

God's Forgiveness of Sins (The 5 W's & 1 H)

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Many years ago in high school I was taught the journalistic approach to writing. To make an article interesting and informative I was told that I should provide answers to at least the six basic questions related to any story. The teacher said the questions can easily be remembered as the five Ws and one H. That is:

1. **Who?**
2. **What?**
3. **When?**
4. **Where?**
5. **Why?**
6. **How?**

Well, I guess my teacher was right because I remembered them more than 30 years later!

When it comes to God's forgiveness of our sins there are some very important points that we must understand. By having the proper answers to the 5 W's and the H that relate to forgiveness we can avoid serious and fatal false doctrines that abound in the religious world. Many misconceptions about forgiveness have resulted because people fail to grasp the basics. So, let us endeavor to answer these important questions:

Who? There are several questions to be asked that begin with "Who?" **1.)** Who needs God's forgiveness? Everyone does for all have sinned (**Romans 3:23; 6:23**). Since one who dies in his sins shall not enter heaven, it is imperative to obtain God's forgiveness to have eternal life (**John 8:21**). **2.)** Who can forgive our sins? Though the Pharisees were often wrong in their doctrine and practice of God's law, on one occasion they were absolutely correct in their understanding when they asked the rhetorical question, "WHO CAN FORGIVE SINS BUT GOD ALONE?" (**Luke 5:21**). Only God can forgive transgressions of His law. No man on earth can grant heaven's pardon. (We are not considering forgiveness which a person ought to grant when someone has sinned against him and repented; cf. **Luke 17:3-4**)

What? Though it might seem the answer is obvious, it is worth asking, "What is forgiveness?" Since we are to forgive those who have repented of their sins against us we had better know what forgiveness is. Our Lord's teaching in the sermon on the mount provides some insight into this matter. Consider, **Matthew 6:12** in connection with verses **14** and **15**: "AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS. ...FOR IF YOU FORGIVE MEN THEIR TREPASSES, YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER WILL ALSO FORGIVE YOU. BUT IF YOU DO NOT FORGIVE MEN THEIR TREPASSES, NEITHER WILL YOUR FATHER FORGIVE YOUR TREPASSES." (NKJV) So, in one sense, when we violate God's law we become His debtors. The penalty for our crimes must be paid — and it will be one way or another. The wages of sin is death.

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Thankfully, Jesus paid the debt for us. It might worthwhile to meditate upon the words of the song *He Paid a Debt* (#859 in the songbook). Based on the words of Jesus forgiveness is equated with the cancellation of a debt.

A second question we might ask is, "What is required for God to forgive our sins?" The short answer is the blood of Christ. John wrote that Jesus "LOVED US AND WASHED US FROM OUR SINS IN HIS OWN BLOOD" (**Revelation 1:5**; NKJV).

When? When should we seek God's forgiveness? That is like asking a man dying from some dreaded disease when he should start looking for medical assistance. Sadly, some dying people feel there is no hope and thus give up. That is like the sinner who feels he is beyond the reach of God's grace. You know, the person who says, "God could never forgive me. I've sinned too much!" God is the loving heavenly Father who wants us to come back home to seek His forgiveness (cf. **Luke 15:11-31**). We should resolve to seek His grace and mercy as soon as we learn of our need. This is especially true for the Christian who is encouraged to "COME BOLDLY TO THE THRONE OF GRACE, THAT WE MAY OBTAIN MERCY AND FIND GRACE TO HELP IN TIME OF NEED" (**Hebrews 4:16**; NKJV).

Where? 1.) Where is forgiveness found? It is available in only one place. Just as salvation from the Flood of Noah's day was found only in the Ark, so eternal redemption today is found only in the body of Christ (**Hebrews 9:12**; **2 Timothy 2:10**). The body of Christ is equated with the church of which Christ is the Head. Paul wrote that the Father "PUT ALL THINGS UNDER HIS [CHRIST'S] FEET, AND GAVE HIM TO BE HEAD OVER ALL THINGS TO THE CHURCH, WHICH IS HIS BODY..." (**Ephesians 1:22-23**; NKJV). Notice the singularity of the body/church: "THERE IS ONE BODY AND ONE SPIRIT, JUST AS YOU WERE CALLED IN ONE HOPE OF YOUR CALLING; ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM; ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL, WHO IS ABOVE ALL, AND THROUGH ALL, AND IN YOU ALL" (**Ephesians 4:4-6**; NKJV). 2) Where does forgiveness occur? This is a very important point. Forgiveness occurs in the mind of the one who was sinned against. In this case, we are speaking of God. When God forgives the debt of sin is canceled in His mind.

Why 1.) Why should God be willing to forgive us our sins? He wants to have fellowship with us but sin is the obstacle to that relationship (**Isaiah 59:1-2**). He is not willing that any soul perish (**2 Peter 3:9**). Our Creator desires that all mankind to be saved (**1 Timothy 2:3-4**). 2.) Why should we seek God's forgiveness? Perhaps the greatest motivating factor would be love. It is the proverbial two-way street. God demonstrated His great love for us by giving up His only begotten Son (**John 3:16**; **Romans 5:8-10**). But, this divine gift ought to arouse love in our hearts: "WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US" (**1 John 4:19**).

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How? 1.) How does one have his sins forgiven? The simple (and Biblical) answer is to obey the gospel (**2 Thessalonians 1:8**). But, what does it mean to obey the gospel? It first means learning God's law and its commands. Only those who obey will be saved (**Hebrews 5:8-9**). Jesus commanded man to believe in Him as the Son of God (**John 8:24; Acts 8:36-37**) and faith comes by hearing the word of God (**Romans 10:17**). The Lord also commanded repentance of all men (**Acts 17:30-31**) and baptism for the forgiveness of sins (**Acts 2:38; 10:47-48**). 2.) How can a sinner be certain he has obtained forgiveness from God? The Savior promised that "HE WHO BELIEVES AND IS BAPTIZED WILL BE SAVED" (**Mark 16:16; NKJV**) and "BE FAITHFUL UNTIL DEATH, AND I WILL GIVE YOU THE CROWN OF LIFE." (**REVELATION 2:10 NJKV**) Proof of salvation is not found in some religious experience or feeling but in by doing what God has commanded.