

DOES 1 JOHN 1:9 TEACH THAT CHRISTIANS
MUST CONFESS THEIR SINS TO GOD TO BE FORGIVEN?

SUMMARY

Following the Introduction (**part I**), in **part II**, we will see that John himself teaches at 1 Jn. 2:12 that Christians' sins *already* have been forgiven. That is, all sins a Christian has committed in the *past*, whether the Christian committed them before or after he or she became a Christian, *already have been forgiven*. Moreover, all sins a Christian commits in the *present already have been forgiven*. And 1 Jn. 2:12 will read the same in the future, throughout the rest of a Christian's life. Thus, if a Christian sins at any time in the future, 1 Jn. 2:12 will, at that *future* time, teach the same thing: the sins *already have been forgiven*. This is, in effect, complete forgiveness in the past for all of a Christian's sins, past, present, and future.

In **part III**, we show that God's act of forgiveness is referred to as a *past* act. This is shown by Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 2:13. Again, this is, in effect, complete forgiveness in the past for all of a Christian's sins, past, present, and future.

In **part IV**, we demonstrate, based on Ephesians 1:7 and Col. 1:14, that Christians *have* forgiveness *right now*.

Complete forgiveness is not a license to sin. The Scriptures, including John's writings, teach that Christians are required to *repent* continually of their sins. But *repentance* is a change of one's way of life. Moreover, Christians do not *repent* of their sins *so that God will forgive* those sins. He *already* has forgiven the sins of Christians. We discuss this in **part V**.

1 John 1:9 was written to *Christians*. Nonetheless, in 1 John, John, writing to *Christians*, warned them about certain teachings of *heretical unbelievers*. For example, in 1 Jn. 1:8 and 10, John was warning Christians that heretical unbelievers were making certain heretical *statements* about sin(s). These heretical unbelievers were *saying* they had no sin or *saying* they had not sinned. At 1 Jn. 1:9, John was teaching Christians that these heretical unbelievers should make a *different statement* about sins, i.e., they should *confess* their sins. Thus, in **part VI**, we demonstrate that *John was teaching Christians at 1 Jn. 1:9 that if these heretical unbelievers later became believers and confessed their sins, God would forgive them of their sins and cleanse them from all unrighteousness.*

As part of the above demonstration, we analyze 1 Jn. 1:5-10, of which 1 Jn. 1:9 is a part. By way of analogy, at Galatians 1:8, the apostle Paul made a conditional, hypothetical statement to warn *Christians* about heretical teaching by *unbelievers*. He said there, “But even *if we*, or an angel from heaven, should *preach* to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, *he is to be accursed!*” Paul was not teaching Christians that he in fact would preach a contrary gospel or that he in fact would be accursed. But he was asking Christians to *assume for sake of argument, i.e., hypothetically*, that he, or even an angel, preached a contrary gospel, and he was teaching Christians what the consequence would be as a warning to them to reject unbelievers’ heretical teaching.

Similarly, in 1 Jn. 1:6-10, John makes conditional, hypothetical statements. 1 Jn. 1:8 is an example; he says there, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving

ourselves and the truth is not in us.” John, an apostle, was not teaching Christians that he in fact was saying he had no sin, that he in fact was deceiving himself, or that, in fact, the truth was not in John. But he was asking Christians to *assume for sake of argument, i.e., hypothetically*, that he was saying that he had no sin, etc., and he was teaching Christians what the consequence would be as a warning to them to reject unbelievers’ heretical teaching.

In **part VII**, we in part rely on our previous discussions and show that the teaching that 1 Jn. 1:9 requires Christians to confess their sins to God to be forgiven creates conflicts and problems with other Scriptures. In particular, that teaching conflicts with the fact that John himself, at 1 Jn. 2:12, taught that Christians’ sins already have been forgiven. It conflicts with the fact that God’s act of forgiving Christians is referred to as a past act. It conflicts with the verses showing that Christians have forgiveness right now.

Moreover, the teaching that 1 Jn. 1:9 requires Christians to confess their sins to God to be forgiven creates problems with other Scriptures. The teaching creates a problem because Jesus forgave people without any Scriptural record that the people confessed their sins or that Jesus required the people to do so. Moreover, as we will see, it creates a problem because it implies God does not *forgive* Christians’ unconfessed *sins*, even though His Son’s blood *cleanses* Christians from all *sin*. It creates a problem because it implies God does not *cleanse* Christians from all *unrighteousness* if they have unconfessed sins, even though His Son’s blood *cleanses* us from all *sin*. It creates a problem because Paul taught that “whatever is not from faith is sin.” If 1 Jn. 1:9 requires

Christians to confess their sins to God to be forgiven, this means Christians have to monitor themselves constantly to determine whether something occurred from them that was “not from faith,” and they have to confess constantly those sins to be forgiven.

Further, the teaching that 1 Jn. 1:9 requires Christians to confess their sins to God to be forgiven creates a problem because 1 Jn. 1:9 was written only around 90 to 110 A.D. Some Christians died before 1 Jn. 1:9 was written, and they therefore did not know about that verse. The teaching thus implies that these Christians’ sins were not forgiven because these Christians did not confess them, even though 1 Jn. 1:9 was not written yet and therefore these Christians could not have known based on that verse that they were supposed to confess their sins to be forgiven.

Finally, the teaching that 1 Jn. 1:9 requires Christians to confess their sins to God to be forgiven creates a problem because, throughout 1 John, John emphasized belief, i.e., faith, not confession of sins. And in the Gospel of John, John never taught confession of sins, but faith, as at John 3:16.

It is sometimes claimed that because the Greek verb translated “confess” in 1 Jn. 1:9 is in the Greek *present* tense, this means that (1) Christians must, *at the present time*, confess their sins to God to be forgiven, and (2) Christians must do so *throughout their lives*. In part **VIII**, we demonstrate this claim is incorrect.

The Greek verb translated “confess” at 1 Jn. 1:9 does not indicate the action of confession is occurring in the present. However, that Greek verb plus other components of the verse present the issue, which we discuss in **part IX**, of whether 1 Jn. 1:9 is a Greek “fifth class condition” referring to a generic situation in present time. That is, we

discuss whether the verse is expressing a principle or a proverb as to what happens if Christians confess their sins at the present time. We show 1 Jn. 1:9 is not a fifth class condition, but instead is consistent with a third class condition portraying a hypothetical situation that could possibly occur in the future, i.e., heretical unbelievers later becoming believers and confessing their sins.

It is also sometimes claimed that Christians must confess their sins to God to receive, not “positional,” but “experiential,” forgiveness from God, and that Christians “lose fellowship” with God if they do not confess their sins. We demonstrate in **part X** that this claim too is erroneous.

In **part XI**, we examine Matthew 6:14-15, where Jesus said, as part of the Sermon on the Mount, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” We will see that Jesus was addressing these statements, not to Christians, but to unbelievers (people who did not yet believe in Christ, and people who would never believe) in His Jewish audience.

In **part XII**, we discuss James 5:15, in which James, referring to a person who was sick, said the person’s sins “shall be” forgiven, and Jas. 5:16, where James said, “Confess your faults one to another.” We will see that Jas. 5:15 is referring to an unsaved sick person who later will be saved and whose sins then “shall be” forgiven, and that neither of these verses teaches that Christians must confess their sins to God to be forgiven.