

# If My People - 19

## *The Problem of Sin (1)*

**2 Chronicles 7:14** *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

This has been a long journey through a short verse ... a verse which encapsulates so much truth.

... a verse which has reminded us of our responsibility in this mysterious, yet glorious partnership into which God has called each one of us.

... a verse which has re-emphasised the incredible freedom given to God's children to participate in His world-changing, nation-transforming plan ... or not.

... a verse which stresses the truth found all through the Bible, that humility is the key to the throne room of God.

... a verse which shows us yet again how our Sovereign God chooses to channel His life-changing power through the prayers, submission, and obedience of His people. He can intervene at any point in time, whenever He chooses, for He is sovereign - however, most of the time He chooses not to, until His people fulfil their role in this supernatural partnership.

... a verse which reminded us yet again of the huge difference between speaking words into the air and really praying and relating intimately to a living, personal God.

So much from one small verse - 18 sermons already and we've really only scratched the surface! Now we come to the topic we all want to talk about even less than pride – and that's sin. Given that sin is referred to, in one form or another, well over 1,000 times in the Bible, devoting some time to exploring the reality of sin and our responsibility in dealing with sin is very important.

Given this sermon's title, we must now ask, why is sin a problem? Firstly, it's a problem because sin is bad and so sin is always a problem, and we will look at some reasons for that in the next sermon. However, the other reason sin is a problem for us today is that as New Covenant believers, born in the shadow of the cross, living through the reality of the New Testament, we often struggle with the place and effect of sin in terms of our relationship with God. This problem is huge because when we have an incorrect view of sin and its impact, we end up making wrong judgements about ourselves, others and God and that leads us into major trouble. So, I plan to spend this entire sermon dealing with this problem before we explore the issue more widely.

As I have said many times, whether we like it or not, our thoughts run our lives and what we think about God, ourselves, others and life in general, will to a huge extent determine how we live. The Bible says we are to be "... transformed by the renewing of our mind" (Romans 12:2) and that means we have to think. That is hard for some of us, not because we are not intelligent, but because we have not been expected to think all that much in the Church for a very long time.

Our culture has contributed to this mental laziness in a huge way. We are bombarded at every point with this insidious mindset which says, “*If it feels good it must be right ... and if it feels bad it must be wrong.*” This is not only in our pagan culture; it is running rampant in the Church also.

The Pentecostal revival in the early part of last century and the charismatic renewal over forty years ago was a breath of fresh air for the shrinking orthodox Church. People began to experience the reality of God in their lives. A lifeless, fruitless intellectual understanding of a distant God was transformed in millions of people as they experienced an alive, vibrant God who touched their very soul and released them from the prison of empty words which they had endured for so long.

These movements were controversial; they were attacked and scorned by many, especially those in leadership who felt threatened. These movements certainly had their human abuses and demonic distortions, but there is no question that they embodied a move of the Holy Spirit which continues today right across the Church in every denomination.

However, we humans are renowned for going too far in one direction or the other. Balance has not been our strong point. Extremes are common. So, in our desire for a real encounter with a living God - one that touches our Spirit and our soul - a relationship which we not only understand with our minds but experience in our soul and our bodies – many have been guilty of parking their brains and embracing the mindset of much of our ‘hedonistic, experiential, instant-gratification’ culture.

We’ve been given the Bible – a collection of ancient writings, inspired by the Holy Spirit, which we claim to be the final authority in this human realm for all matters of faith and practice, and yet this book requires mental *and* spiritual energy to interpret and understand. It’s not enough to give a new believer a Bible and tell them to go and read it and let the Holy Spirit teach them all they need to know. From time to time, there may be no choice and God is certainly able to do so much with very little resources. However, in our day and culture, we are without excuse for not learning how to use the Bible properly.

There is no question that the Holy Spirit is our Teacher, but how does He teach us? Some would say He speaks truth into our spirit, and we just ‘know’ it because we ‘feel’ it, we ‘experience’ it. I don’t have a major problem with that, for that is what He has done for me thousands of times. However, many believe that this is all that we need, and they are wrong.

One of the other ways the Holy Spirit teaches us from the Bible is to show us how to read it properly and understand how dozens of documents written by fallible human beings over thousands of years from totally different cultural perspectives could come together in one compilation like this and actually make sense and inform our lives.

We need to learn to *interpret* the Bible and *discern* the life-changing eternal Word of God within the pages of Scripture. The Bible is not the literal words of God – we all know that. They are the words of men, compiled by men, translated by men, interpreted and taught by men and women! We need to always remember that and not be guilty of expecting the Bible to do what it was never intended to do.

Now that whole process was and is under the oversight and direction of the Holy Spirit, there’s no question about that, but it’s still a complicated collection of documents which requires us to exercise our minds when reading it, interpreting it, and applying it to our lives today. So much error and thousands of controversies, disputes and divisions have emerged in the Church over the years because people handle the Bible poorly.

Some are guilty of intellectualising the whole thing and without any guidance from the Holy Spirit, they make the Bible say all sorts of things it was never meant to say. Others, however, don't think enough and shamelessly handle the Scriptures as they lift quotes out of context here, there, and everywhere to justify their own particular theological perspective and experience.

Which brings us to the problem before us today: the problem of sin. Our understanding of sin is one of the many areas in which we have seen great divergence of opinion and I want to suggest to you that the controversy, conflict and confusion in this area is unacceptable and entirely avoidable. If we read the Bible properly and learn to interpret Scripture through Scripture before we interpret Scripture through our personal experience, then this confusion about sin will disappear.

Our experience is valid and important - it should not be ignored. The convictions we feel in our heart and the emotions and feelings which accompany them are not to be judged too harshly ... but they are to be judged nonetheless, for we are a fallible, fallen people who get it wrong a lot of the time.

Our emotions and feelings can (and often do) lie to us can also be influenced by the powers of darkness. That is why the first 'window' through which we should view the Bible is the Bible itself. By that I mean this. There is a progressive revelation of God and His dealings with mankind running from Genesis through to Revelation and we are meant to have a grasp of the whole picture before trying to interpret parts of the picture.

If you have been a student of the Bible for a while, you will know that you should not lift any passage you like out of the middle of the Old Testament, written before the coming of Christ, and apply it directly to your experience today, this side of the cross. There are lots of verses which are universally applicable - many of the Psalms and other passages which speak of the nature of God apply equally now to when they were first written. But there are just as many which do not fit directly into today's context and were never meant to be lifted from their original context.

If you see the Bible unfolding like a journey through time with God revealing more and more of His character and nature and His purpose and plan in redeeming mankind ... then you will realise that some of the commentary on that journey is general observation about God and man and it applies to every leg of that journey equally. However much of it is about the scenery at one particular part of that journey and we need to make sure we leave it there and don't lift it out of its context because much of the scenery today is very different, thanks to the finished work of Jesus Christ.

It is still valuable information. God still inspired its recording and writing so we can see the big picture. But he never intended for us to put ourselves back into a situation which is locked in time and culture thousands of years ago. Now I can almost see many of you nodding at this point and I imagine some are thinking, *"Yes, I know this. This is basic stuff. I know we need to be careful not to apply old covenant/ old testament theology in the new covenant / new testament reality in which we live now."* In fact, most Christians I know, have some measure of understanding about the need to interpret Scripture carefully and use it wisely. But how many know how to do that and how many are following that principle all the time?

This is a wild statement, I know, but I am going to stick my neck out and say that the majority of believers today do not do this very well and that includes some famous ones who write best-sellers and lead large Churches. The saddest thing about all this is that it's totally avoidable. Treating the Bible with respect and learning to interpret it properly is not a difficult.

However, it is hard work, and it requires commitment and diligence. In an age of 'instant' everything and 'quick fixes,' this is an area in which we fail, for we are a lazy people, and we will not work hard for something if we can get a facsimile of it for much less effort. That's why many Christians have a very weak Biblical foundation to their faith. They get away with that most days. In fact, some manage to go through their whole life like that. But when someone challenges our beliefs and our concept of God, from inside or outside the Church, many of us stumble and fall.

What do we can say about sin? How do we interpret the Bible when it comes to sin in our lives? Well, a good place to start might be 2 Chronicles 7:14 - the very verse we are studying so passionately in this series. This verse clearly states that if the people of God turn from their sin (wicked ways) then God will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and this will have a radical flow-on effect across the entire land. By inference then, this verse seems to say that if we do *not* turn from our sin, God will *not* hear us, He will *not* forgive us and He will *not* heal our land. Is that right? Is this verse is actually saying that God hearing us and forgiving us is conditional upon us humbling ourselves, seeking His face and turning from our sin? Let me give you another one while you are thinking ...

Psalms 66:18 clearly states that if I regard wickedness or iniquity (sin) in my heart, God will not hear me. The premise is that sin separates us from God, and He will not hear our prayer if we have sin in our heart. That is the clear inference of this verse and that is how it's taught in many pulpits right across the world to this very day. But what do you think? That seems consistent with 2 Chronicles 7:14, doesn't it? Let's try another one - there are many - but I am selecting only a few.

Isaiah 59:1,2 makes it even clearer when it says: *"Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."*

So, what do you think? *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and ( **then I** ) will forgive their sin and heal their land."*

Is that what that really means? In its original context: absolutely. This is exactly what it means. So too with the other two passages I read and dozens of others. In our fallen, unredeemed state, sin effectively (not theologically) separates us from God. A holy God cannot look upon unatoned sin without judging it. His wrath burns against all unrighteousness.

So, rather than destroy the objects of His love God would effectively turn His back on them until that sin was atoned for through sacrifice. If sin has not been atoned for, it remains a barrier ... an impenetrable wall between us and God. That is the reality of life in the Old Testament. That is the truth under which we lived under the Old Covenant. Then Jesus came ... and everything changed. The writer of Hebrews explains that change better than anyone.

**Hebrews 10:11-23** *"Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."*

*Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary." Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."*

This is the good news! This is the gospel! This is what it's all about. This is the wonder and glory and mystery of this incredible salvation which is ours in Christ! That impenetrable barrier between us and God which would not even allow Him to hear us or forgive us, was smashed once and for all by Jesus when He lived a perfect life for us, paid the price of our sin on the cross (which is what we call 'atonement'), and then conquered sin, death and Satan forever when He rose victorious from the grave. If you have any doubt that Jesus has dealt with the barrier that sin caused, let me read just a few of the many New Testament passages which remind us of this great salvation.

**Ephesians 1:3-14** *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*

*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment -to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory."*

Wow! What a passage. What a promise. What a gracious God we serve!

**Colossians 1:9-14** *"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."*

Redemption and forgiveness are a free gift. We do not earn them with our confession or repentance. So, you see, we need to view 2 Chronicles 7:14 and other references through the window of the New Covenant.

Does that mean this part of the verse we are looking at today has no meaning for us? Are we supposed to just ignore this bit because our sin has been atoned for? No. Not at all. It still has meaning, and we will unpack that further in the next sermon, but we will see that its original meaning and context does not apply to our journey with God now, this side of the cross, as New Covenant believers upon whom God has lavished grace and mercy and forgiveness and redemption.

Sin is still sin and it's as ugly and destructive today as it ever was. Repentance is still a precious gift and an essential need for New Covenant believers, and we will see why in more detail next week. We just need to establish right here and now, before we look at the ongoing problem of sin, that sin no longer separates us from God in the way it may have in the past. Jesus fixed all that – once and for all time. You no longer have to worry if God is listening to your prayers or not because of sin in your life. If you stand in Christ as a believer then God is listening to all your prayers ... no matter how much sin is in your life.

As we will see later, sin may have a huge impact on your ability to hear from God, so from your perspective, sin can be a real problem, but not from God's perspective. He remembers our sins no more. The slate is clean. So, does that mean that our sin, no matter how bad it gets, can never sever our eternal relationship with God when we are in Christ, when we are a New Covenant, born-again believer? If God is the one Who saves us, does that mean we cannot ever be 'unsaved' again?

Well, there are thousands of preachers all over the world who would never be stupid enough to answer such a question in public or even in private for some of them. I'm not sure why this is the case because the answer is simple. The answer is unequivocally, absolutely, positively YES! That is exactly what it means. Your name is written in the Lamb's book of life and no one, not God, not Satan and not even you, can rub it out.

But, you may think, what about that very difficult passage in Hebrews 6 which says it is impossible for someone who once tasted the fruit of salvation, to ever come to repentance again if they fall away? Where does that fit? Good question. Some of the most brilliant theologians in the world have tried to work that one out. And what do you do with Matthew 6:14-15 where it says if we forgive others, God will forgive us and we do not forgive, God will not forgive us. If forgiveness is part of salvation, if we are forgiven for all sins, past present and future, what on earth does that mean? I could go on and quote a few more difficult statements in the New Testament, written this side of cross, written in the context of the New Covenant, which seem to contradict the bold statements I made earlier. That's why it's so important that we allow the Holy Spirit to teach us how to read and interpret the Bible properly.

Let me tell you that these difficult passages are not a problem for me anymore. I learned a long time ago that you need to pick the right window through which you view the Bible. In other words, you need to start at the right place before viewing or seeking to understand these difficult passages. You need to stand on solid ground and look through the largest window possible: that is, established, irrefutable, foundational, Biblical truth.

In this case, we have hundreds of passages in the New Testament which affirm our position in Christ. Dozens which deal very clearly with the issue of atonement for sin and our forgiveness being part of our salvation and not dependent upon our confession or repentance. We read a couple just a few minutes ago, but there are many, many more. That is the bedrock upon which you must stand. That is the window of clear, unambiguous truth through which you look to interpret the isolated texts which are not widely supported or explained by other Scriptures.

Sometimes we are able to understand the intent of a difficult passage in the context of the rest of Scripture this way. At other times, the passage remains a mystery - we simply do not understand it. Perhaps it was translated wrong. Perhaps the writer, in trying to make a point went a little far, like all preachers and writers do at times, and left us with a statement which is open to misinterpretation. Whatever the reason, it remains a mystery and we just leave it alone and stand firm on that which is clearly understood and supported by the whole counsel of Scripture.

So let me wrap this up by saying that the problem of sin first and foremost is a problem of understanding it and understanding what the Bible says about the context and nature of sin now, in our lives as Christians. We cannot allow a loose handling of Scripture, or an ignorance of Old Covenant and New Covenant differences or a few problem texts to push us out of the mainstream of Biblical truth into a backwater of speculation and error.

As born-again believers, disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, our sin has been atoned for, once and for all by the blood of Jesus Christ. Our eternal destiny is secure. Our ticket to heaven has been signed by the Father, with the blood of Jesus and that ticket to eternity is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit within us. If you have ever worried that sin can one day rob you of your ticket to heaven, then your worries can end right now. It won't happen! I am literally staking my life on that truth.

If you allow sin to run away in your life you will be miserable. You will hurt yourself and others. You will grieve God. You will hinder the work of God in this place. But your eternal destination is secure - just as it was for the brother to whom Paul was referring in 1 Corinthians 5:5 when he instructed the leaders to, *"hand this man over to Satan, so that his sinful nature may be destroyed, and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."*

This brother had allowed sin to run rampant in his life and in these very confronting words of Paul, he makes it clear that this man's soul will be saved on the day of the Lord. We will share heaven with this brother because of the blood of Jesus and the grace of God. Not because of his personal performance in this life, which clearly was not that good.

So, if you are feeling a little bit better about your sin now; if you are feeling a little more relaxed in the knowledge that you cannot sin your way out of the grace of God, that's good. That's very good, because that is the truth. That is bedrock truth, and we cannot deal with the presence of sin in our lives properly unless that bedrock is firmly established first. In my next sermon I'll come from the other side of this and tell you why you must deal ruthlessly; why sin is so evil and insidious and destructive and why I believe God is calling us all to repentance more than at any time in Church history.

It won't undo anything I have just said, but it will give you the rest of the picture about sin - which we need to know just as much. Once we have our eternal life squared away, then we can deal with this problem of sin with the right frame of mind, without fear, but with a ruthless honesty and integrity. That's what we'll do in the next sermon, so, brace yourself, and stay tuned.

If you've struggled with anything I've said in this sermon, please study the manuscript or video again talk to God about it. If you're still struggling with the issue of sin and forgiveness and grace, then perhaps some time with my teaching series Amazing Grace will help you reconnect with a fuller explanation of God's grace and forgiveness, the foundation of the Gospel and the foundation of all that I have been teaching for decades now.

May the spirit of God shine His illuminating light upon God's truth and burn it into our hearts today.