

Good News About Sin

Genesis 8:20-9:5; Matthew 13:24-32; Acts 14:8-17



We use the word sin for all that falls shy of perfection, goodness, love, and purity. To sin is to disobey God and fall away from what is good and best and worthy in life. Sin breeds destruction, chaos, shame, pain, distress, conflict, and turmoil in our fallen world. Can there be anything good to say about sin? Sin denotes failure, conflict, and pain. What's good about that?

I can't imagine Noah's distress at the cataclysmic loss of life on earth. Having experienced some personal grief, I cannot fathom the depths of grief he must have suffered. Our passage overtly says little about God's grief, yet there is something compelling in God's response for future sinful humanity's future. In the passage we read, God gave Noah a promise. "Never again! Never again will I curse the ground or destroy all earthly life because of human sinfulness!"

Life on earth had become utterly unbearable with violence, greed, scandalous living, and all kinds of wickedness. God had despaired of having created humanity and determined to start creation anew. Noah had found grace by walking with God, and God used him for a fresh start. With the flood finally over and the earth restored, Noah offered sacrifice to God. God seems to have decided on a better way to deal with sin than simple judgment and destruction. God decided that the better way to deal with sin and wickedness would be through grace—the example of a better way.

This is a striking passage in light of the popular theology of the day. The prevailing view was that human wickedness would call down divine judgment upon the land. Sin would keep God from sending rain and allowing for fertility among plant and animal life. God was understood to be harsh and ever ready to punish wickedness and disobedience with a heavy hand. This text says differently. God reserves the right to judge, yet this judgment is couched in the grace of restraint.

We find a reversal of the Genesis chapter three curse on the land, as well as the promise of stability on earth. This stability and divine protection would not be based on human morality and obedience, but on God's grace, mercy, and love. God would still demand accountability for our actions. There would still be expectations on our lives, choices, and actions. With this responsibility, however, comes grace to sustain life in spite of human wickedness. Grace would triumph above sin. Life would trump death and destruction. Love would become the greater order of the day.

Paul and Barnabas had a disturbing experience in Lystra. The crowd decided they were gods come down in human form. As the people rushed to honor them and offer them sacrifices, Paul urged them to refrain. In calling them to restraint, Paul spoke of God's mercy, forgiveness, and grace. He did not want them to be ignorant of God's grace, nor of God's identity. The people needed to understand that there was good news for them. They needed to hear that they had already been recipients of God's grace and love, even while living in ignorance and sin.

For a Jew, blasphemy was the most horrendous of crimes. The people of Lystra acclaimed Paul and Barnabas as deities, yet these two had simply come as messengers of the true God. They ripped their clothes in protest. They exposed their flesh to demonstrate that they were mere human beings like the rest. They managed to restrain the people from offering sacrifices to them, but they had greater

concerns than for themselves. As heinous as blasphemy was to a Jew, they were more concerned about the gospel message of grace—grace available even for those guilty of blasphemy!

This doesn't sound like much to us. Blasphemy is a word that somehow rings hollow to our ears. For the Jew, however, blasphemy was akin to the current outrage of the Afghani Muslim community over the conversion of a Muslim to Christianity. We look at conversion as a private choice and personal conviction. The Afghani community looks upon conversion from Islam as blasphemy against their religious convictions. Conversion states that what one leaves behind is inferior to one's new life and conviction. To leave Islam is to declare Islam untrue and Mohammed not to be the Prophet of the One True God. To a devout Muslim, this is blasphemy! In First Century Judaism, blasphemy was instantly punishable by death. The same held true in Medieval and Reformation Christianity. This makes Paul's words all the more striking.

We should expect Paul to call down fire and brimstone upon the city of Lystra! We ought to find harsh words of condemnation on Paul's lips and see harsher actions as well. We should seek wrath and vengeance in light of such a blasphemous demonstration. Instead, we find news of grace and mercy in the face of exuberant sin. Paul still speaks of responsibility, but God's response to sin is first of all an offer of grace. The good news is still mercy and forgiveness, even in the face of blasphemous sin.

Jesus' parable of the weeds among the wheat is a story of grace. We latch more readily onto the scene of fiery judgment, but the import of the text is grace, patience, and mercy. God's love is such that He desires that none should perish. God desires that we live fruitful lives and find fellowship with Him. This is the God of Jonah—the One slow to anger and long in mercy. This is the God who desires that all should come into fellowship and grace.

Jesus does not rule out judgment. Jesus does not ignore human responsibility. Jesus does not encourage sin, evil, and lives devoid of accountability. At the same time, however, Jesus stresses God's grace to transform our lives and offer us the opportunity for transformation and hope. Rather than words of condemnation, these are words of grace, welcome, and encouragement. They are words of good news for those ensnared by sin.

Jesus was not on a crusade to eradicate the earth of sin and sinners. Jesus was on a mission to call sinful humanity to a life of faith and dependence upon God's grace. Rather than working through external visible demonstrations of power, God's reign worked almost invisibly like yeast causing a ball of dough to rise. The mystery of grace radically transforms our lives, producing fruit in the long term.

This is the good news. There is something good to say about sin. Sin does not have the last word. Sin, evil, wickedness, distress, turmoil, and despair cannot overcome God's grace. It is God's message of grace, mercy, and forgiveness that bring hope in the face of sin. Even the heinous character of blasphemy pales in the light of grace. Jesus declared that He had come to seek and to rescue those lost in sin. Jesus declared that forgiveness and restoration was available to any who would repent and lay their lives in submission and service to God.

We have good news to share, even regarding the failures of life. Will we sit on the news, or shall we go on to share it with others? Grace has overcome the destructive nature of human sinfulness. If we should sit on this good news, how will the world understand God's good news about sin?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*