



Forgetting Your Sins . . . What Does the Bible Say?

What does Scripture teach with regard to “forgetting your sins”? Does God’s Word teach that a believer is “to forget these sins” with the meaning of “not having a remembrance of those sins”? One will look in vain to find biblical support for the necessity of “being unable to recall” or “to lose remembrance” of one’s own sins in order to grow in Christ. In fact, the memory of certain sins, even though forgiven by God, is often important for training in righteousness and frequently helps to remind a believer not to repeat those sins.

On the other hand, there is a biblical definition of “forgetting” that should be understood and practiced by every believer in Christ. Basically, Scripture uses the term “not to remember” as meaning “not to mention or bring to mind” or “not to keep an account.”

For instance, David requested the Lord “not to remember” (literally, “not to mention”) the previous sins of his youth (Psalm 25:7). In a similar perspective, Scripture uses “forget” in the sense of “escaping notice.” Case in point—the Apostle Paul could remember (bring to mind) his earlier sins (1 Timothy 1:12-15, text printed below), yet he confidently proclaimed “to forget” (not take notice) of those things that were behind in order to press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14, text below).

Instead of looking to his past, the Apostle Paul concentrated on Christ and what was ahead. Paul listed many of his past sins, but these significant failures did not inhibit his continued growth in Christ. On the other hand, if a believer remembers past sins but is taught to have a blank memory about these failures, a needless tension results that can inhibit one from growing in Christ. A believer can needlessly question, “Why can’t I forget my past sins?” and, without knowing it, can place undue attention on past sinfulness at the expense of cooperating with Christ’s present work in his or her life. A believer is burdened with an unnecessary prerequisite for spiritual development if required to “have a blank memory” about past sins.

There is no question that past sins can be shameful and painful. However, any past sin does not have to thwart a believer’s on-going growth in Christ. The key to being an overcomer is to fix our eyes on Jesus, to rely on God’s empowering Holy Spirit, and to follow Scripture with regard to daily living. Instead of having a goal of “being unable to recall” past sins, a believer would find lasting benefit and relief by diligently learning more about the power of the Cross and its effect on daily living.

If there was any person whose past sins could have thwarted spiritual progress, it was the Apostle Paul. Yet, he triumphantly proclaimed, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2) and “for me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). The Apostle Paul’s perspective refutes the need to “be unable to recall past sins.”

There is no question that sin’s consequences often last a lifetime; but there is no act of sin with enough power to overcome the work of Christ and the power of the Cross in a believer’s life. Additionally, trying to achieve a blank memory about one’s own sins is not only counterproductive to one’s growth in Christ, but it also is unnecessary. Instead, a believer is “to forget” (not take notice) of things behind, both good and bad, in order to press onward toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

This does not mean that a believer is not to take responsibility for past sins, nor does it mean that restitution for past sins should not be undertaken. A believer who deals responsibly with the consequences of his or her past sins will NOT be able to “forget” past sins, in the sense of not being able to recall them. Often, the on-going magnitude of sin’s consequences will not allow a believer to have a blank memory of past sins (for example, financial support for a child born out of wedlock, or the loss of a marriage due to adultery, or a person injured due to drunk driving). Nevertheless, a believer can still be an overwhelming conqueror in Christ, as Romans chapter 8 clearly proclaims.

In the final analysis, the issue is not a believer’s memory of the past that determines effective Christian living and witness. The issue is a believer’s commitment to rely on the power of God through His Son, His Word, and His Spirit while concentrating on his or her daily walk in Christ through prayer and meditation, Bible study, obedience to Scripture, fellowship with believers, and ministry to others. The concept of “forgetting your sins” draws attention back to the past, keeping the focus on self rather than Christ. A believer who focuses on the past has taken attention away from the present, the time frame in which spiritual growth takes place.

Scripture does not mention this so-called prerequisite for spiritual growth (“forgetting one’s sins”). Believers would be wise to redirect their attention to the provisions for spiritual growth as found in God’s Word instead of natural, worldly wisdom that lends itself to errors and self-centered perspectives.

SCRIPTURE TEXT

1 Timothy 1:12-15, I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

Philippians 3:13-14, Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.