

*God decided to leave man's conduct to his own free choice,
and if he had not sinned, he would have been immortal.
—Bereshit Rabbah 8,11*

How can I get right with God?

Step one. Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity agree that the first step to reconciliation with God is confession of the disobedience that separates us from Him. But why does God expect this? To understand, consider the following comparison...

"Suppose I have jumped into a deep well. If I refuse to admit that I am down in the well, how can I be convinced to grab a rope? ...But I am embarrassed to find myself down here and frustrated that I cannot climb out on my own. So although God has dropped a rope and stands at the top ready to pull me up, I go to unusual lengths to ignore him. I pretend there is no rope. I pretend there is no well. I pretend I can climb out anytime I like without his blasted rope. I pretend I am supposed to be exactly where I am. Sometimes I even pretend that God is not really up there or not really willing and able to pull me out. Anything seems preferable to the humiliating admission that I am in a situation beyond my control. But until I admit that, how can I grab the rope?" (TGAM)

There are many reasons why we might choose not to confess our disobedience. Continuing with the same comparison, consider these examples...

There is no rope	i.e.	The Gospel is not true
There is no well	i.e.	I'm not a sinner
I can climb out without a rope	i.e.	I can be good enough for heaven
I'm supposed to be here	i.e.	I'm so bad even God can't forgive me
God's not really up there	i.e.	God does not exist
God's not willing to pull me up	i.e.	God does not care about me

- ▶ What are some scriptures that indicate God wants lost people to confess when they come to him?
 - ✓ Simon Peter's calling. (**Luke 5:1-11** Compare Isaiah 6:1-5)
 - ✓ The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. (**Luke 18:9-14**)
 - ✓ The parable of the prodigal son. (**Luke 15:17-24**—Note, the Greek word *de*, translated in verse 22 as "but," also means "and.")
- ▶ What does it mean to "confess" in the context of an unbeliever's spiritual salvation? Does it have to include a recitation of specific sins? Does it have to include a specific acknowledgment of sinfulness? What does it mean to "acknowledge sin"?

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- ✓ A perfect confession would be a denial of all the things written on the board above (although God does not require this in a formulaic way).
- ✓ An acceptable confession would be a *willingness* to deny all the things written on the board.
 - The Holy Spirit may explain and convict us of some of these things after we are “born again.”
- ✓ Confession in the context of salvation is not necessarily a recitation of specific sins. It is acknowledgment of sinfulness, rather than mere sins. (This relates to the idea that Jesus’ Passion saved us not only from our individual sins, but more importantly from our condition of sinfulness.) But in some cases, it may not mean a specific or conscious acknowledgement even of sinfulness as such (see below).
- ✓ Confession must always include:
 - A sense that the estrangement between me and God is my fault (thus not necessarily a specific understanding of the role of sin per se, but understanding of shortcoming on my part), and...
 - A sense that it is beyond my ability to bridge the gap between me and God.
- ▶ Why is confession a condition of an unbeliever’s spiritual salvation?
 - ✓ “...to grab the rope, I must first realize that I need the rope.”
- ▶ Does the role of confession change after we are “born again”? (See **Ro 7:21-25**)
 - ✓ Yes, confession plays a different role for unbelievers seeking salvation, and believers seeking reconciliation.
 - Since a believer’s sinfulness is already fully forgiven, or hidden, believers no longer need to acknowledge that aspect of themselves. We are eternally “born again,” and it would be senseless to continue to behave otherwise.
 - ▶ Instead, confession becomes a mode of reminding believers of ongoing sins, and asking God to remove us from the fallen world so we can get on with living as He wants us to live. Confession is part of being “rescued” on a daily basis.

Step two. Why isn’t it enough to admit disobedience? To understand why God expects something more, consider our comparison again...

“The words translated as “repent” in both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures carry the connotation of “turning,” that is, facing away from my past sinful behavior and back toward God. I cannot hold the rope yet continue to simultaneously splash around in the muck and mire. Experience has shown that people who try to do both lose their grip and fall right back down.” (TGAM)

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- ▶ What is “repentance”?
 - ✓ “...repentance is agreeing to stop messing about. It is abandoning my sinful ways in order to give God and his rope my full attention.” (TGAM)
 - ✓ Repentance is not turning from all sin, since we don’t have to stop sinning to be saved. (If we did, grace would not be necessary.) Most new Christians do not yet know about all the sins in their lives. “Jesus cleans his fish after he catches them.” (anon.)
 - ✓ But we do have to desire to stop sinning.
 - ✓ Repentance is turning from a focus on ourselves to a focus on the Lord.
- ▶ Consider **James 2:18-19**. What insight does it offer on the purpose of repentance as a part of reconciliation with God?
 - ✓ Belief without sincere desire to submit to God is not enough. “Even the demons believe.”

Okay, I’ve followed God’s little formula, now what?

It’s really not about a “formula.” Confession and repentance mean nothing without the proper motivation...

“I used to believe the sole purpose of confession and repentance was to instill humility, as if God only cares about being in charge, like a bully demanding I ‘say uncle’ before he lets me up. But at Chever Torah I have come to understand that confession motivates me to grab the rope and repentance inspires me to hold on tight.” (TGAM)

- ▶ How do you feel when you realize you have hurt a loved one? How do you feel after you go to them and admit what you have done was wrong, and apologize?
- ▶ Who benefits most from an unbeliever’s confession and repentance, the unbeliever, or God?
 - ✓ Confession and repentance exist for the unbeliever’s benefit, not God’s. God needs nothing from us. He could forgive us and reconcile us to Him without any action or decision on our part if He so desired.

The problem of justice

I did it, I admit it, and I really am sorry. Can God and I move on now?

There’s one more problem to be solved, as we can see in our comparison...

“Remembering what I learned before in my study of why bad things happen to good people—remembering that even the Lord cannot make sense of nonsense in a logical universe—I suddenly see that even God cannot lift a person who does not grasp and hold the rope. But of course, it is not really that

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simple. The truth is, I have muddied the water with my floundering about below. I am covered with the muck and mire I stirred up. I have even swallowed some of the filthy stuff in my desperate attempts to escape on my own. So as I am drawn closer to God, a second question comes echoing down the shaft. ‘Can you leave this well the way you found it?’ (TGAM)

- ▶ See **Nu 15: 22-29**. What kind of sins can be atoned for with an offering? (For more on this, see **Lv 4**, the entire chapter.)
 - ✓ The offering atones for “unintentional” sin.
 - ✓ “Unintentionally” is *shegagah* (a mistake, an inadvertent transgression—always used in connection with sin).
- ▶ Now see the rest of the story in **Nu 15:30-36**. What kind of sin does this address? What kind of offering is acceptable for this kind of sin?
 - ✓ This is “defiant sin.”
 - ✓ There is no offering anywhere in the Bible to atone for it.
 - ✓ Note that the example following the warning strongly implies that “cut off” means executed.
 - ✓ “Defiantly” is *yad* (an open hand, often symbolizing power) *ramah* (to hurl or deceive), an idiomatic expression similar to “with his eyes open.”
- ▶ In addition to, see also **Ex 23:7**, **Dt 29:19-20**, and **Nu 15:31**. What is the status of the sinner before God in each of these scriptures?

✓ Exodus	murder	“I will not acquit the guilty”
✓ Deuteronomy	idolatry	“The Lord will never be willing to forgive him”
✓ Numbers	<u>any</u> defiant sin	“His guilt remains on him”

Can I make it up to God? Rabbinic Judaism teaches that the Torah does provide one sacrificial offering for defiant sin, which is given once each year on the “Day of Atonement,” or *Yom Kippur*...

“According to Rabbinic Judaism, this is the one ceremony that atones specifically for defiant sins against God. And indeed, the kind of sin forgiven on Yom Kippur is called pesha, which means “rebellion,” or willful deviation from godly living. So although many verses in the Torah specifically say defiant sins will not be forgiven, it seems possible that Yom Kippur might make up for the mess I’ve made at the bottom of the well...” (TGAM)

- ▶ Read **Dt 12:13-14**. What difficulty does this present for those who believe the offerings of Yom Kippur can atone for defiant sin? (Hint: see **Mark 13:1-2**)

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- ✓ We cannot offer *Yom Kippur* sacrifices as described and required in the Hebrew scriptures, since the altar where those sacrifices must be made no longer exists.
- ✓ Review the theory on the purpose and timing of the destruction of the temple discussed in Lesson 8, under the “Second Reason” why Christians don’t obey all Torah commands
- ▶ Read **Ps 50:9-12** and **Job 41:11**. What difficulty does this present for those who believe the offerings of *Yom Kippur* (or any other compensation we might offer God) can atone for defiant sin? (Hint: see **Dt 19:21**)
 - ✓ True justice—a fair actual balancing of the scales—means any harm done must be repaired completely; things must be returned to their exact former condition.
 - ✓ But nothing we can offer God as compensation for our sins is ours to give. Everything already belongs to Him. This even includes our own lives.
- ▶ Given your answer to the question just above, would justice be served if a sinner offered his own life to God as a “life for life” sacrificial offering? What does this tell us about why punishment for those who die without being reconciled to God might be eternal? (See **Mt 25:41 & 46**)
 - ✓ Justice would not be fully served even if a sinner offered his own life, because everything already belongs to God, and that includes us. So even our most precious possessions—our very lives—are not ours to offer as compensation for our sins.
 - ✓ This may explain why the unrepentant might suffer in hell forever (as some Christians believe). When we refuse to accept Jesus’ sacrifice in our place, even our physical death does not balance the cosmic scales of justice.

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