

## **What Does Scripture Say?**

Why can't you release yourself from your sin? Is it because the weight is too much? Because you know you haven't changed? Because the ripple effects of your sin can't be reversed?

I have good news—such good news. You don't need to forgive yourself, because you can't forgive yourself.

I know, this answer sounds foreign. Our contemporary therapeutic culture tells us that self-forgiveness is not only a category of forgiveness, it's actually the most important of them all. Writing in *Psychology Today*, psychotherapist [Beverly Engel](#) says, "I believe that self-forgiveness is the most powerful step you can take to rid yourself of debilitating shame." But here's the vital question for Christians: Can you point to one example in Scripture of someone forgiving themselves?

There is no category of self-forgiveness in the Bible. And what a freeing truth! Your shame and guilt does not depend on your ability to forgive yourself.

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## Two Kinds of Forgiveness

There are two—and only two—biblical categories of forgiveness: others' forgiveness and God's forgiveness. Horizontal and vertical.

Horizontal forgiveness marks us as Christians. Seeking the forgiveness of others is not optional. Forgiving one another is not optional. Paul writes:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Col. 3:12–13)

It's not enough to ask forgiveness from God; we must also ask forgiveness from those we've injured.

I have good news—such good news. You don't need to forgive yourself, because you can't forgive yourself.

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As important as horizontal forgiveness is, even more fundamental is vertical forgiveness, which comes from God alone. After committing the heinous double sin of adultery and murder against Bathsheba and Uriah, David cries out to God: “Against you, you only, have I sinned!” (Ps. 51:4). How can David say this? Is he minimizing his horrifying sins against Uriah and Bathsheba?

Hardly.

David realizes that as awful as his sin is horizontally, it’s much worse vertically. He has profoundly offended his Creator—and the Creator of Uriah and Bathsheba—by devaluing one life and snuffing out another. He has offended his righteous, covenant-making God with his wicked, covenant-breaking actions.

## **Sing! You’re Forgiven.**

But you know what David never walks through? The process of self-forgiveness. He doesn’t entertain for a second that he must forgive himself or that, once he’s sought forgiveness from God, he must self-flagellate to

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sought forgiveness from God, he must self-flagellate to fully release himself from his sin. In fact, David would probably shock modern therapeutic sensibilities with how quickly he feels release. He admits that, once forgiven, he will have the audacity to *sing*: “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness” (Ps. 51:14).

Have you experienced such freedom? Have you ever felt the complete forgiveness of God so deeply that you had to sing with joy?

Vertical forgiveness allows you to experience the power and release that comes through the cross—and then it sends you back to the horizontal, where you are made right in community.

Dear fellow sinners, does guilt plague you? Seek forgiveness from those whom you have sinned against. Seek forgiveness from God your Rescuer, who has purchased your salvation through the death of Jesus. And then sing! Celebrate your forgiveness. Enjoy your freedom.

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# Does the Bible talk about forgiving yourself?

The Bible does not command us to forgive ourselves. Instead, we are told to seek God's forgiveness. First John 1:9 teaches, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Psalm 25:18 says, "Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins."

God's forgiveness is really all we need; when He forgives us, we can forgive ourselves. Jeremiah 31:34 talks about God remembering sin no more; when He forgives, He

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chooses not to bring our sin up to Himself or anyone else. When people struggle to forgive themselves, it is often a struggle with lingering feelings of guilt or with shame. We are embarrassed by our past behavior, or perhaps angry with ourselves for behaving in a way that has led to difficult consequences. But in Christ, we know that all our sin is forgiven. We have been redeemed and God can even use the negative consequences of our sin for His glory. Rather than wallow in shame and guilt, we can rejoice in the forgiveness that is ours in Christ. David rejoiced, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psalm 32:1). In Psalm 103:2-3 he declared, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his

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Instead of agonizing over past sins, any memory of them should lead us to recognize the great forgiveness of God. Paul wrote, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Timothy 1:15). It appears to be a sign of Christian maturity to recognize how bad our sins were while also rejoicing in the great forgiveness we have received from God. God's forgiveness becomes a testimony of praise, rather than a story of our guilt.

When we remember our own sins and that we have received forgiveness from God, it also becomes easier to forgive others. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught His followers to pray, "Forgive us

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So how can we deal with forgiving ourselves from past sins? Accept God's forgiveness. Remind yourself of verses that speak to His faithfulness and the truth of His forgiveness. Remind yourself that He does not hold your sin against you (Psalm 103:12; Romans 5:8-11; Romans 7-8) and that you have been made new in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). Accept the truth of God's forgiveness and move forward with a fresh start. Philippians 3:13-15 teaches, "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way." Philippians 4:8 says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is

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