

Sin is Real But So is Grace

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a seven-part series

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John 13:36–38; 18:25–27; 21:14–17 (Common English Bible, CEB)

[At Jesus' last meal with his disciples]

³⁶ Simon Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you can't follow me now, but you will follow later." ³⁷ Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I'll give up my life for you." ³⁸ Jesus replied, "Will you give up your life for me? I assure you that you will deny me three times before the rooster crows."

[After Jesus' arrest, Peter follows and waits outside.]

²⁵ Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing with the guards, warming himself. They asked, "Aren't you one of his disciples?"

Peter denied it, saying, "I'm not." [Peter's second denial]

²⁶ A servant of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said to him, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" ²⁷ Peter denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed.

[After Jesus' resurrection, he comes to his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.]

¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ Jesus asked a second time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep." ¹⁷ He asked a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" He replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

Acts 9:1–2 (CEB)

Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest, ² seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

[Saul, later known as Paul, is met by the resurrected Jesus as he makes his way to Damascus and is struck blind. A few days later, he is taken to the home of a disciple, Ananias, in Damascus.]

¹⁷ Ananias went to the house. He placed his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord sent me—Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you were coming here. He sent me so that you could see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Instantly, flakes fell from Saul's eyes and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. ¹⁹ After eating, he regained his strength.

He stayed with the disciples in Damascus for several days. ²⁰ Right away, he began to preach about Jesus in the synagogues. "He is God's Son," he declared.

²¹ Everyone who heard him was baffled. They questioned each other, "Isn't he the one who was wreaking havoc among those in Jerusalem who called on this name? Hadn't he come here to take those same people as prisoners to the chief priests?"

²² But Saul grew stronger and stronger. He confused the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

*Sin can seem overwhelming,
but it washes away in the amazing light of God's grace.*

Here we have two stories of grace, by which we mean God's pouring out forgiveness and mercy on someone who doesn't deserve it. The "old" meaning of grace is still a good one: unmerited favor. In other words, in these stories, God is showering his compassion and kindness on a couple of unworthy souls.

Peter's story

I find it pretty easy to have sympathy for Peter. I'd like to think that I'd have done better in the courtyard of the high priest, but I doubt it. Few of us are as courageous as we imagine.

Peter's story is pretty simple. On the eve of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, he is sharing a last meal with his inner circle of disciples. They seem about as clueless as always – sounds harsh, but it's true. Things take a dark turn when Jesus begins to talk about betrayal and Judas is sent from the room – his treachery known only to Jesus and himself. When Peter tells Jesus that he would lay down his life for his master, Jesus looks at Peter, surely with love and resignation, "Will you give up your life for me? I assure you that you will deny me three times before the rooster crows" (John 13:38).

Jesus then leads them to the garden called Gethsemane, where he asks his disciples to wait for him. Taking Peter and two other disciples with him into the garden, Jesus prayed. What did Peter do during Jesus' time of anguish and fear? He fell asleep. That's right. He nodded off. Not once. Not twice. But three times . . . three! (see Matthew 26:36-46).

After his arrest in the garden, Jesus is taken to the house of the high priest. Peter follows at a distance and hangs around in the courtyard of the house while Jesus is mocked and beaten inside. When a servant woman asks Peter whether he is one of Jesus' disciples, Peter denies it outright. A bit later, the guards pose the same question. And, again, Peter denies it. Finally, a servant of the high priest said, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" And again, Peter denies it all . . . for a third time – and the rooster crowed.

As the hours pass, as Jesus is tried, scourged, nailed to a cross, and crucified, what must have been going through Peter's mind and heart? Three times. How could it be? Perhaps he was lost in his own disappointment, for it was all seemingly coming to nothing. Jesus was crucified, another would-be Messiah who met a bad end. Indeed, all we know for certain is that Peter hid. He was nowhere to be seen on Friday afternoon or on Saturday. In the gospel accounts, we don't encounter Peter again until Sunday morning, when some of the women run to tell him that the body of Jesus is gone. I'd guess a good bit of confusion reigned until Jesus came to his disciples that evening.

With Jesus having been resurrected and his claims vindicated, Peter must have wondered where he stood with the Master. Would he be banished for his failure to stand by Jesus, for his denial that he even knew his Savior? Sometime in the weeks that followed, Peter got his answer. On the shore of the Sea of Galilee, over a breakfast that Jesus had prepared, he asked Peter, "Do you love me?" When Peter assured him that he did, Jesus told him to feed Jesus' lambs. And then Jesus asked him a second time, to the same response. And again Jesus entrusted his flock to Peter. Then, Jesus asked the question for a third time, "Do you love me?" That third time had to be a sobering moment for Peter. Do you know him? . . . no, no, no. Do you love me? . . . yes, yes, yes.

And when Jesus told Peter for a third time, "Feed my sheep," Peter knew that he had been forgiven, that Jesus had poured out on him immeasurable grace. Peter's weakness had not doomed him to the outer darkness; rather, Jesus had embraced him and entrusted much to him. *Yes, Sin is real but so is grace.*

Saul's story

As dramatic as Peter's story is, I find the story of a Pharisee named Saul to be even more amazing. Saul was originally from Tarsus, a large city on the southern coast on Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). He was a Jew and a Roman citizen. From an early age Saul was known to be a zealous, intense, and brilliant young man. He made his way to Jerusalem, applying himself to the study and keeping of the Law. He excelled over his peers and was made a student of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the most important rabbis in the first-century.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, the troublemaker from Nazareth, Saul concentrated his immense energy and determination on eliminating this dangerous Jewish sect. He identified, chased down, and rounded up the followers of Jesus. Even when Gamaliel urged caution with the followers of Jesus (see Acts 5:17-42), Saul didn't slow his pace. With pride, he helped out at the stoning of a Christian named Stephen, holding the coats of those who

launched the missiles (Acts 7:58). After all, Saul was doing God's work. And so he charged on. He "began to wreak havoc against the church. Entering one house after another, he would drag off both men and women and throw them into prison" (Acts 8:3).

And then it all changed – in a moment. Saul had been "spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" for some time. He had even gone to the High Priest seeking letters to carry to Damascus, where he hoped to round up more of these Jesus-people. The letters authorized him to arrest these heretical Jews and haul them back to Jerusalem.

But on the road to Damascus, a bright light overcame Saul and he heard the voice of Jesus. Nothing would ever be the same for him. Nearly two decades later, Paul told some about what followed to believers in Galatia, hoping they would trust that his teaching came directly from Jesus Christ:

"You heard about my previous life in Judaism, how severely I harassed God's church and tried to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my peers, because I was much more militant about the traditions of my ancestors. But God had set me apart from birth and called me through his grace. He was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might preach about him to the Gentiles. I didn't immediately consult with any human being. I didn't go up to Jerusalem to see the men who were apostles before me either, but I went away into Arabia and I returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. But I didn't see any other of the apostles except James the brother of the Lord. Before God, I'm not lying about the things that I'm writing to you! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, but I wasn't known personally by the Christian churches in Judea. They only heard a report about me: 'The man who used to harass us now preaches the faith that he once tried to destroy.' So they were glorifying God because of me."

(Galatians 1:13-24)

How do we explain such a thing? Why would Saul (also known by his Roman name, Paul) be taken into God's embrace and become a driving force in the spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ. *Because Sin is real but so is grace.*

Our own story

The biggest mistake we could make here would be to pigeon-hole Peter and Saul/Paul into a category marked "other/not me." It is tempting and all too common for us to look at other people and see folks who really need God's grace, not realizing that we are all sinners and in dire need of God's unmerited favor. As Saul/Paul wrote in another letter:

"God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives."

(Ephesians 2:4-10)

Yes, the darkness in the human heart afflicts us all. Yes, something is wrong with us that we cannot repair. But grace is also real. And in the end, grace wins. Love wins. God wins. Always remember the words of John the Baptist when he saw Jesus approaching at the Jordan River: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the world."

The incarnation is the supreme act of God's grace, enabling *all who trust in Jesus* before all else to be restored to a right and good relationship with the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

The Conversion of Saul

In his excellent commentary, *The Message of Acts*, John Stott argues that Saul's conversion into the apostle called Paul was neither sudden nor compulsory. Stott rightly emphasizes that God prepared this zealous Pharisee for his encounter with Jesus. Could Saul really have glimpsed nothing of the truth of Christ? Could he have been unshaken by the testimony and martyrdom of Stephen? Rare is the person whose faith in Christ comes completely out of nowhere. God prepares us for the revelation of the Good News. Stott sums it up this way:

The cause of Saul's conversion was grace, the sovereign grace of God. But sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually, and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience with his goads. Then he revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin which imprisons; it is grace which liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice and self-centredness, as to enable us to repent and believe. One can but magnify the grace of God that he should have had mercy on such a rabid bigot as Saul of Tarsus, and indeed on such proud, rebellious and wayward creatures as ourselves.

C. S. Lewis, whose sense of God's pursuit of him has already been mentioned, also expressed his sense of freedom in responding to God:

I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, 'I am what I do.'¹

1. from Lewis' book on his own conversion, *Surprised by Joy*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Go back to Peter's story and try to imagine your way in. Do you think you would have stayed awake in the garden? Would fear or disappointment have driven you to deny Jesus early that Friday morning? How do you think you would have felt when Jesus talked with you on the beach?
2. Do the same with Saul/Paul's story. Why do you think God might have chosen Saul? How might God have prepared him? As the immensity of God's grace settled in on Paul, how might it have shaped his understanding of the Good News. Remember, the news is really only good if it is in response to bad news. Otherwise, it is just news.
3. Have you ever been the recipient of grace, surprising grace from someone? Are you willing to share that story with others? Oftentimes, the truth of God's grace become clear to us only in the clear light of grace that we've been given by someone in our life.
4. Finally, in light of all this, how would you explain grace to someone? How would you help them see that grace is the source of our hope and confidence? That we are, as Paul put it, God's accomplishment, not because of anything we've done, but simply because God is love!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday Exodus 34:1-9 The classic statement of God's graciousness</p>	<p>Tuesday Psalm 116 "The Lord is merciful and righteous, our God is compassionate."</p>
<p>Wednesday 2 Corinthians 12:1-13 More from Paul on the grace given him</p>	<p>Thursday 2 Timothy 1:8-14 The grace of God is revealed through the appearance of Jesus.</p>
<p>Friday James 4:1-12 Be givers of grace in our dealings with one another.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

