of meeting, clean himself up and then be ready to "offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people" (Leviticus 16:24).

The sequence is clear: Select the two kids of the goats of the congregation as a sin offering; cast lots for the two goats; the Lord's goat will be sacrificed and its blood used to make an atonement; the *azazel* goat shall be presented alive and the sins and transgressions of the people be put on its head. The live goat will then be taken away from the congregation almost immediately far and far away into the wilderness by a man suitably appointed for this duty.

Conclusion

So, what does God do with our sins? He forgives them and He forgets them. How far does God take away our sins? How far is the east from the west? David also pondered this question and he found some answers (Psalm 103:10-14):

"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities [*we deserved punishment for what we did*].

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him [*we received mercy as we fear and respect a loving God*];

"As far as the *east* is from the *west*, so far has He removed our transgressions from us [*our sins have been removed and forgotten*].

"As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him [*we received the kindest pities from a loving Father*].

"For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust [*He knows our weaknesses and strengthens us*].

"But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children [*we and our descendants receive His mercy and righteousness*],

"To such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them [*God has provided a covenant of mercy, forgive and forget*]."