

## What Is the “Sin unto Death”?

Two New Testament passages mention a sin that leads to death, often referred to as the “sin unto death.”

*“Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” James 5:19-20*

*“If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.” 1 John 5:16-17*

### Truth common in both passages

- In both passages the context and language make it is clear that the authors are addressing believers about the sin of other believers. James addresses the readers as “Brethren” and the one who sins is named as someone “among you” who “wanders from the truth.” In First John, the reader and the sinner are Christian brothers.
- In both passages, there is a special category for this sin which leads to death.
- In both passages, the author holds out the possibility of rescuing the sinner from death.

### The meaning of death

These four interpretations of “death” are most common:

1. *Loss of salvation.* There is no support for this theologically or in the contexts. Despite the mention of believers’ sins in both epistles, they are not threatened with losing salvation (See *GraceNotes* nos. 2, 24, 37, 59, 60). In the relevant contexts, James encourages confession of sin and prayer for those in need, especially for those who may be ill because of sin (James 5:13-18) and John assures his readers that they have eternal life (1 John 5:11-13), which is life that cannot be lost (John 5:24; 11:25).
2. *Deadened fellowship with God.* Though death can sometimes refer to the deadening experience caused by sin (Rom. 6:23; 8:6; 1 Tim. 5:6), this does not fit the contexts of these passages.
3. *The unpardonable sin.* This assumes the sinner is in the process of deliberately rejecting God’s grace in Jesus Christ, which was the unforgivable sin of Israel’s leaders (Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; see *GraceNotes* no. 16). John warns of antichrists, apparently unsaved false teachers who left the believing community (1 John 2:17-19). Some think he is warning those who are beginning to follow them, but the parallelism breaks down because the wayward sinner is a saved person.
4. *Physical death.* This view has the strongest support. James explains how temptation can lead to sin which degenerates to physical death (James 1:13-15). In the immediate context James connects sin to physical illness and the importance of prayer for healing (James 5:13-18), though this sinner in danger of death may not be sick at all. John warns believers about the

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unsaved antichrists who deny Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:18-23), a serious sin that could deserve premature physical death. The Bible has many examples of physical death caused by sin (Num. 16; 1 Sam. 2:22-25; 4:11; Eze. 33:11, Acts 5:1-10; 1 Cor. 11:29-30). Sin resulting in death was part of the Mosaic Law (Num. 18:3; Lev 20:1-27) and is also taught in Proverbs (Prov. 10:2; 11:4, 19; 12:28).

### **The sin that leads to death**

Though no specific sin is named, it is evidently identifiable by the readers of each epistle. If the sins and deaths of Ananias and Saphirra and the Corinthian believers are examples, their sins disrupted the unity and harmony of the church, a serious issue. James speaks of a believer who “wanders from the truth” on a pathway to death. His epistle mentions many commands that should be obeyed. The sin in his warning may not be one specific sin but a general attitude of persistent disobedience. In his epistle, John mentions various sins also, most seriously denying that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22-23). He affirms all unrighteousness is sin, but not all sins lead to a premature death. If John and his readers have in mind a serious sin that deserves death, it is likely the denial of Jesus as the Christ (compare the seriousness of this sin repeated in 2 John 9-11). It seems that if God wanted us to know a specific sin that brings premature death, He would have revealed it. Each author assumes their readers can identify the sin that could result in God’s disciplinary, premature physical death.

### **The hope for sinners on the way to death**

James assures his readers that someone in the church could turn the sinner from his pathway to death. His preceding context suggests that prayer makes a difference, especially the “effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man” which “avails much” (James 5:16). Before his discussion of the sin unto death, John assures his readers who pray according to God’s will that their prayers will be answered (1 John 5:14-15), and he asserts that not all sins lead to death (1 John 5:16-17). He does not prohibit prayer for the one whose sin is leading to death but neither does He encourage it, which would make sense if it the sin is related to the antichrists’ heresy.

### **Conclusion**

These two passages demonstrate the seriousness of sin and remind us that God may discipline believers severely for some sins, even taking their physical life. This severe discipline is compatible with God’s love and grace in several ways. First, God loves His church and is jealous for its purity enough to protect it from those who would destroy it. Second, the premature death of a believer should influence others not to sin, even fear to sin (Acts 5:11). Third, by a premature death, God may be preserving both the believer’s testimony and the rewards he may have earned. Finally, James 5:20 says that when someone turns a sinner from his error, he will save not only his life but will also “cover a multitude of sins.” This could refer to the sins of the one on the pathway to death or to the sins of the one who saves him, but either way, it shows God’s gracious willingness to forego further discipline, or to reward the faithful believer who helps his brother. Sometimes God’s grace can appear in severe discipline, but He is always willing to restore a sinner (Heb. 12:1-11; 1 Peter 4:8).

