Can I be FORGIVEN?

forgiving (fəˈɡivəŋ)
adj.: willing to forgive; merciful

give (fəˈɡiv)
giving, gave, given
1. to cease to blame or hold resentment against (someone or something)
2. to grant pardon for (a mistake, wrongdoing)
3. to free or pardon (someone) from penalty
4. to free from the obligation of (a debt, penalty)
Can I be forgiven?

David, Israel’s king, got things very wrong. He had an affair with a married woman and then he had her husband killed to cover his tracks. Filled with guilt, he cried out to God:

*Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my [wrongs]. Wash me thoroughly from my [wickedness], and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my [wrongs], and my sin is always before me.* —Psalm 51:1-3

Whether in big things or little things, if we’re honest, we’ve all messed up. We all struggle with feelings of failure and guilt. Was David unforgivable? Covering an affair with murder; surely that’s too much, isn’t it? Not according to God. The Bible tells us that those who genuinely say sorry to God, and turn back to Him in obedience, will find true forgiveness.
But what about those who can’t shake off past mistakes or actions? Is there hope for those who hate themselves for what they’ve done?

What about the shame and pain that is draining the life out of us? Have we gone ‘too far’? Can God really forgive anyone—even the worst?

**GUILT.** Our guilt shows up in a number of different ways. For instance, before David said sorry to God for the affair and murder, he suffered physical and emotional distress. He described how his guilt affected him like this:

*When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all day long . . . My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.* —Psalm 32:3-4

Guilt can affect us physically. It might lead to illness, exhaustion, lack of sleep (or nightmares/flashbacks), stress or other such things. Guilt can control our minds, making us feel depressed, angry, lonely or worthless. And it can break relationships as we blame others, get irritable with them and struggle to be open.

David’s entire life was affected by his guilt. But he cried out to God and found forgiveness. He was able to move on—scarred, but hopeful.

Surely David had gone ‘too far’ to ask for forgiveness? Wouldn’t he have been more respectful to his victims to refuse mercy and instead slowly die in self-hatred? Not according to the Bible.
If you think you’ve gone too far, there’s hope. God wants us to know that He can forgive all the things that haunt us.

The Bible says God forgives those who are truly sorry for how they have lived. He doesn’t have to forgive—but He promises to forgive.

We’re going to look to see how much God personally suffered to forgive us, even though we don’t deserve it. In His love, God has found a way to punish our wrongs (as we deserve), and yet still offer forgiveness to the worst of us.

GOD’S ANGER. We don’t like to talk about God’s anger. But we need to understand it if we are going to understand God’s forgiveness.

God created us to live with Him. But we prefer to live without Him, doing our own things, living our own lives, setting our own priorities and valuing ourselves above Him. And we are all guilty. We all ignore God, our Creator, and by doing so, we hurt Him, hurt others and do selfish things. This is what the Bible calls sin. Sin makes God angry. This isn’t the grumpiness or imbalanced rage of someone who feels they have been ignored. It is the right and correct anger of God, who sees everything that is not in line
with His perfect ways as unacceptable. His perfect will for us is *perfect* and good. Yet, in doing things without Him, we show that we view our ways as more important than His.

*But because of your stubbornness and your [rejection of God], you are storing up wrath [fury] against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed. God “will repay each person according to what they have done” . . . for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil.* —Romans 2:5-9 NIV

God’s anger isn’t a denial of His love. He cares about us too much to just ignore the harm we are doing to ourselves and to others. He cares enough to be angry about our sin; He cares enough to do something about it.

Even though we deserve God’s anger and judgement, Jesus didn’t come to earth to judge. He came to save us from our sin and from the anger of God. Jesus said, “For God did not send His Son into the world to [judge] the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. Whoever believes in Him is not [judged], but he who does not believe is [judged] already” (John 3:17-18).

If we deserve God’s anger, how can Jesus promise to save us?

**GOD’S JUSTICE.** We don’t like it when criminals go free. If a child is murdered, for example, we want the guilty person to pay. God says:
There is none righteous [right with God], no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable. —Romans 3:10-12

If we are the guilty party, how can God forgive us? Only bad judges let guilty people go free. If we aren’t paying for our sin, who is? There is only one other person who can pay for the things we have done wrong.

At great cost to Himself, God paid the price for our sin. In an act of amazing self-sacrifice, Jesus became a man on earth in order to die in our place. Roman executioners crucified God’s only Son. He had no sin of His own to pay for; He was perfect! But in His perfection, He chose to take on our failings, selfishness, guilt and shame.

When it was finished, God accepted the death of Jesus as the “finished” payment for our sin (John 19:30). God’s justice was satisfied. Jesus, our Creator, took on our sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), took on all of God’s anger towards us, died on the cross for us and was separated from God instead of us (Matt. 27:46).

Three days later, Christ rose from the dead. By walking out of the grave, Jesus showed the punishment for sin had been paid in full. He also showed that new, forgiven life with God was a reality for anyone who trusts Him.

According to the apostle Paul, God is just (right and perfect) to justify (call perfect) all who trust Jesus Christ. He wrote:

*By [our works and actions] no [person] will be justified in His sight . . . For there is no difference; for all have*
sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the [rescue] that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a [payment for sin] by His blood . . . that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. —Romans 3:20-26

**GOD’S FORGIVENESS.** Because Christ’s death on the cross was for all sin, if we trust Christ, we have received complete forgiveness. This isn’t just for things we have done wrong in the past, but for the things we are struggling with right now—and for things we’ll struggle with in the future.

**Once For All.** The moment we trust Christ as Saviour, we are free of God’s judgement. The issue is settled: our case is closed and God will not open the files of our guilt again. God will never condemn us because our sins have been judged and punished in Christ.

God, by His own authority, clears us of all charges. God “made Him who knew no sin [Christ] to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21), so that we could be made right with God again.

Does this mean we are no longer answerable for the things we have done wrong? His forgiveness doesn’t mean there won’t be consequence to our actions (Gal. 6:7). When we do wrong things, make mistakes and hurt people, we will still have to live with the result. But those of us who trust Christ will never be condemned for our sin. That is why Paul could write:

*Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God* —Romans 5:1-2
The word *justified* describes the status of a person who has paid the full penalty for their wrongs. In this case, Christ has paid the penalty for us.

In effect, God says to those who trust Christ (or have “faith” in Him), “Your sins have been paid for. My Son died for you. So, in Him you are right and blameless before Me. You are forgiven of all your sin in a ‘once for all’ payment!”

**Complete.** “Blessed are those whose [wrongs] are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose **sin the LORD will never count against them.**” (Romans 4:7-8 NIV, emphasis added).

**Forgiven.** A young mountain climber struggles up a steep trail with a heavy backpack. He weakens, slows and falls down. Then an older climber drops back, lifts the load off his back and shoulders it himself. The young hiker feels free and starts up the trail with new energy. The word “forgiven” means “to lift off and carry away”. That is what happens when we accept God’s forgiveness. He takes our failures and guilt away and puts them on Christ instead.

**Covered.** This means our wrongs are hidden forever. We don’t need to worry about being confronted by those sins. We will not see them again. We will not face judgement for them.

**Never count against.** God puts our sins on Christ’s account. He will not hold our sins against us. Instead, He puts the perfect righteousness of Jesus into our account. God looks on us as His perfect children!

When we receive His forgiveness, God judges *all* sins to be paid for in full. Christ becomes our Saviour
and our representative in heaven (1 Jn. 2:1). He is our shield, protecting us from ever being separated from the love of God (Rom. 8:28-39).

We need to remember, however, that this forgiveness is given only to those who trust Jesus. Like medicine, forgiveness is not effective until taken.

Want to read more about how God describes the forgiveness He offers you? Ask someone in your church to help you think about these verses in the Bible:
• John 3:16; 5:24; 11:25 • Romans 1:16; 5:1; 10:11

Forgiven People Still Need God’s Discipline

By dying for us on the cross, Jesus has paid for all our sin, past, present and future. However, as Christians, when we get things wrong and don’t correct ourselves (1 Cor. 11:31), God disciplines us as a loving Father (see Heb. 12:4-11). It is like a young man taking the family car for a spin without permission. His parents aren’t doing him any favours by acting as if it didn’t happen.

In the same way, God’s discipline is for our good. It doesn’t mean God no longer loves us. It means that He wants us to keep close to Him, being honest about our mistakes, so that we can continually receive His forgiveness and move on from our wrongs. He doesn’t want us to keep being dragged down by guilt, but to know His love and forgiveness every day. That is only possible if we spend time with Him in prayer and reading the Bible.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. —1 John 1:9
What next?

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”
—Mark 1:15, emphasis added

When Jesus came to earth to die for our sins, He said that we should trust (“believe”) Him!

He has done the work to save us—we just need to trust Him. But there is another thing He tells us to do: “repent”.

**Repentance.** The basic meaning of “repentance” is ‘a change of mind’, which results in a reversal in our choices and behaviour. We repent when we change our beliefs about God and ourselves. We are all weighed down with guilt, we all try to fix our problems ourselves and we don’t really want to trust or obey God. Repentance is when we turn around to face the opposite way. Rather than trying to cope on our own, we say to God “Yes, I need You more than anything! I don’t want to be in charge of my life any more, I make a mess of it. Please forgive me and lead me.”

Repentance is a decision to trust Jesus and rely on Him, not ourselves. It is our recognition of our desperate need for Jesus!

Perhaps you are scarred from decisions you have made, relationships you have broken or mistakes you have made. When you look at your life, do you desperately wish someone would help? This is where repentance starts. Tell someone in your church, or
another Christian you know, about how you are feeling. Ask them why they decided to entrust their lives to Jesus, and what difference their decision has made.

**Being ‘Good’**. “But what about the good stuff I do?” some people ask. “Surely God finds it easier to forgive me when I look out for others and do good things?”

Without a doubt, the good, God-centred things we do are important to God. But good actions do not earn us forgiveness.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* —Ephesians 2:8-10

Rather than earning us forgiveness, good works are the result of forgiveness! Those who are saved through faith become God’s “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (v.10). We must remember that God forgave us while we were still His enemies (Eph. 2:1) by the death of His Son, which means God’s forgiveness relies only on His love, not on us. As forgiven people, who have ‘turned around’ in repentance, good works are the sign of our new life with God. They show He is in command now and that we want to live for Him instead of for ourselves.

The good news of the Bible is that forgiveness comes through trusting Jesus. There is nothing we can do to earn it! The great cost for this forgiveness was paid by God Himself.
Forgiveness FAQs

Forgiveness is a big topic. Don’t be surprised if you have lots of questions. Here are a few extra thoughts and Bible passages addressing the big forgiveness ‘FAQs’. Make sure you also ask your questions to someone in your church. They will be able to talk with you more about the truth of God’s forgiveness.

What if I don’t ‘feel’ forgiven by God?
Most of us struggle with feelings of guilt and shame. Even when we have genuinely said sorry to God for the things we have done, and asked Jesus to be our Saviour, we can feel unforgiven. We might fear that we have been rejected by God and gone ‘too far’ with the things we have done.

When feelings of guilt attack us—and they will—we need to remind ourselves that our forgiveness does not depend on how we feel. Old wounds, stupid decisions or shameful circumstances can pop into our minds at any time. And suddenly we’ll feel useless or horrible—assuming that no one, especially God, could forgive us for what we have done. But those memories and those feelings of being beyond hope are not the truth.

Forgiveness is something God does—and has already done. It is based on an historical event: Jesus Christ dying on the cross in our place, and then
coming back to new life with God. He has already paid the price for all of our wrongs and failures. All we can do is simply accept that forgiveness as a fact. It is not dependent on us or our feelings. It doesn’t depend on how well we move on from past mistakes. Forgiveness is what God does when He marks us as clean and perfect because Jesus took our punishment for us.

Forgiveness is based in fact, not feelings. So make sure you take time to read the Bible regularly. This is where God reminds us of the truth, so we can rely on Him, rather than how we feel (which is something we can quickly do if we’re not careful). Here are a couple of verses worth remembering:

God takes away our wrongs: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our [wrongdoings] from us” (Ps. 103:12).

God puts our failures out of His mind: “I will . . . remember their [wrongs] no more” (Jer. 31:34).

God cancels the debt of our sin: “I, even I, am He who blots out your [wrongdoing]” (Isa. 43:25).

If I have been forgiven by God, why am I still suffering from past mistakes?

Being forgiven by God does not mean we will never face consequences for our actions. We might never fully make up with people we’ve hurt. Financial debts will still need to be repaid. Old injuries may still slow us down. But no matter what difficulties we have to go through or live with, we can do so with hope. This isn’t just wishful thinking. This is the certain knowledge that after we die, God will welcome us into heaven as His children.
He also promises to turn our mistakes around and actually use them for good, as we put our trust in Him. Paul, a writer in the Bible, declares “all things work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28, emphasis added).

God promises to never leave us or abandon us (Heb. 13:5). We belong to Him and go through all things with Him. We don’t have to face any pain or trials alone. And we know that there is no judgement for the things we have done wrong. Christ took the full punishment for us. Now we can talk to God in confidence and trust Him to help us with the difficulties we face today.

**Does God really forgive people who have done terrible things? Surely it is too late for me to say sorry.**

The Bible tells us about lots of people who did really bad things and yet were forgiven by God. These stories are there so we can know for sure that God keeps His promise to forgive all sin! It is never too late. Here are just a few examples:

**A criminal being executed.** When Jesus was crucified, the criminal being executed next to Him cried out, “[Jesus], remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Even this criminal, who was literally about to die, was promised forgiveness by Jesus: “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:40-43).
Peter. Peter was a close friend of Jesus. Yet, fearing for his life, he denied even knowing Jesus when He was arrested. Jesus forgave Peter and used him to start the church (Mk. 14:66-72; Jn. 21:15-19).

A woman caught having an affair. According to the law of the time, she deserved death. But Jesus Christ forgave her sins and told her to follow Him (Jn. 8:1-11).

Paul. He actively dragged Christians from their homes and killed them. In Acts 8, He stood by and watched, nodding his approval, as a Christian was stoned to death. But then he met Jesus and spent the rest of his life telling others about the forgiveness of God (Acts 8, 9; 1 Tim. 1:15).

What about people who have hurt me?
We are told to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). This is saying that, as forgiven people, we are to treat others based on the forgiveness we have received from God. We no longer need to bear grudges or stay bitter about things people have done against us.

Forgiving others isn’t easy or quick. It is a decision that we have to repeat frequently (normally every time we are reminded how the other person hurt us). Remembering that God has forgiven all our wrongs will help us know how to show mercy to others. What if they don’t deserve it? Well, did we deserve God’s forgiveness? No. And it came at the cost of His Son.
The more we reflect on the forgiveness we have received, the more we will be able to show forgiveness, even to those who don’t deserve it.

Depending on the different circumstances we may be facing, our forgiveness may look quite different. Not every relationship can be fully restored to what it was, even if we do forgive those who have hurt us. Relationships can still come to an end, even if those involved have genuinely forgiven each other for any hurts that have been caused.

Are you struggling to forgive someone? This isn’t a journey to take alone. Make sure you tell someone in your church or a close Christian friend. They can pray with you and encourage you as you work through this difficult issue.

Is there anything God won’t forgive?

Jesus said, “I tell you, every kind of sin and [insult] can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man [Jesus] will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven” (Matt. 12:31-32 NIV).
There are two main things to understand here:

1. **Every kind of sin and [insult] can be forgiven.** Firstly, Jesus tells us plainly that all mistakes, failures and wrongs (sin) can be forgiven. This is good news! There is nothing we can do (except “blasphemy against the Spirit”) that God can’t forgive.

2. **Blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.** So what is this? We need to know that when Jesus said this, He was speaking specifically to religious leaders who were publicly rejecting Him. They were saying that the miracles Jesus performed were works of the devil, and not works of the Holy Spirit, even though they knew better. So the only thing that is unforgivable is rejecting Jesus, the One who can forgive us.

   God says that Christians are “sealed” by His Spirit, meaning they belong to God (Eph. 1:13). But “blasphemy against the Spirit” is basically saying “no” to God’s offer of salvation. To blaspheme is to discredit who God is, meaning we are not interested in belonging to Him or receiving His forgiveness. Only this decision is unforgiveable. For those of us who have given our lives to God, nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). Our salvation is secure in Christ’s complete work on our behalf!
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