
What is the Unpardonable Sin?

Do you ever fear that you may have committed an unforgivable sin? Do you worry that you may have gone *too far*, that your fate is sealed, and no matter how hard you may try, or how badly you may want it, God will *never* forgive you? Do you fear that you may have lost any hope of ever having salvation? If so, you need to understand what the Bible says about *the unpardonable sin*.

by Vance A. Stinson

Is there a sin that God will not forgive? Many believe there is such a sin, and some fear they have committed it.

Some say that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the unpardonable sin. But what is “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”? Others say that deliberately sinning after having accepted Christ as Savior is unforgivable. But is it? Will God refuse to forgive such a sin, even if the sinner repents of his transgression?

Just what is the unpardonable sin? Is it murder? ...adultery? ...blasphemy? Or is it an *attitude*, a *state of mind*?

One thing is sure: If you *fear* that you may have committed the unpardonable sin, and if your heart’s desire is to return to a right relationship with God, then you can STOP YOUR WORRY! You *can*, if you really and truly desire it, turn to God in repentance, and *He will certainly forgive you*—a fact you will see *proved* in this article.

But some fear that their final doom is impending, no matter how many tears fall before the throne of grace. They think that God will *never* forgive them, no matter the depth of their repentance.

Such thinking is based on a *misunderstanding* of a few scriptural passages. So let’s carefully examine each, and see if we can come to a clear understanding of what the Bible really says about this subject.

But first, let’s answer one of the most frequently asked and certainly one of the most important questions of all: “What must I do to be saved?”

The WAY of Salvation

Some say that all one has to do to be saved is “just believe.” But James says that even the *demons* “believe, and tremble” (James 2:19). Clearly, “belief” alone is not enough. So what conditions are required for salvation? What steps must one take before his sins are blotted out?

The people who heard Peter preach on the day of Pentecost—the birthday of the New Testament Church—asked a similar question.

“Now when they heard this [Peter’s sermon], they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, *what shall we do?*” (Acts 2:37).

Peter’s words had penetrated their hearts; they wanted to know what they could do—what conditions they had to meet—before they could be saved.

Notice Peter’s answer: “...**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 Spirit” (verse 38).

Before one can receive the Holy Spirit, he must *repent* of his sins. **REPENTANCE**, then, is necessary before remission of sins is possible. Repentance, of course, must be accompanied by *faith* (belief) and followed by *baptism* and the *laying on of hands*.

John says that “sin is the *transgression of the law*” (I John 3:4). Before remission of sins is possible, one must *repent* of his sins—repent of transgressing God’s law. To repent means to be sorry for past sins; it means to **CHANGE**—to have a *change of heart*, of attitude, of intent; to change from an attitude of rebelliousness or indifference to one of meekness and submissiveness. Repentance is always directed toward God, not self.

Once these conditions are met, God will graciously grant the gift of His Holy Spirit. A true Christian, then, is one in whom the Spirit of God dwells. “Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His” (Romans 8:9).

Almost everyone agrees that even the worst of sinners can become Christians, if they will but repent and turn to God. But what about the *Christian* who is overcome by temptation and falls to sin—will God forgive him if he repents? Or is his fate sealed?

“Backsliding” Christians

Consider the hypothetical example of Joe, a Christian and churchgoer for more than 20 years.

Joe is an alcoholic who gave up drinking when he began

attending church those many years ago. His change in lifestyle proved beneficial to everyone. His family life improved greatly. He became more productive at work. In short, his whole life changed for the better.

But one day it happened—Joe released his grip on rationality, only to reach for the bottle once again. The nightmare returned. Joe lost his wife, his job, his self-respect—all within a few months.

After a year of wrecking his life, Joe managed to regain a hold on sanity. He stopped drinking and began putting the pieces of his shattered life back together. He also returned to regular church attendance, and prayed fervently that God would forgive him of his terrible sins.

Did God forgive Joe?

Let us assume that Joe had been a true Christian before returning to a life of sin. But now, a long time later, he is sorry for his “backsliding,” and wants to have his relationship with God restored. Is it now impossible for God to forgive Joe? Is all hope now lost?

According to some, Joe’s doom is sealed; his sin is unpardonable, eternal. It is *impossible* for him to come to repentance, to renew his relationship with God. Hebrews 6:4-6, it is claimed, supports this conclusion.

The passage states: “For it is *impossible* for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall *fall away*, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.”

Does this mean that Joe, who had been “enlightened” and had “tasted the good word of God” before returning to his former sinful ways, has no hope of ever being forgiven? Has God—the merciful, loving, gracious Father who is not willing that any should perish—decreed that Joe is past forgiveness, that he has no more chance for salvation? Does it mean that no matter how deeply Joe repents, how badly he wants to obey God, how earnestly he seeks reconciliation with God, God will still *reject* him?

Peter tells us, “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage. For if after they have escaped the pollutions of this world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire” (II Peter 2:19-22).

Joe was “overcome” by temptation and “brought in bondage” to alcoholism. He had “escaped the pollutions of this world,” but was “again entangled therein, and overcome.” Would it have been better for Joe “not to have known the way of righteousness”?

In Hebrews 10:26-27 we read, “For if we sin *wilfully* after

that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains *no more sacrifice* for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.”

When Joe reverted to his former sins, he was fully *knowledgeable* of what he was doing. He *knew* he was wrong. But he did it anyway. Does the above passage tell us there is “no more sacrifice” for Joe’s sins?

If Joe turns again to God in genuine *repentance*, will God forgive him? Or is it too late for Joe?

Repentance—Key to Forgiveness

Through the prophet Malachi, God says, “Return unto me, and I will return unto you” (Malachi 3:7). “Return...” God says. One cannot *return* to a place or condition without having first been there. But how can a “backslider” who has strayed from God return to Him?

James, writing to *Christian* Israelites, said, “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye *sinners*; and purify your hearts, ye *double minded*. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up” (James 4:8-10).

Notice the terminology: “Draw nigh...Cleanse your hands...purify your hearts...Be afflicted...mourn...weep...Humble yourselves...”—clearly, an admonition to turn to God in REPENTANCE! And remember, James was *not* writing to sinners who had never been converted, but to people who had repented and been baptized for remission of sins but had drifted back into the ways of the world (see verse 4).

Repentance, as pointed out earlier in this article, means to be sorry for past sins, to have a change of heart, and to earnestly desire to obey God. (For a thorough study on this subject write immediately for our free booklet, *Why Should You Repent?*)

Just read through the second and third chapters of Revelation and notice how many times Jesus Christ calls on *His own servants* to REPENT.

John wrote, “If we confess *our* sins, He is faithful and just to forgive *us* our sins, and to cleanse us from all *unrighteousness*” (I John 1:9). Notice the words “we...our...us”—John was talking to the *Church of God*, not to the non-Christian world.

Christians, then, can yield to temptation, can *sin*, but can return to God by *repenting* of their sins.

But there are some who adamantly insist that God will not forgive Christians who have sinned. Apparently, they think God is a bit short of mercy; that His grace may be applied one time only; that human parents forgive their children more easily than God forgives His sons and daughters, and are therefore more merciful and have greater patience than God.

The Bible simply does not agree with such a view of God. Peter wrote, “The Lord is *not slack* concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is *longsuffering* to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come

to repentance" (II Peter 3:9).

What, then, does Hebrews 6:4-6 mean?

Notice the wording: "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened...If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance."

The key word here is REPENTANCE. Anytime one repents, then obviously he has not "fallen" so far that it is impossible to renew him to repentance. Anytime a "backslider" *wants* to repent and turn back to God, HE CAN! The only person who *cannot* repent is the person who, of his *own* volition, WILL NOT repent—for God is *not willing* that any should perish!

Now, let us consider a possible second meaning of the scripture under discussion.

Turn to and read Matthew 19:23-26. Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, *With men this is IMPOSSIBLE; but with God ALL THINGS are possible.*"

Now go back to Hebrews the sixth chapter and let's note the context.

"Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment" (verse 1-2).

The writer is not saying that these doctrines are not important; he's merely telling the Hebrew Christians to strive to progress beyond the elementary principles. To continue to preach repentance from dead works, baptism, and laying on of hands to people who had already been baptized—who had already experienced initial conversion—is a waste of time.

Why is it a waste of time?

Because "...it is impossible for those who were once enlightened...If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance" by trying to lay the foundation all over again. In other words, continually *preaching* the elementary doctrines (baptism, laying on of hands, etc.) will not help those who "fall away"—will not enable them to lay a new foundation.

So the writer of Hebrews *may* be saying that it is impossible for *us*—human beings—to renew those "fallen away" to repentance, "*but with God all things are possible*"! He is more than willing to grant them repentance; and He will forgive them, if they will but repent.

The key to forgiveness is *repentance*. God grants repentance, but it is up to the sinner to repent. Anytime one truly repents *God will forgive*, no matter how badly he may have sinned, no matter how abominable his sins may be.

Turn again to II Peter 2:19-22. Peter was not talking about those who occasionally sinned because of weakness, temptation or ignorance; he was speaking of those who had reached

the "*latter end*"—who had turned from God *completely*, having rejected His offer of repentance.

But what if someone desires to turn back to God before reaching the "*latter end*"? Is it too late for him to do so? NO! If he wants to return to God, *he can!*

Again, *repentance* is the key. *Wherever there's repentance there's forgiveness of sins*. This fact is born out throughout the Holy Scriptures.

David—Sinner or Saint?

Consider the example of David, whom God called "a man after mine own heart" (Acts 13:22). David, we are told, was a "man of God" (Nehemiah 12:24), and will rise from the dead to once again take his place on the throne as king over Israel (Ezekiel 37:25).

And yet, as "saintly" as the description above makes him out to be, David *sinned mightily* against God, committing the major sins of *adultery* and *murder* (read II Samuel 11-12)! His sins were at least partly due to his own personal weaknesses, but one would have to stretch the imagination to infer that David sinned unknowingly or unwillingly.

The truth is, David *knew* he was taking another man's wife in adultery; he *knew* he was sending an innocent man to his death. Oh, he may have blinded himself to his own motives, but you can rest assured that in the depths of his heart he *knew exactly* what he was doing. David sinned knowingly, deliberately!

And when he repented, *God forgave him!* Turn to Psalm 51 and read for yourself David's prayer of repentance.

Again, wherever there's repentance there's forgiveness of sins.

John wrote, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:8-9). The "we" and "us" indicate that truly converted Christians *do sin*, but can be forgiven.

It is clear, then, that God is not only willing to forgive our sins, He *wants* to. But Jesus spoke of a sin which "shall not be forgiven." What is this sin? Why is it unforgivable?

Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

Jesus said, "...All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit* shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Spirit, *it shall not be forgiven him...*" (Matthew 12:31-32).

What did Jesus mean when He spoke of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"? Why is it unforgivable?

Thus far we have seen that the only unpardonable sin is the unrepented-of sin. Murder, adultery, blasphemy, idolatry, lust—all are unpardonable...*until repented of!*

But what about this "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"; is it a sin for which repentance will do no good?

Jesus warned the Pharisees of the gravity of this sin after

they had attributed the work of the Holy Spirit to "Beelzebub" (verse 24). In other words, they were saying that the power-source of Jesus' miracles was *Satan the devil*—thus, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

But why is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit any worse than other sins? Why is it unforgivable?

The Pharisee Nicodemus gives us a clue.

"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, *WE KNOW that thou art a teacher from God*: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (John 3:1-2).

Did you notice that this Pharisee admitted, "WE [*the Pharisees*] KNOW that thou art a teacher from God..."?

Amazingly, the Pharisees—at least some of them—*knew* that Jesus' many miracles, including the casting out of demons, healing of the sick, and raising of the dead, *had to be of God*; and yet, they openly exclaimed that the miracles of Jesus—miracles performed by the power of the *Holy Spirit*—were really *of the devil!*

They spoke against the Holy Spirit, willfully and without remorse, calling it an evil spirit. And, incredibly, **THEY KNEW BETTER!** That's why their sin was so abominable.

The state of mind that would attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan the devil, all the while *knowing better*, is a state of mind completely void of repentance—incapable of repentance, unwilling to repent.

The unforgivable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, then, cannot be committed out of ignorance and is not merely a single *act*, or a sin resulting from momentary weakness. It is an attitude, a *state of mind*. A person can commit this sin only if he is fully conscious of the fact that he is sinning, doesn't care that he is sinning, and commits the sin deliberately, willfully, without remorse, and has no intentions of ever repenting.

If you think you may have blasphemed the Holy Spirit, are perhaps worried about it, and want to repent of it, then *repent*, and stop worrying—God forgives all repented-of sins.

Consider the following:

John wrote, "Whosoever abideth in Him [Christ] *sinneth not*; whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, *neither known Him*" (I John 3:6).

Does this mean that anyone who sins *one time* does not know Christ? Of course not! From the same epistle we read, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8).

Obviously, then, the aforementioned passage means that whosoever sins *habitually*, as a *way of life*, does not know Christ.

With this understanding, it becomes clear that the unforgivable blasphemy of which Jesus spoke is not merely a one-time sin, a sin of weakness, or the result of temporary anger. It is a continuing condition of the mind—it is the mind that, for ego's sake, is fully willing to publicly assign the marvelous works of the Holy Spirit to Satan the devil. Those of such mind are not likely to repent; therefore, they're not likely to be forgiven.

Again, **REPENTANCE** is the key. Anytime anyone repents of his sins and turns to God through faith in Jesus Christ, God will forgive.

But what about you? Have you struggled to obey God only to find yourself overcome by temptation? Do you want to turn to God again, but *fear* that it is too late, that God may never forgive you? Do you fear that you may have committed the *unpardonable sin*?

If you are concerned, perhaps worried, over whether or not you might have committed the unforgivable sin; if you are sorry for your sins and want to turn again to God, then *worry no more*—**YOU CAN BE FORGIVEN!** All you need do is repent.