

# 1 John 1:9 and the Issue of a Believer Confessing His Sins

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## Introduction

The New Testament is very clear that when a person puts their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—trusting in Him and Him alone for their salvation—that person is regenerated, justified, and forgiven of all their sins (Titus 3:5-6; Rom 5:1; Col 1:13-14). Being eternally forgiven of all sins, the child of God has the promise of eternal life (1 Jn 2:25). However, there is a distinction between a believer's positional forgiveness based on his faith in Christ and his relational forgiveness by which he enjoys *fellowship* with God. The first is eternal, whereas the second is a temporal matter. Although the Scriptures have a lot to say about confession of our sins, the primary verse on this subject is 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The question here is whether the apostle John is addressing fellow Christians and encouraging them to confess their sins to God in order to enjoy fellowship with God, or whether he is explaining what happens to non-Christians at the time they are saved. Those who opt for the latter interpretation attempt to argue that it is not necessary for Christians to confess their sins, since all their sins have already been forgiven. In this brief article, I will argue that this verse pertains to Christians and why confession of sins is essential for enjoyment of fellowship with God. In defense of this position, I will first set forth the issue of confession in its broader canonical context before focusing in on some of the details from 1 John 1:9 specifically.

## The Role of Confession Seen in the Old Testament

The idea of a child of God confessing his or her sins is taught throughout the Bible, and it is good to start by considering some of the contributions from the Old Testament that pertain to confession. Under the Mosaic Law, one of the stipulated sacrifices was that of the "guilt offering." This is described for us in Leviticus 5:5-6:

<sup>5</sup> 'So it shall be when he becomes guilty in one of these, that **he shall confess that in which he has sinned.** <sup>6</sup> 'He shall also bring his guilt offering to the Lord for his sin which he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement on his behalf for his sin.

For these types of sin, the Old Testament believer was to bring an animal for sacrifice to the priest and then to confess his sins. We need to keep in mind that believers living under the Mosaic Law were not saved by keeping the Law. They were saved in the same way that Abraham was, i.e., by faith (Gen 15:6). But a believer who wished to be obedient to God was required to confess his sins when presenting a guilt offering.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would bring the blood of the sacrificial animals into the holy of holies to be placed on the mercy seat above the ark. But he was also responsible for confessing the sins of the nation before God at this time. We could call this *national confession*:

<sup>21</sup> “Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and **confess over it all the iniquities** of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send *it* away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who *stands* in readiness.

As the nation of Israel ventured into the wilderness after leaving Mount Sinai, the Lord instructed those who sinned to confess their sins and make restitution for any wrong done:

<sup>6</sup> “Speak to the sons of Israel, ‘When a man or woman commits any of the sins of mankind, acting unfaithfully against the Lord, and that person is guilty,’ <sup>7</sup> then he shall **confess his sins** which he has committed, and he shall make restitution in full for his wrong and add to it one-fifth of it, and give *it* to him whom he has wronged (Num 5:6-7).

The Mosaic Law also anticipated that the nation would be disobedient and eventually have to be disciplined by the Lord, possibly even being exiled from the land of promise. At such times, confession of their sins was essential for being forgiven, restored, and regathered:

<sup>40</sup> ‘**If they confess their iniquity** and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me . . . <sup>42</sup> then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land (Lev 26:40, 42; cf. 2 Chron 6:24, 26; Neh 1:6).

When David was troubled by enemies, he resorted to confession of his sins as he sought God’s deliverance from his enemies. In Psalm 38:16-18, he wrote,

<sup>16</sup> For I said, “May they not rejoice over me, *who*, when my foot slips, would magnify themselves against me.” <sup>17</sup> For I am ready to fall, and my sorrow is continually before me. <sup>18</sup> For **I confess my iniquity**; I am full of anxiety because of my sin.

One of the most famous passages in all the Old Testament is Psalm 51 in which David confesses his sin and pleads for God’s pardon following his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and responsibility for the death of Uriah.

In the book of Proverbs, confession of sins is addressed, because the one who wishes to pursue God’s wisdom must have the fear of the Lord, which is to hate evil (Prov 8:13). Hence, Proverbs 18:13 instructs us, “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but **he who confesses and forsakes them** will find compassion.”

Finally, Daniel serves as a good example of a faithful believer who confesses both his own sin and that of the nation in hopes of their restoration from the Babylonian captivity:

<sup>20</sup> Now while I was speaking and praying, and **confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel**, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God in behalf of the holy mountain of my God, <sup>21</sup> while I was still speaking in prayer, then the man Gabriel . . . came to me (Dan 9:20-21; cf. Ezra 10:1; Neh 1:6; 9:2).

The point to be made from this survey of Old Testament verses is that confession of sins to God has always played a vital role in the lives of the people of God who want to be in His favor and enjoy communion with Him. Even though there is a change of covenants at the cross, from being under the old covenant to being under the new, the principle of confession continues.

### The Importance of Confession for Relieving the Burden of Guilt

Although the primary importance of confession is for a believer to be restored into fellowship with God, there is also a very important benefit that true heartfelt confession does for the believer himself. One of the consequences of sin is the experience of “spiritual death,” which could be described as feeling alienated from God, spiritually empty, distraught by guilt, and miserable in general. This is reflected in such verses as Romans 6:16, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as* slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of **sin resulting in death**, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” (cf. Rom 6:21; 7:5, 10, 13, 24; 8:6). The path out of this state of misery begins with confession. David’s own experience as recorded in Psalms 32:3-5 serves as a paradigm for us:

<sup>3</sup> When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. <sup>4</sup> For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away *as* with the fever heat of summer. <sup>5</sup> I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “**I will confess my transgressions to the Lord**”; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.

### Confession of Sin in the New Testament Outside John’s Epistles

The word “confess” is the Greek word *homologéō*, made up of two constituent parts: the verb *légō* meaning “to say, speak” and the adjective *hómos* meaning “the same.” Together, it means *to say the same as*, that is, to agree. When a believer confesses his sins, he is agreeing with God that what he has done has violated the holiness of God. Doing so does not save the believer in an eternal sense, but it does put him in a position of being restored to God and able to again enjoy fellowship with God. There are several verses in the New Testament outside 1 John that would confirm the importance of confessing our sins to God.

This is implied, for instance, in “the Lord’s Prayer” when He taught the disciples to pray, “**forgive us our sins**, as we have forgiven those who sin against us” (Matt 6:12, NIV2011). This assumes there is *relational forgiveness* with God for fellowship beyond our positional forgiveness based on the cross. During the time that the apostle Paul helped establish a church at Ephesus, we read, “Many of those who had believed kept coming, **confessing and disclosing their practices**” (Acts 19:18). When believers are ill and wish to have the elders of the church

pray for them, James writes, “if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, **confess your sins** to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed” (Jas 5:15-16). In writing to the church in Laodicea, the apostle John rebuked their “lukewarmness” when he said, “Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent” (Rev 3:19). Although the word “confess” is not used in this verse, for these believers to **repent** when experiencing the Lord’s rebuke and discipline implies that they would confess their sins to the Lord as part of their repentance (cf. 2 Cor 12:20-21). Not all will agree that Simon, the former magician in Acts 8, was a genuine believer, but most likely he was. After saying “Now even Simon himself believed,” we are told that he was baptized and continued on with Phillip (Acts 8:13). However, he subsequently sinned greatly by offering to pay money for the power that the apostle Peter had. Peter then told him, “Therefore, repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord *that*, if possible, the intention of your heart will be forgiven you” (Acts 8:22). Simon the believer needed God’s forgiveness for this presumptive act he had done. [The words “if possible” probably mean that Peter did not know how the Lord might deal with Simon, for Peter had seen how the Lord dealt sternly with Ananias and Sapphira by putting them to death]. Again, this passage is another example where we would expect repentance to be accompanied by confession and asking the Lord for temporal forgiveness (in Simon’s case, to avert God’s discipline).

### Confession of Sin in John’s Epistles

The apostle John is thought to have written the epistles bearing his name rather late in the first-century AD. Even though *Gnosticism* as a religious philosophy would not come into full bloom until later in the second-century, already some of the basic tenets of that were starting to arise and infect the Christian churches. This stemmed partly from the gnostic idea that matter was evil and that what was really important was the spirit world and esoteric *knowledge*. An implication of this, in their thinking, was that sin—arising from the body that is part of the material world—was inconsequential. One of the main reasons that John had in writing 1 John was to correct this mistaken notion about sin and to warn the churches of these deceptive teachings which were contrary to God and His Word. Hence, John told them, “These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you” (1 Jn 2:26). John called these false teachers “antichrists” (1 Jn 2:18). Then he warned the believers in the churches, “Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous” (1 Jn 3:7). It is clear from these verses and the epistle in general that John was very concerned that some of the Christians he cared so deeply for might be taken in and deceived by gnostic teachings having an erroneous view of sin.

Why should Christians be concerned about living a righteous life? Because that is the very nature of God. Hence, John begins early in his epistle by asserting,

<sup>5</sup> This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say that we have fellowship with Him and

yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; <sup>7</sup> but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7).

The issue for John was whether or not the Christians to whom he wrote would experience true *fellowship* with the God in whom there is no darkness (i.e., sin). By fellowship, John does not mean to come into a relationship with God of being justified. He knows that his readers have already experienced that. Throughout the epistle, he speaks to them as already having become Christians. For example, in 1 John 5:13, John wrote, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." Later he writes,

<sup>19</sup> We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in *the power of* the evil one.

<sup>20</sup> And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:19-20).

There is no reason to think that John was writing this epistle *evangelistically*, as though he were instructing them in how to be saved. Six times in this epistle, John calls his readers "beloved" (1 Jn 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11). He also makes other confirmatory comments such as, "You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 Jn 4:4). Finally, I would point out that 1 John 1:9 is part of the paragraph beginning in 1 John 1:5 and running through 1 John 2:2. That is the immediate context for our verse in question. Just two verses after 1 John 1:9 and in the same paragraph we read,

<sup>1</sup> **My little children**, I am writing these things to you **so that you may not sin**. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup> and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of* the whole world (1 Jn 2:1-2).

Here, John calls his readers "My little children," an expression he uses six times in the epistle as a way of affirming their Christian identity (1 Jn 2:1, 12, 28; 3:18; 4:4; 5:21). This is not the way he would be addressing his readers if he was unsure of their salvation in Christ. But notice how 1 John 2:1-2 fits into his theological assertion with which he opened the paragraph in 1 John 1:5. God is light and in Him there is no darkness (sin), so John quite logically was writing to urge his Christian readers to "not sin," because that is the nature of God Himself. John wanted them to seek to be like God, and in doing so, that would make it possible for them to enjoy *fellowship* with God, i.e., to enjoy closeness in their relationship with God (which positionally they already had) . . . and to enjoy fellowship with fellow Christians (1 Jn 1:7).

John is certainly not trying to assert that they have to be sinless. For that very reason, John wrote, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8), as well as "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us"

(1 Jn 1:10). John is neither teaching *sinless perfection* nor discounting the importance of a believer owning up to sin he has committed. So, even though he wrote urging his Christian readers not to sin, he was very much aware that all believers do—at times—sin. Fortunately, God does not terminate the relationship at that point (casting us into eternal hell). Rather, He desires our return to Him, so that fellowship can be reestablished. Hence, John laid out the right path to restoration: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9). Sin causes a conflict in our relationship with God and distances ourselves from Him. Confession—agreeing with God about our sin—is what we do as Christians in order to restore our relationship with Him. If our sin involves fellow human beings, there may also be a need for apologizing, asking for their forgiveness, and if the situation warrants, making restitution for any damage caused.

The type of confession as envisioned in 1 John 1:9 is not for the purpose of making sure we go to heaven when we die (as though unconfessed sins might be a cause for excluding us from the eternal kingdom). Again, the whole point is about a believer walking with God and enjoying fellowship with God *while on earth in this life*. As we examine ourselves and seek to be faithful to confess our sins, we would be very mistaken if we thought that we would be perfect in doing so. There are many times when we are not even aware of all the sin(s) we have done, but God is concerned with the sins we do know about. That is why the psalmist prayed, “who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults” (Ps 19:12). Oftentimes, the Holy Spirit convicts our hearts of sins that God wants us to confess and deal with by repenting and forsaking them.

## Conclusion

1 John 1:9 is an admonition written to believers to help them maintain a healthy relationship with God and to be able to enjoy fellowship with Him. Even though all our sins are eternally forgiven based on our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the reality is that sin breaks our fellowship with God and results in our experiencing *spiritual death* . . . feeling guilty, alienated from God, and sometimes even depressed. Through confession of our sins before the Lord, we can experience the revitalization of our relationship with Him and the enjoyment of the closeness of God's presence. This truth is consistently taught throughout both the Old and New Testament. Hence, the teaching about confession of sin is not dependent on what one believes about 1 John 1:9, for it is a doctrine that is affirmed throughout the Scriptures. Yet, 1 John 1:9—when considered in light of its immediate context and the context of the epistle as a whole—is clearly addressed to Christians to instruct them as to what they are to do when they sin, in order to enjoy once again the fellowship they can have with their loving Father in whom there is no darkness at all.