



Can God Forgive Sin?

The biblical distinction between sin and sins

- Can God forgive sin?
- When Christ died on the cross did He bear the sins of the world?
- The doctrine of Propitiation
- The doctrine of Substitution
- The Prevailing Error
- What about sins committed before Calvary?
- What about sins that are future (after salvation)?

Two questions have prompted this paper which is essentially about the distinction between sin and sins. They have arisen recently in connection with a number of issues raised by young believers regarding the work of Christ and salvation in Him.

1. Can God forgive sin?
2. When Christ died on the cross, did He bear the sins of the world?

Some may regard the raising of these questions a little strange; their study a trifling matter and that we are “splitting hairs.” However, the answers to these questions have a vital bearing upon our Christian faith and what we preach and teach concerning it. And, what is more, they tell us a good deal about the character of God and the work of Christ. Furthermore, the answers to these related questions may appear obvious. Perhaps my reader is confident that we can answer “yes” to both of them! If this is the case, I encourage you to read on. We will see that our Lord did not bear the sins of the world when He died at Calvary, and neither can God forgive sin.

Terminology Sin & Sins

Our questions revolve around the terms “sin” and “sins.” It is critical that we appreciate the biblical distinction between them.

Sin

“Sin” is rebellion or disobedience in its principle or root. Literally, the word “sin” or *hamartia* in the Greek means to “miss the mark,” as when a spent arrow falls short of the target. In the Bible it is employed as falling short of the glory of God – His standard of righteousness. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Sin – as a principle came into the world as the result of Adam’s fall. In so doing it challenged the holiness of God. Paul identified its point of origin among us and acknowledged the Genesis record when he declared that “By one man **sin** entered into the world” (Rom 5:12).

Sins

When we come to the matter of “sins,” it is now not “*where* art thou,” but “*what* hast thou *done*?” We have here the “fruit” of the root – the product of our sinful natures. We all commit *sins* because we are sinners.¹ When man serves sin by committing sins as a result of his sinful nature, he earns the “wages” of sin, which is again death, as Paul notes in Romans 6:23. It is not the “wages of sins.” Paul is careful to bring us back to the root problem and its consequence – sin and death (physical and spiritual death). Another way of looking at the distinction between sin and sins is that sin is the principle and sins the practice.²

The Genesis record

The distinction between sin and sins is evident after the Fall. The first, as we have noted is seen in the question, Adam “*where* art thou?” It was directed to Adam, our federal head and indicates his separated spiritual *position* from a holy God, a separation that his **sin** had caused. The second we have in the question “*what* hast thou done?” It speaks of the fruit of sin – **sins**.³

The distinction seen antithetically in the Person of Christ

Those of us who revere God’s Word have come to do so in part because of the attentive way in which the Spirit of God has woven doctrine into a marvelous tapestry of truth. We have a blessed example in the Person of Christ presented in Scripture. John takes up his inspired pen and announces “in Him is no sin” (1 Jn 3:5). What does this mean? It means Christ does not possess a fallen nature – sin, the root is not there. “The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me” (Jn 14:30). The root being non-existent there could be no fruit – no sins, in thought *or* in deed. And so Paul is moved by the Spirit to declare that He “knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21) and Peter is inspired to declare that He “did no sin” (1 Pet 2:22). It is not as some say in error that Christ *could* have sinned but did not. The testimony of the Spirit is that Christ did not sin because He *could not* sin. It is a salient truth brought out not only in the distinction between sins and sins, but in every doctrine that relates to sin and God’s dealings with it through Christ on the ground of righteousness.

Our Lord, the perfect man and truly God is barren as to sin, the root, and so He cannot bear its fruit –sins, and “every tree is known by his own fruit” (Luke 6:44). Here then, is the flawless moral foundation of Christ in propitiation as we shall see, “that He was manifested to take away our **sins**; [because] in him *is* no **sin**” (1 Jn 3:5).

¹ Adam sinned from the position of “innocence.”

² *Transgressions*: In the Bible, sins are sometimes called *transgressions*. These are acts of sin that are done in the face of an existing command not to do them. Adam’s sin was a transgression.

³ In that same record we have prophesied the condemnation of **sin** as it appeared before the Fall among the fallen angels with Satan at their head. “And I will put enmity between thee [Satan] and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen 3:14-15). “The prince of this world is [has been] judged” (Jn 16:11). Christ’s death at Calvary condemned sin in all spheres.

When Christ died on the cross, did He bear the sins of the world?

Let us first deal with the second of our two questions above. Its answer will shed valuable light on the first. If, when He died on the cross, the Lord *bore* the sins of the world – that is, every sin ever committed, then everyone would be saved – salvation would be *universal*. And, what is more, it means that there would be no need to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which is of course contrary to the evangelical commission given to us in the Bible. For this reason we will not find any reference in Scripture to Christ *bearing away* the sins of the world when He died at Calvary.

However, we are aware that there are two verses in Scripture that cause some to have difficulty accepting this fact – John 1:29 and 1 John 2:2.

“The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).⁴

“And He [Christ] is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for *the sins of the whole world*” (1 Jn 2:2).

In the first verse some boldly alter the word “sin” to read “sins of the world,” an error which needs no other correction than to consult the original text of Scripture. It is plain, too, that there is nothing in these verses about the *bearing of sins*. Christ, says John, “is the *propitiation*,” not the *bearer*. The key matter here is propitiation. It is vital that we have an understanding of what this means. In order to do this we begin with the meaning of the word itself.

Propitiation

The word propitiation comes from the Greek *hilaskomai*. It was used by the ancient Greeks when they sought to appease their gods with gifts and so avert their wrath. The first point to note – and it is a decisive one, is that propitiation means “appeasing” and not “bearing.” In this alone we can rule out the idea that 1 John 2:2 teaches that Christ bore the sins of the world on the cross. Secondly, although *hilaskomai* is used in the Bible, it is not done in the way in which the pagans used it. It is never used in the sense of God being appeased or pacified by *man*, but of God appeasing *Himself*. How and why He did this is central to the Gospel and to the character of God.

The Doctrine of Propitiation

God propitiated Himself because of **sin**. The coming and presence of unanswered **sin** offended His holiness. How could God vindicate His holiness and appease His wrath? We have His answer in Romans 3:25 in the Person of His Son. When laying the foundational truths of the Gospel, Paul stated that “God sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for **sin, condemned sin in the flesh**” (Rom 8:3).⁵ “Sin,” the root has been condemned or annulled. By taking on perfect humanity and laying down His life, Christ became sin – a sin offering, the offering which bore God’s condemnation upon sin. Our Lord *willingly* took on Himself the full condemnation of sin in its very root and principle at the hand of a Thrice Holy God. When John the Baptist saw the Lord coming toward him, he declared “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the **sin** of the world” (Jn 1:29). The taking away of sin is the result of its condemnation. So too, when he spoke of the cross-work of Christ, the writer of the Hebrew epistle recorded, that “Once in the end of the age hath He [Christ] appeared to put away **sin** by the

⁴ The tense is “taking away” the sin of the world. It looks to the *purpose* or the *intent* of His coming. His purpose was to take sin away – away from the world, which will be consummated in the New Heaven and New earth. The *work* upon which this is accomplished was done at Calvary, cf Heb 9:26 “to put away sin,” for which He appeared “once.”

⁵ The expression “in the flesh” refers to Christ and His physical death. This seems to best fit the context in that we have our Lord Himself as the “sin offering” in the expression “for sin” (a sacrifice for sin). What was condemned or judged was the nature or root – sin. This is what the law could *not* do. It identifies the root no doubt and judges sins – the fruit, but it could never judge or condemn the root. The reason being that sin, the nature, cannot be forgiven (or atoned). It must be condemned. “Sin in the flesh, the principle of evil working and producing sin in us is condemned. I do not say sins are, but sin; but it is condemned when sacrifice was made for it- when it was put away by Christ’s sacrifice of Himself. It is not forgiven...An evil principle cannot properly be forgiven; it is condemned...put away judicially” as the result of Christ’s sacrifice (JND, The Bible Treasury N5 p 24).

sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26). He goes on to say, “Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for **sin**” (Heb 10:18).⁶ What we have here is a portion of the consistent testimony of the Spirit of God, that Christ in His death has met every odious claim that the coming of sin made against the holy and righteous character of God. In doing this He bore the wrath of God against sin.

Now we well know that “sin” – the root is actively present because it manifests itself by its fruit - sins. It still stalks and stains creation. The complete stain of sin will be “taken away” or “put away” when this present earth ceases and we have a new creation in a New Heaven and a New Earth wherein dwells righteousness (2 Pet 3:13). However, as far as believers in Christ are concerned, our sin has been put away because we stand in the blessing of what Christ has done in regard to sin. There is no sin *on us judicially*; though there is still sin *in us naturally*, and so we still sin (which is addressed by John in his first epistle and by Paul in Romans 6 and 7, though from different perspectives). The value of the propitiating work of Christ is ours *now* – indeed to all who believe. Its value will also serve to put or take away sin completely in that coming day.

Intimations from the OT

It would be helpful here to bring into view a little of the anticipation of Christ’s work in relation to sin in the OT. Isaiah declared, “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make His soul an offering for **sin**, He shall see his seed, He shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand” (Isa 53:10). Isaiah speaks here of God’s pleasure in the bruising of His Son at Calvary. It is God propitiating Himself. It is the infinite divine pleasure associated with the propitiating work of His Son; God vindicating Himself in regard to sin through His Son’s death. Then in Psalm 22 we have the anticipated grief of the suffering Son on the cross. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?” (Ps 22:1). Why, and in what sense was Christ forsaken? He was forsaken as the **sin** offering – an offering that God could not look upon because it was treated as sin. It is the cry of the sinless Man in anguish as a holy God hid His face as He meted out His divine wrath against sin upon Him. And so Paul under the Spirit’s inspiration declares that “For He [God] hath made Him to be **sin** for us, who knew no **sin**; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21).

Where then do sins come in?

God has appeased (propitiated) Himself through His Son who bore His wrath against sin and thus sin in principle has been condemned. His holiness vindicated, God can now offer forgiveness for **sins**. “[Christ] Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins.” Christ’s sacrifice answered the claim that *sin* made against a holy God. In so doing He made it possible for God to forgive sins and not breach His righteousness. This is what John means when he states Christ is the propitiation for the world. This amazing blessing, which is the result of Christ’s propitiation, is available to everyone. With this in mind we need to have a closer look at 1 John 2:2.

“And He [Christ] is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the whole world.”

Notice that the wording of this verse here is different to our quotation from the Authorized Version (AV) above. The AV has inserted the expression “the sins of,” which it gives in *italics*, signifying that it is not in the original Greek Text. This expression has been added by the translators because they believed it will assist interpretation. The translators unfortunately have a habit of doing this and it is not always helpful to the sense of the passage. We say unfortunately because we do venerate the AV and place great trust in it.

The first thing to remember is that in this Epistle John is principally speaking to and about *believers* - which is evident from the first two verses of chapter 2 (and indeed from the preceding chapter).

⁶ In Hebrews 10:26 reference is to the various sin and trespass offerings of the OT. “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.”

“My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the whole world” (1 Jn 2:1).

John is speaking about the situation where a believer sins and, as a result, loses *fellowship* with the Father. He therefore brings in the work of Christ as the believer’s Advocate – which is to restore that broken fellowship. Profitable though it would be, we do not need to go into what this work is and how it is accomplished in order to rightly divide this passage. We need only bear in mind that Christ’s advocacy is confined to **believers**. It is “we,” the children of God who have Christ as our Advocate.⁷ This being the case, the relationship between propitiation and Christ’s advocacy in regard to the sins of believers, has no relevance to “the world” whatsoever. So when we come to the second part of verse 2 which relates to the **world**, we are given the *broad* relationship between propitiation and sins. What then is that relationship? It is that the result of Christ’s work of propitiation is available to all. And, what was the result of that work again? It was the provision for the forgiveness of sins, because as far as God is concerned sin has been judged to His infinite satisfaction – condemned! The Christian evangelist can therefore visit every corner of the earth and proclaim with unmitigated authority that God offers the forgiveness of sins to all, on the basis of Christ’s propitiating sacrifice. This is why our Lord was able to declare that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16). “It is God who is propitiated by the vindication of His holy and righteous character, whereby, through the provision He has made in the vicarious and expiatory sacrifice of Christ. He has so dealt with sin that He can shew mercy to the believing sinner in the removal of his guilt and the remission of sins.”⁸ It is imperative that we acknowledge in our preaching and praise, that it was the shed **blood** of Christ that met a holy God’s claims against **sin**. And, that without this the forgiveness of **sins** would be *impossible*! His righteousness would be violated if He did so. The forgiveness of sins depends upon the condemnation of sin, as peace depends upon righteousness. Is this not what we have in Romans 3:25? “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins.”

What is the work of the Spirit of God in the world? We say here the world and not in the believer for that is another matter. It is not to convict the world of *sins*; but of “sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (Jn 16:8). Through the preaching of the Gospel the Holy Spirit will expose sin, the root and exhort repentance for its fruit.

The Doctrine of Substitution

Christ bore God’s wrath against **sin** and sin was condemned. Man can now be offered pardon and peace with God and his *sins* forgiven. When a person through faith accepts this offer, Christ in His death becomes his/her Substitute. Christ’s work for sin is made good to them – the truth of substitution. It is *here* that we have the *bearing* of **sins**. For this reason Paul declares concerning Christ, “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation **through faith in his blood**...for the remission of sins” (Rom 3:25). All who have appropriated this offer through faith can *then* confess with Peter, that Christ “bore our sins in his own body on the tree” (JND 1 Pet 2:24 cf Col 1:14). For *them* sin and sins have been put away judicially in Christ – a positional truth. They are the justified before God. God cannot judge what is not there.⁹ “Their sins and their iniquities will I

⁷ Some may reply, “Are not all men the children of God?” It would be a blessed thing if it were so! The Lord makes it very clear that only those who believe are the children of God. “But as many as received Him, to them gave He power [authority] to become the sons [children] of God, even to them that believe on his name” (Jn 1:12).

⁸ W. E. Vine. *Expository Dictionary of N T Words*. P 223.

⁹ Believers in Christ are judicially “dead to sin.” However, sin (the root) is not dead in us and it can produce the fruit, sins as noted (1 Jn 1:9-10). “If we say that we have no **sin** (the root or nature), we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8). It will remain in us until corruption puts on incorruption and mortality puts on immortality (1 Cor 15:53). Until that day comes Paul exhorts, “God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to **sin** (the root or nature), live any longer therein?” (Rom 6:2). So, “if any man sin [commit sin i.e., sins, the fruit], we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn 2:1). His advocacy for us is based on His propitiatory work as we continue to note.

remember no more” (Heb 8:12). As purged worshippers there is “no more conscience of sins” (Heb 10:2). Not so for the unsaved!

When, therefore, we come to the matter of *sins*, every *individual* is brought in along with the offer of forgiveness and the plea for repentance. Nowhere does Scripture speak of the forgiveness of “sin,” for sin must be condemned before sins can be forgiven. There is a raft of NT biblical passages confirming these truths.

- Acts 5:31: “Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.”
- Acts 13:38: “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the **forgiveness of sins.**”
- Acts 26:18: “To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive **forgiveness of sins**, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.”
- Eph 1:7: “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the **forgiveness of sins**, according to the riches of his grace.”
- Col 1:14: “In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the **forgiveness of sins.**”

In relation to the remission of sins

- Matt 26:28: “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the **remission of sins.**”
- Mark 1:4: “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the **remission of sins.**”
- Luke 1:77: “To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins.”
- Luke 3:3: “And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the **remission of sins.**”
- Luke 24:47: “And that repentance and **remission of sins** should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”
- Acts 2:38: “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the **remission of sins**, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”
- Acts 10:43: “To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive **remission of sins.**”
- Rom 3:25: “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the **remission of sins** that are past, through the forbearance of God.”
- Jn 8:21: “Then said Jesus again unto them, I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall **die in your sins**: whither I go, ye cannot come.”
- Jn 8:24: “I said therefore unto you, that ye shall **die in your sins**: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall **die in your sins.**”
- Acts 3:19: “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that **your sins may be blotted out**, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.”

Peter’s trilogy

“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit” (1 Pet 3:18). In this verse we have the intimation of three truths:

- Propitiation – Christ’s suffering *for* sins, in the sense that He condemned sin so that sins can be forgiven.
- Substitution – the Just for the unjust (the *bearing* of sins upon faith).
- Reconciliation – that He might bring us to God.

Paul’s treatise

Romans 8:3 marks the end of Paul’s discourse on sins and sin in the epistle to the Romans. He begins that discourse by establishing man’s moral responsibility to God. Man is “without excuse” (Rom 1:20). It is where every sinner must begin in his dealings with a holy God. We have here the charter for every evangelist who seeks to do justice to his calling – to speak of man’s responsibility to God, his ruin in Adam and his remedy in Christ. Paul then deals with man’s *sins* up to Chapter 5:12 (apart from the matter of sin raised in Chapter 3 in regard to the law). He follows this

with the matter of *sin* to the end of Chapter 7. Then, in Chapter 8 Paul brings his discourse on the Gospel to its triumphant conclusion. “There is therefore now no more condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”

Have we noticed the word “now?” Why no condemnation *now*? We have the answer in verse 3. “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.” The law came in on account of man’s disobedience and pride. It is “holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Rom 7:12). And, what did the law *do*? It condemned man and revealed his bondage under sin. “By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight” (Rom 3:20). But what was it that the law could *not do*? It was unable to condemn sin. But praise God, in the fullness of time God “sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law.” To what end? “To redeem them that were under the law” (Gal 4:4-5). At Calvary the Son condemned sin. And what does *this* do? It removes the curse of the law and justifies the sinner through faith, so that they “receive the adoption of sons” (Gal 4:5). Christ was not sent by God to condemn the world but to condemn **sin** (Jn 3:17). He did not have to condemn the world; the *law* does this. He was sent to offer salvation to the world by condemning **sin**; **grace** did that! It is Calvary’s grace that underwrites the blessed truth that “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”

No condemnation!

What does this mean for the **believer**? It means the root – **sin**, my evil nature has been condemned in Christ – judged and *put away* in Him by virtue of what He did at Calvary. It means too that my **sins** – the fruit has been *forgiven* in Christ, by virtue of the condemnation of sin by Him. **Sin**, the evil root – the nature has been *put away* judicially; its evil fruit *forgiven*.¹⁰ The entire failure of the first man has been dealt with by the Second Man, who is the Lord from heaven (1 Cor 15:47). Because of Him, the two questions resulting from the Fall, “Where art thou?” and “What hast thou done?” have no bearing upon the believer.

Justification

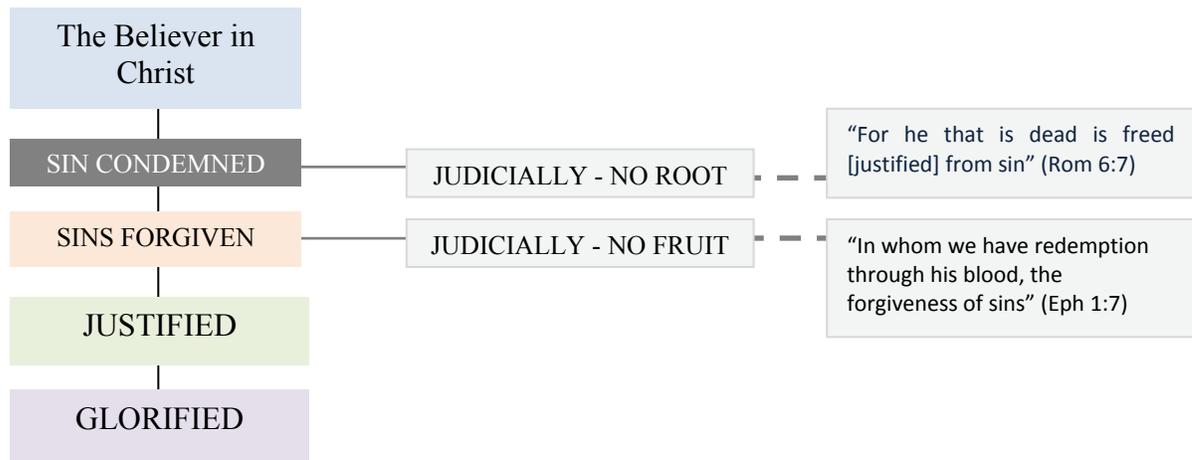
The emancipating theme of the Roman Epistle is “justification” through faith. The principle extends beyond the moral matter of “forgiveness” and speaks of the believer’s judicial *standing* before God, as one who is *justified* – that is, as one with no charge to answer. Paul brings out the value of Christ’s work in propitiation and God’s infinite grace to man in regard to it. “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God” (Rom 3:24-25). And so we have, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom 5:1-2). Who can condemn and lay charge against God’s elect? (Rom 8:33-34). None! Because it is God who not only forgives sins but who also justifies.

Glorification

But Paul does not stop at justification – our legal standing in Christ. The Spirit of God has more to reveal to us through his inspired pen, for we read that according to God’s predetermination, that “whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Rom 8:30). Our bodily glorification will be consummated at the Rapture. “Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor 15:51-53). “Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn 3:2). However, we presently possess a good and irrevocable title to it - in virtue of Christ’s death. Though once dead in sins, we are seen risen and seated together in heavenly places in Christ (Eph 2).

¹⁰ Are the blessings of this confined to the present dispensation? Indeed not! For we read that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom 4:3 cf Gen 15:6). Why was his belief counted unto him for righteousness? It was because God saw Abraham and all the believing ancients in the light of the condemnation of sin at the cross. And so we read “[Christ] Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God” (Rom 3:25). We take this up again later.

Glorification also refers to the inheritance we possess in Christ. “And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Rom 8:17). How blessed and humbling it is to trace the ascending path in Romans 8, illuminated by the triumphant truth that there is now no more condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, because He has condemned sin in the flesh! We see then, that our place in Christ means more than the moral matter of sins forgiven and more than standing before a righteous God without charge. It is glorification and possessing “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven” (1 Pet 1:4).



Lessons from the OT

The distinction between sins and sins, along with the doctrines of propitiation and substitution are imbedded in the OT. We encounter a prime and instructive example of it on the Day of Atonement when the high priest brought two goats without spot before Jehovah. “And he [Aaron, the high priest] shall take of the congregation of *the* children of Israel two kids of the goats for a sin offering” (Lev 16:5). One goat by lot was for Jehovah – its purpose was *Godward*. The other was for the people – its purpose was *manward*. The goat for Jehovah was for a sin offering. “And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the LORD’S lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering” (Lev 16:9). It was slain and its atoning blood sprinkled on and before the mercy-seat in the Holy of Holies by the high priest, divested of his garments of beauty and glory and clothed in his linen garments of righteousness. The blood sprinkled on the mercy-seat within the holiest speaks of what God is – HOLY, and what He demands - VINDICATION in regard to sin. **Sin** had to be dealt with (albeit annually). Once this had been done the high priest came out of the Holy of Holies. Notice, there is nothing about “sins” or the “laying on of the hands” in regard to this first goat – Jehovah’s lot; nothing at all about the people. This we get in the second goat – the people’s lot, and with it glad tidings for all. The high priest then laid his hands upon the head of the live second goat and confessed the **sins** of the people. This goat was released into the wilderness. It was the “scapegoat.” It symbolized the *bearing* away of the peoples’ *sins in substitution* after the *confession*, on the *ground* of the accepted death and shed blood of the first goat. “And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness” (Lev 16:21).

The foreshadowing of Christ and His work (refer to the figure on the last page)

The first goat

Can we not see how wondrously the first goat anticipates the *propitiation* made by the shed blood of Christ, typifying the necessity and acceptability of His sacrifice before God in regard to the matter of *sin* and *sins*? Paul speaks of it in Romans 3:25 as we have noted. “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare his righteousness [i.e., in regard to sin] for the remission of sins.” The expression “to be a propitiation” (*hilastêrion*)

according to its use in Scripture (cf Heb 9:5), means “mercy seat,” which in the OT related to the *covering* of *sin*. Here Christ *Himself* is the propitiation – “the propitiatory.” His blood is the ground upon which propitiation is made for the forgiveness of sins; faith is the means by which we appropriate the forgiveness of sins. His work for sin (and hence sins) was “once for all,” which marks the vital difference between Christ’s propitiation and the atonement made in the OT through repeated animal sacrifices. Christ’s perfect sacrifice completely and eternally met the righteous demands of God in regard to sin. His sacrificial work for sins therefore did not have to be repeated. “But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God” (Heb 10:12; 9:28). “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust” (Pet 3:18). As the divine Man, He was the needed perfect sacrifice for sin. He perfectly met God’s wrath against sin and, in so doing He vindicated the holiness of God forever. Sin therefore has been defeated, put away— Hebrews 9:26. God sent His own Son for *sin*, and His Son has *condemned* sin in the flesh – not simply *covered* it as was the case in the OT. This is the divine ground upon which God is able to show mercy to the guilty sinner.

The second goat

The second goat brings before us what man is and what he needs – the glad tidings of the Gospel of God’s grace. He is a guilty sinner in need of a Sin-Bearer – found only in Christ. “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The peoples’ goat typifies the work of Christ in *substitution* - the Scapegoat who bore *our sins*. “So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many [the many who believe]” (Heb 9:28). Whereas propitiation is Godward and concerned with meeting God’s holy nature and character, substitution is meeting man’s need for the forgiveness of sins. As we noted, Peter, addressing *believers* speaks of “[Christ] who in His own self bore our sins in His own body on the tree.” The two goats foreshadow the entire truth and message of Calvary. God became man, and as the Perfect Man He put away *sin* forever by the sacrifice of Himself. Because of this God can offer forgiveness of sins to all who confess their guilt. Those who do so can *then* say He bore *my sins* in His own body on the cross. He becomes their Substitute.

Practical lessons

The practical implications of these truths are many. We note two that are relevant to our present subject. The first relates to the message we take to the unbelieving *world*; the second relates to what we take to our believing *hearts*.

To the world

First, we cannot say that Christ “bore the sins of the world” on the cross; nor can we say to the unsaved that “Christ bore your sins” on the cross. To do so will in the former case obscure the doctrine of propitiation. It was the divine wrath against **sin** that the Lord bore on the cross, thus making *provision* for everyone’s sins to be forgiven. In the latter case the doctrine of substitution is perverted, because it assumes that Christ is the Substitute for all regardless of individual responsibility and repentance. We have no Scriptural authority to say that Christ died *instead* of all. Biblical substitution is not “replacement.” What we can say is that Christ died *for* all. Indeed, “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). He gave Himself a ransom for all (1 Tim 2:6).¹¹ Second, we inform the world that the unsaved person is guilty before God and must turn to Christ in repentant belief. Third, we declare the glorious emancipating truth to the world that there is now no divine condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

To our hearts

The abiding source of our praise and thanksgiving to God is that Christ has propitiated a holy God and, that because of this, as *believers* our **sin** has been judicially put away and our **sins** have been forgiven in Christ. In other words, though faith we come into the benefit of Christ’s work of putting away sin. Paul declares, “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin” (Rom 4:8). Why blessed? It is because God cannot impute sin which has been put away by His Son. Sin, the root is not imputed to us and no sins (fruit) remain *judicially*. We have come into the unassailable blessing of the work of Christ in regard to sin and sins. We are not regarded by God as “in Adam.” We are seen by Him as reborn and saved in Christ, standing outside of Adam and of **sin** and its judgment. We now stand “in Christ.” “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22). What has been imputed to

¹¹ But not all desire to be ransomed.

us? Righteousness! We have this explicitly declared. “For He [God] hath made Him [Christ] to be **sin** for us, who knew no **sin**; that we might be made [become] the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21).

The prevailing error of not rightly dividing the Word of God

There are some who have not grasped the difference between sin and sins and, consequently, they have very little appreciation of the doctrines of propitiation and substitution. This has largely been due to the error of approaching the Word of God with a predetermined system of theology. Such a predilection obscures the distinctions that we have noted. We will see how this has led to serious error – error that strikes at the very heart of the Gospel and the efficacious work upon which it is founded. Paul exhorts us all to “study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

Limited atonement

Let us take an example, one that in part prompted this paper. Calvinists tell us, that when we who oppose their doctrine teach that “Christ did not bear the sins of the world on the cross,” we are in fact agreeing with their doctrine of “limited atonement.” This doctrine teaches that the value of Christ’s death is limited to the sins of the “elect.” His death they say is “sufficient” to save all; but in reality it is only “effective” for a few – those elected by God for salvation. Now read what they claim in support of this doctrine. “If your sins are paid for already by Jesus and you go to hell, then that’s double jeopardy.”¹² This double jeopardy arises they say when non-Calvinists claim that “Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of people who don’t believe.”¹³ That is, He bore the sins of all men, even for those who will not believe. Calvinists then commend “limited atonement” and their doctrine of election. They claim that these tenets of Calvinism avoid this double jeopardy. This is because Christ did not die for the sins of those who do not believe the Gospel – those who they say God has not elected for salvation.

Have we spotted their error, or we should say errors? The assertion above has not only misunderstood what it is we claim regarding Christ’s work, but it also misunderstands what Scripture has to say about sin and sins. We do *not* claim that Christ *bore the sins* of all men; Scripture never teaches such a thing as we have noted. Christ did not bear everyone’s *sins* on the cross (those of believers and unbelievers). What we do claim, is that what He *did* do for everyone was to make *provision* for their sins *to be* borne. He did this by His work of propitiation in condemning **sin**. The sin question is wholly to do with God – not man. We saw it typified in the first goat, Jehovah’s lot on the Day of Atonement. Because God’s holiness has been vindicated, He can *now* reach out in grace and mercy to everyone and offer forgiveness of *sins* to all. *This* is where man is brought in along with his responsibility to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation (the second goat). All who accept this wondrous offer can then say in faith “he bore my sins in His own body on the tree.” As for those who do not accept His offer, they reap the judgment for their *sins* and are not forgiven. Christ did not *bear* their sins on the cross. He has given them, along with all men the *opportunity* to have their sins forgiven. He has made provision for this by the condemnation of sin. So we see that there is no double jeopardy whatsoever and no biblical argument here (or anywhere else) for the odious doctrine of “limited atonement” or the noxious idea that God has predetermined a certain number to be saved. It is apparent that those who advocate such notions have little understanding of the distinction between sin and sins, or of Christ’s work of propitiation and the doctrine of substitution. May we repeat, His propitiating death on the cross condemned **sin** which has made *provision* for everyone’s **sins** to be forgiven – praise God!

Can God forgive sin?

We come now to the first of our two questions, which has largely been answered. From the passages noted so far it is clear that God cannot forgive **sin**. There is no explicit or implicit teaching in Scripture that supports it; rather, the doctrine of Christ and His work revealed in Scripture speak against it. However, there is an abundance of biblical testimony that God can and does forgive **sins**. The overwhelming testimony of the Bible is that sin in principle and root must be answered and condemned. This took place judicially upon the cross – hence the Lord’s cry “It is finished.” I come into the blessing of this now, for I am dead *to* sin. I am never called upon to die *to* sin. How can I die

¹² That is, an unbeliever’s sins have been paid for twice – once by Christ and then again by the unbeliever when cast into hell.

¹³ John MacArthur – “Bible Questions and Answers.” <http://www.biblebb.com/files/macqa/70-19-6.htm>

to something that I am already dead to (Rom 6:2)? Through faith and standing in Christ, sin will never be imputed to me. As we noted the complete blessing of the putting away of sin will not be realized until the New Heaven and New Earth.

Forgiveness before Calvary

We need to say a little more about the extent of Christ's propitiating work as it relates to the forgiveness of sins *before* Calvary. On what basis were people saved during that time? The short biblical answer is that they were saved on the same basis that we are – the finished work of Christ and its condemnation of sin. But you say they had no knowledge of Christ and Calvary! True – **but God did!** Their faith in God was counted for righteousness because of what Christ *would* do. As far as God was concerned, Calvary was always an accomplished fact - even within His eternal past counsels; a forethought and never an afterthought. Here again the doctrine of propitiation is placed before us. It is God propitiating *Himself*. No matter what, sin had to be challenged and condemned in order that God vindicate His holiness. It is God's work for Himself. Christ's work of propitiation. Its enabling offer of forgiveness to all and the reality of forgiveness through faith stand true for all generations – past, present and future. “[Christ] Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of **sins that are past**, through the forbearance of God” (Rom 3:25). The “sins of the past” is better translated “the passing over of sins.” It does not refer to *our* past sins, but to those committed by people of a past era – the days before Calvary. God “passed over” the sins of all who believed in Him on the righteous ground of the inevitable propitiating work of His Son that was to come. This is why He could forgive their sins and not contradict His righteousness – which would have been contradicted if sin was not challenged and condemned in a degree that satisfied His infinite holiness. And so we have the abiding principle that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Gen 15:6). Because of their faith, Abraham and all the saints before Calvary stand righteous before God in virtue of Christ's finished work. We have the same teaching in Hebrews 9:26. “But now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” The better rendering of “the end of the world” is that Christ appeared at “the consummation of all ages” – past, present and future. All ages find their salvation from sin at Calvary.

Forgiveness of sins – past, present and future

Many are concerned about the sins committed after their salvation. There are a number of vital truths that when brought to bear will, to faith, dispel all doubt concerning this matter.

1. It is well to remember that when Christ died for our sins they were *all* future. Scripture makes no distinction between our past, present or future sins upon salvation. So given that we are crucified with Christ (Rom 6:6), His death expiates all our sins – past, present or future.
2. Believers are “justified.” We noted earlier that this is more than having our guilt removed. It is being regarded by God as never having been guilty. We are seen by God as *standing* in Christ – the guiltless One, and in His finished work (which is quite apart from our spiritual *state*). “To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved” (Eph 1:6). We are irrevocably and completely “the righteousness of God in Him [Christ]” (2 Cor 5:21). Our spiritual state or *condition* may change from day to day; but our *position* in Christ stands firm. This being the case the matter of past, present and future sins is entirely irrelevant in regard to our eternal salvation.
3. As believers we have not only been justified but glorified. “And whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Rom 8:30). Now we know that this glorification has its consummation at the Rapture, but the passage looks upon it as our present inalienable possession and entitlement in Christ. The grammatical construction confirms it as being so as we noted earlier. After all, along with justification it carries the absolute certainty resting in divine predestination.¹⁴ “Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also

¹⁴ Which is not election.

justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Here too, we see that a distinction between past, present and future sins is irrelevant in regard to our eternal salvation.

4. There is yet another foil to the fear of future *sins*. We have it in Hebrews 10:18. “Now where remission of these is [i.e., sins], **there is no more offering for sin.**” Now if Christ’s work on the cross did *not* deal with my future sins, then I am horribly lost because there is no more offering for *sin*. My future sins cannot be dealt with on the divine ground of propitiation and substitution. I would be irrevocably dead in trespasses and sins and under God’s wrath. The entire divine purpose of salvation would be compromised. And, what is that purpose? It is “that in the ages to come He might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:7). *That* is why we are told that we are “accepted in the Beloved” (Eph 1:6); that we are now quickened together with Christ and seen sitting in heavenly places in Him (Eph 1:6; 2:5-6).

Satan is forever seeking to undermine our assurance of salvation. Our sometimes poor spiritual **state** is often dangled before us – enjoining us to look within for assurance. However, the Word of God would have us look to our spiritual **standing** – to look to Christ. Another has well said, “We stand upon His merit; we know no other stand, not even where glory dwelleth in Emmanuel’s land.”

But what about John 1:9?

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Surely this relates to our sins after conversion! Indeed it does, but the forgiveness and cleansing from unrighteousness here is *not* in relation to our *standing* in Christ and our salvation. If we commit sins we are *walking* unrighteously – in darkness, and so as His children our fellowship with the Father who is in the light is broken. Upon our confession, forgiveness takes place, unrighteousness in our state ceases and fellowship with Him is restored. *This* is the forgiveness here – one that enables a fractured fellowship due to unrighteousness in walk to be restored.

May we repeat, it is *not* forgiveness or righteousness in relation to our standing in Christ. That has been dealt with, established and secured on the ground of Christ’s death when we through faith accepted Christ as our Saviour.¹⁵ This can never be touched because it is as sure as the work of Christ in propitiation which can *never* fail. Has not Christ been exalted at the right hand of a holy God? And we are “the righteousness of God in Him” and “accepted in the Beloved” (2 Cor 5:21; Eph 1:6). We noted the unassailable assurance earlier. “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin” (Rom 4:8). God cannot impute sin which has been condemned and put away by His Son. And so, John is careful to predicate what he has to say about our sins and lost fellowship with the Father on the ground that “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from **all** sin” (v 7).

It is vital to understand that forgiveness and restoration in regard to *fellowship* with the Father *must* be on the same righteous ground that secures our standing in Christ – His work of propitiation. It is, after all, a matter of our **sins**, which must be dealt with on the basis of **sin** having been condemned. *This* is why John brings Christ in here as “the propitiation for our sins” – even our Advocate, “Jesus Christ the Righteous.” It is foundational to the truth declared in verse 7 - “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” Recall too, that the passage up to and including the first part of verse 2 relates only to believers, with Christ as their Advocate. In the second part of verse 2 John makes a general statement as to the value of Christ’s propitiatory work for the entire world.

Some final thoughts from Romans 6 and 7

We are dead to sin

We have throughout this paper resisted the desire to say more on the advocacy of Christ. We will continue to do so and if it pleases the Lord we will take up this blessed subject in another place. It leaves us room to conclude with a

¹⁵ Perhaps a little illustration will help. As a child I belong to a family. Nothing can remove my position in it. It is mine by blood and birthright. However, I may embark upon a wrongful action that fractures my relationship with my father. I remain by birth irrevocably part of the family, but now my fellowship with my father (and my family) is marred. If, however, a gracious father accepts my confession of wrong doing, fellowship is restored. The forgiveness here is all about my state and not my standing.

further comment relating to sin and sins from the Roman epistle. “The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law” (1 Cor 15:56).

John writes that we “sin not” and then focuses on how as believers we can be restored to fellowship with the Father if we commit sins. “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn 2:1). John bases his exhortation on the relationship between God the Father and His children. Paul, like John speaks of “sins” committed by the believer after salvation. His exhortation fits the polemic purpose of his epistle.¹⁶ “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin [the root], live any longer therein” (Rom 6:1-2). Paul also speaks of why we should not commit sins. He bases his exhortation on another relationship – one that we have with God as the Justifier through Christ’s death. “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24). And so we have practically, “knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom 6:6). “For he that is dead is freed [justified] from sin” (Rom 6:7). Because of this death, we have the exhortation, “Let not sin [the evil nature or root] therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof” (Rom 6:12). The exhortation is strengthened by the truth that we are not only “dead to sin” but “alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 6:11). “Dead to sin” is better rendered “we died to sin” (the evil nature). This is not being dead to *sins* as this does not address the root problem and the truth of justification. It is Christ and the question of sin; that He condemned sin bearing its judgment on the cross. We come into the good of this work on the cross upon our faith in Him. Sin, the root and principle has no claim upon us judicially. It is *this* truth that is brought before the believer by Paul in Romans. Here again we see the need to distinguish between sin and sins, to rightly divide Scripture if we are to enter into its practical teaching. There is thus no sin *on* us; but there is, as we have noted, still sin *in* us which, when allowed to reign leads to us committing *sins*. What does all this mean practically for the believer? Being “free from sin” we “became the servants of righteousness” (Rom 6:18).¹⁷

We are dead to the law

The law abides and “the strength of sin [the root] is the law.” The inability of man to keep the law and defeat sin means that the law keeps man under the bondage of sin. But because Christ condemned sin, the law is no longer our husband, we are “dead to it.” Recall that the law could not condemn sin but it condemned the sinner. Christ condemned sin and justifies the sinner through faith. For this reason we are “dead to the law” – free from its condemnation and bondage. “Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ [i.e., His death]” (Rom 7:4). Can anything be plainer regarding the law in the life of the believer? How vain and vapid are all efforts to “keep the law” whatever shade this may take. “For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God” (Gal 2:19). How am I dead to the law through the law? It is that “by the law is the knowledge of **sin**” (our fallen nature, Rom 3:20). The law was our schoolmaster revealing our condemnation in **sin** and so brings us to Christ – He who condemned sin. “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster” (Gal 3:24-25).

No longer in Adam but in Christ

When we trace each of the truths regarding sin and sins, we find that they converge upon the grand truth that our *standing* before God is no longer in Adam but in Christ. In Adam we were dead in sin, dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1) and in bondage to the law. But we are now alive unto God through Christ. We are dead to sin (Rom 6:2), free from sin (Rom 6:22) and dead to the law (Rom 7:4). “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” (Rom 5:19).

¹⁶ When we say something is polemic, we mean that it states a view and then presents the arguments in *support* of it while arguing against opposing views. If something is said to be “apologetic,” it seeks merely to *defend* a point of view.

¹⁷ In Romans 6:7 it is **justification** (*dikaioo*) from **sin**; in verse 22 it is **liberation** (*eleutheroo*) from the bondage of **sin**. The latter is predicated on the former which agrees with Paul’s Gospel polemic in Romans. The AV has “free” and “freed” respectively and so it blurs the distinction and causation.

Sin and Sins and Propitiation and Substitution

