

Old Testament Saints

When Were Sins Forgiven? Part 1

When were the Old Testament saints forgiven? Was it during their lifetime or after Jesus died on the cross?

The question of when Old Testament saints were forgiven is an important biblical issue. Scripture shows that faithful people under the Old Covenant received forgiveness during their lifetime, but that forgiveness was ultimately made possible by the future sacrifice of Christ. In other words, God granted forgiveness before the cross, while the cross later became the true basis for that forgiveness.

Old Testament believers did receive forgiveness during their lifetime. Throughout the Old Testament, God clearly states that sins could be forgiven when people repented and offered sacrifices He commanded. For example, the Law repeatedly says, *“So the priest shall make atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him.”* Leviticus 4:31. Similar statements appear many times in Leviticus. Leviticus 4:20, 4:26, 4:35. This means that when the Israelites obeyed God’s instructions, repentance, sacrifice, and obedience, God forgave them at that time.

David also spoke of forgiveness as a present reality. *“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”* Psalm 32:1-2. So, the Old Testament clearly teaches that people could be forgiven while they were alive.

Animal sacrifices did not actually remove sin. While forgiveness of sins was granted, the sacrifices themselves were not the true payment for sin. The New Testament explains this clearly, *“For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.”* Hebrews 10:4. The sacrifices under the Law served as reminders of sin, acts of obedience, and symbolic atonement. But they pointed forward to a greater sacrifice yet to come.

Christ’s death was the true basis for their forgiveness. The New Testament reveals that Jesus’ sacrifice paid for sins committed both before and after the cross. God set forth Christ, *“to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed.”* Romans 3:25. Here Paul explains that God “passed over” earlier sins, meaning He forgave them while anticipating the future sacrifice of Christ. Christ’s death was the retroactive payment for those sins.

Hebrews specifically says Christ’s death redeemed Old Covenant sins. The book of Hebrews addresses this directly. *“That by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”* Hebrews 9:15. This passage teaches that Jesus’ death redeemed sins committed under the Old Covenant as well as those under the New Covenant. His sacrifice reaches both backward and forward in time.

A helpful way to understand it. A common illustration is a financial promissory note under the Old Testament, God forgave sins based on faith, repentance, sacrifice, and obedience. But the actual payment had not yet been made. At the cross, Christ made the full payment. Thus, the forgiveness granted earlier was secured by the future sacrifice of Christ.

Old Testament saints were forgiven during their lifetime when they obeyed God and repented. However, animal sacrifices did not truly remove sin. The actual atonement occurred when Jesus Christ died on the cross. His sacrifice redeemed sins committed under both the Old and New Covenants. Therefore, under the Mosaic Covenant, sins were forgiven in their lifetime, but that forgiveness ultimately depended on the future sacrifice of Christ.