



The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Following the journey of the memes of the Bible from their original cultural & historical origins to their influence in our world today.

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Does God Just Wink When Our Sins Hurt Others?

By Jim Myers

Our religious belief systems play a major role in creating our realities, what we believe about God and how we treat others. How we answer the above question depends on what our religious beliefs are. Finding the answer begins with how we define sin. Religions have very different definitions for this very familiar word. It must be noted that even groups or denominations of one religion may have significant differences, too. Since it is estimated that there are 40,000 Christian denominations in the United States alone, I will not attempt to summarize them all; that would take an encyclopedia. So, I will just focus on how my belief system has changed in the past twenty-five plus years.

I had been working on a chapter in the book that I am now writing about what sins mean to different people. While doing a search on the internet I came across an article about "What happens when a Christian commits a sin?" As I read it I found some of the beliefs that I was taught at my family's church when I was growing up. Understanding what sin is and how it affects our relationship with God was always a little confusing in that church.

The confusion began when I learned that I was "born a sinner" and that if I had died the moment I took my first breath I would have spent eternity in hell. The sins we committed didn't really play a role in the whole thing. I didn't know it at the time, but the belief that our church held was based on the doctrine of Original Sin. The doctrine states that it is a condition, not something that people do. It is not just an inherited spiritual disease or defect in human nature; it's also the 'condemnation' that goes with it.

The doctrine of Original Sin¹ is based on Bishop Augustine's interpretation of what happened when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. It states that every human being inherits guilt from Adam, which means that everyone is born a sinner with a built-in urge to do bad things and to disobey God. It also states that every human is damned, even if they do not

commit any sins of their own. People can only escape damnation by believing in God's grace, and believing that the crucifixion of Jesus was a sacrificial act that removed the guilt of Adam. God's grace is passed on to the believer through baptism in the church. Now let's return to the question of what happens if a Christian sins after he or she is saved? The website I found addressed this question in the following way.

Before you got saved, you only had one nature, or one set of desires: the flesh, or the old man. **The old man cannot be made righteous, nor can he enter Heaven. He can only sin.** When you got saved, the Holy Spirit came to dwell within your body. **He gave you a new nature, a new set of desires. This new nature cannot sin, but can only do right.** So, as a Christian, you now have two natures. The old nature, called the flesh, will always sin. The new nature, the Spirit, will always do right. Your old nature and your new nature are always fighting for control, and you decide which one to obey.

I don't know what this sounds like to you, but it reminds me of the old Flip Wilson show when he would say, "The devil made me do it!" According to the above beliefs, life does not sound like it would be very peaceful. The website I was reading then asked what has to be the most important question, "Will the sins we do cause us to lose our salvation?"

If we sin as Christians, is there a certain type of sin or any amount of sin that will make us lose our salvation? The answer to that question is very simple: NO. Now that you are saved, you have eternal life. You are not waiting for it: It is yours today! You have already passed from death unto life, and are now a citizen in heaven, with an inheritance waiting there for you in your name.²

This doctrine clearly provides a great deal of comfort for the saved person, but how does it affect the world we live in or the people that get hurt by our acts of sin? Did the above doctrines play a role in the way that some churches dealt with their priests and ministers when they discovered they had sexually abused children? Did they believe it was just the "old natures" of the clergymen that caused them to do it, but since they were already citizens of heaven they just needed to move them around until they departed from this life?

But what about the people harmed or even murdered by the sinful acts of believers? *Doesn't God or the church care about them?* As a minister I received many request to pray with someone for forgiveness from God for a sin they had committed. After, the "Amen" the person that sinned felt free of the guilt and went on with life. *However, the person that was harmed knew nothing about the prayer. He or she wasn't even asked whether they forgave them.*

When I discovered that Jesus was a Jew and that he taught Jewish people about Jewish things, obviously, one of the first things I wanted to find out was what sin meant in his Jewish culture. In biblical Hebrew there are about 20 different words which denote "sin." The three most commonly used words for sin are – **HET'**, **PESHA`**, and **AVON**.³

(1) **HET'** occurs in the Bible 459 times and means "to miss" something; "to fail." It signifies a failure of mutual relations and corresponds to the modern idea of "offense" rather than to that of "sin." It denotes an action, not an abstraction, with its consequences. Failure in carrying out one's duty can concern the relations between men or between God and man.

(2) **PESHA'** occurs in the Bible 136 times. Its basic meaning is that of "breach." In terms of international law, the breach of a covenant is thus PESHA'. It is a wrongful act which dissolves the community or breaks the peaceful relation between two parties. It is also used to express the sinful behavior of man toward God.

(3) The verb **AVON** found in the Bible 17 times, basically expresses the idea of crookedness, and thus means "to wrong," and in the passive form, "to become bent." The noun AVON, from the same root, is found 227 (229) times, and designates "crookedness."

The usual rabbinic term for sin is **AVERAH**, from the root **AVAR** ("to pass over"; i.e., sin is a rejection of God's will). The rabbis rarely speak of sin in the abstract, but usually of specific sins. There are **sins of commission** (transgression of negative precepts) and **sins of omission** (the failure to perform positive precepts). Sins of commission are more serious than those of omission.

The ancient remedy for sin in the Second Temple Period was the sin-offering, which worked both for the purification of the person, as well as to obtain the forgiveness of the God. The sinner was required to confess their sin as part of the sacrificial ritual for forgiveness. *Confession expels the sin from his heart, while at the same time it shows that he does not intend to conceal his sin and to deceive God.*

When God "forgives" one's sin, He "covers" or "hides" it. He does not remember it; He "bears" it Himself. Though it is merely said that the sin is forgotten, covered, not imputed to the sinner, God's forgiveness of sins is identical with the curing of the man and with the regeneration of his strength. **God's forgiveness, however extensive, only encompasses those offenses which man commits directly against Him. Sins in which injury is caused to one's fellow man are not forgiven by God until the injured party has himself forgiven the perpetrator.** Even after compensatory payments have been made,

the offender must still seek forgiveness from the injured party *because of the suffering that he caused.*

Mans' actions in the forgiveness process involve both conscience and deeds, in order to secure forgiveness. It is not enough for a person to hope and pray for forgiveness. He must humble himself, acknowledge his wrong, and resolve to depart from the sin. Inner contrition must be followed by outward acts; remorse must be translated into deeds.

This process is called **TESHUVAH** in Hebrew, which is translated "**repentance.**" The root word is **SHUV**, which means "to turn." The idea is that the person who committed the sin was going the wrong way, so the solution is for the person to turn around and go the right way. The goal is to restore, not destroy the person. Let's review the steps of **TESHUVAH**:

Step 1: **Stop** – Cease from doing the sin; stop doing the harmful act.

Step 2: **Regret** - Feel regret for the actions and the harm they caused.

Step 3: **Confess** - Express regret out loud. It doesn't have to be done to professional minister or priest. It can be accomplished by a prayer or just by saying the words out loud.

Step 4: **Do good works.** Do good works that are restorative actions and provide restitution for the damage caused by the sin. **Go to the person(s) sinned against and make amends – (1) ask for forgiveness; (2) do what is necessary to restore things back to the state they were before the sin.** Only after these steps are completed can one ask God for forgiveness.

What Jesus taught about sin and forgiveness clearly reflects the above Jewish beliefs, which was not what I had been taught by my church. Pay close attention to what he taught, which is found in Matthew 5:23-24:

"So if you are offering your sacrifice at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your sacrifice there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your sacrifice."

Let's review the process again:

- (1) You are offering your sacrifice at the altar.
- (2) There, at the altar, you remember that your brother has a case against you.
- (3) Leave your sacrifice -- stop the actual religious ritual.

- (4) Go -- leave the Temple immediately.
- (5) First be reconciled with your brother.
- (6) Then be reconciled with God.

If we put the teachings of Jesus in our modern context of asking for forgiveness by prayer, it would be something like this:

- (1) You are offering your prayer for forgiveness.
- (2) As you pray, you remember that you have sinned against someone.
- (3) Stop your prayer.
- (4) Find the person who has been sinned against and do TESHUVAH and make amends – (1) ask for forgiveness; (2) do what is necessary to restore things back to the state they were before the sin.
- (5) First be reconciled with your brother.
- (6) Then return to your prayer and ask for God’s forgiveness.

*Jesus’ words reveal something that is completely alien to most Christians. Now think about the two ways of viewing sin and receiving forgiveness that I had learned in my lifetime. **One way completely ignores the person harmed and the other restores him or her.** One way is to pray a prayer, if the sinner wants to, but it really doesn’t affect anything because their eternal destiny is already set. The other way requires the sinner to make amends and repair the damage.*

What Jesus taught about forgiveness had nothing to do with going to heaven. *It was how to repair the relationships of people, and their relationship to God, in the world in which they live. What if Christians were actively involved in doing what Jesus taught about forgiveness? How would it affect our world today? You may be surprised to learn that there is an organization that actively teaches its members to use the above process of **TESHUVAH** -- and the results have been miraculous for many people. The organization is **Alcoholics Anonymous** and if you read the “Twelve Steps,” you will recognize **TESHUVAH**.*

*Shouldn’t every believer find out what Jesus taught first, and then, if it is different from what their church teaches -- find out who changed it? I didn’t know some of my most important beliefs were created by Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the 5th century CE. I knew nothing about him or the things that may have influenced him to create that doctrine. I thought they came straight from God. You know, the most important question may not be whether “God just wink when our sins hurt others?” Instead it may be – *What does God think about those who harm those “made in His image” and never do anything to repair the damage they have done or attempt to repair broken relationships?** **BHC**

¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/originalsin_1.shtml

² http://www.lighthousebaptistsydney.com/articles/general/What_Happens_When_a_Christian_Sins.pdf

³ Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 14, col. 1587-1592

February Memorials

In Loving Memory

**PHYLLIS
WYRE**

d. February 8, 1998

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**ALBERTA
HARLESS
MYERS**

b. August 18, 1887
d. February 5, 1979

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**GLORY ANN
HODGES
ROSS**

b. August 18, 1887
d. February 29, 2008

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which they shared when we
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will
live; for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The
Prayer Book Press)

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials. The Memorial Garden is on the website at <http://www.biblicalheritage.org>. Please visit it the next time you are on the Internet. If you would like to add your loved one to this section, send their information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Remember those who have meant so much to you.

In Loving Memory

**MARIA
ESTELLA
RUIZ**

February 22, 1996

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**JAMES
HENRY
MYERS**

b. September 6, 1881
d. February 13, 1953

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*



SHALOM

*Totality, Wholeness &
Peace.*

Is it important for Christians to learn about & understand the Jewish teachings of Jesus?

Does what we believe affect who we are as individuals, communities & nations – and how we relate to one another? We are committed to providing you with solid fact-based information, but we need your help.

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