

Stories of Redemption

selected texts

Visitors to a particular museum in Italy are often struck by four partially finished sculptures. "... These were figures Michelangelo originally intended to use on the tomb of Pope Julius, but midway through the project he decided not to use them and ceased work on them. There is a hand protruding here, a torso of a man there, a leg, part of a head, but none are finished.

"Nearly everyone who sees these works senses the turmoil, the struggle embodied in these figures. It is as though they are crying to break free from the prison of the marble to become what they were intended to be.

"Author Theodore Roder looked on these four figures that Michelangelo called 'The Captives' and wrote, 'When I looked at those partial figures, they stirred up in me a deep longing to be completed—an ache to be set free from that which distorts and disguises, imprisons and inhibits my humanness, my wholeness. But as with those statues, I cannot liberate myself. For that I need the hand of another.'" - *John H. Stevens, "His Liberating Touch,"*

We each need the hand of Someone else Who can liberate us from sin's restraints so that we might be all that God intended for us to be when He first knew us in our mother's womb. This morning, since our service is a little different, I want to present something different. I just want to share three remarkable accounts of redemption from the Bible. They are presented simply to awaken praise and gratitude in each of us who has ever experienced the cleansing touch of Jesus. They are presented to encourage anyone who might question whether he or she has gone one sin too far for God to still care about him or her. They are presented to all who might doubt if God can really use them.

David, a Vile Opportunist

Moments before the bell to begin his New York City Golden Gloves match, boxer Daniel Caruso readied himself in the manner of Marvelous Marvin Hagler: by jabbing himself in the face. Caruso broke his own nose. The ringside doctor called off the fight. David, Israel's greatest King, well represents those who self-destructively turn blessings into disasters, who shoot themselves in the foot (or punch themselves in the face).

The story of a young shepherd slaying Goliath is inspiring. The story of a bored king lusting after a beautiful woman to the point of murdering her husband is disturbing. Can this be the same David? Here was a man who had experienced God as few others have. David lacked for nothing and yet, we find him sinning as ingloriously as any man ever sinned.

¹In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

²One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful ... - 2 Samuel 11:1, 2

Kings went to war in the spring because the rainy season had passed, and the roads were firm, so something here is amiss. David was sleeping away afternoons in Jerusalem while his armies were at war. Apparently, David had attained a level of prosperity that superseded his character to endure it. His string of successes had intoxicated him with a sense of invincibility and unchecked entitlement.

David should have filled his days with something worthwhile – a little wood-working or gardening – maybe, join a gym, got a bike or write his memoirs – even a bug collection would have been better than this idleness that made him such easy prey for temptation. Actually, David had started a collection. He had been collecting wives for some time. A harem should satisfy a man’s passions, but David’s issue was not simply one of passion. He had grown too accustomed to having what he wanted when he wanted it.

From his roof, David sees a beautiful woman bathing. After he leers, he acts. He sleeps with Bathsheba and impregnates her. Then, he summons her husband, Uriah, from the battle front to enjoy a little R & R with his wife, hoping that this will cover up the royal indiscretion. Uriah is a more loyal soldier than David deserves. He refuses to enjoy the pleasures of home while his brothers-in-arms are at war. David gets Uriah drunk, but Uriah has higher scruples in inebriation than David has in sobriety. Next, we almost forget why we are supposed to like David. He sends a message to his general to see to it that Uriah dies in battle. After the vile deed is done, David takes Bathsheba as one more wife.

Life goes on, and David shows no signs of cracking until Nathan, a prophet, appears and spins a story about a rich man with many sheep and a poor man with a single ewe lamb, which was treated like a part of the family. When a guest arrives, the rich man takes the poor man’s lamb and cooks it rather than slaughter one of his many sheep. David is incensed until Nathan declares, “You are the man!”

This was the worst thing David had ever done. In fact, it is a worse thing than most people ever get around to doing. But, David immediately confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD.” As painful as the exposure of his guilt was, it paved the way to a restoration for which his spirit had been longing. All these months behind the façade of “nothing happening,” David had sensed his spiritual distance from God:

³When I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. – Psalm 32:3, 4

Nathan spoke one word of comfort to the King: “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.” David certainly deserved to die. He had executed others for far less, but grace is God’s unmerited gift. It has to be. What else can account for God’s dealings with this broken king? David did not escape every consequence of what he had done. The child of the union would die so that David might not prosper from the fruit of his sin. But, centuries later, another son of David would die, not as a discipline for any one man’s sins, but as a satisfaction of God’s judgment on the sins of all of us.

Manasseh, a Vehement Offender

Dean told me that he once dreamed of heaven and was promptly met by St. Peter at those famous “Pearly Gates.” Peter began to show him around. Soon, he saw an enormous wall with thousands of clocks, all ticking away, but at different rates. He noticed that under each clock was a name plate. Peter explained that each clock was designed to keep track of an individual still on earth. Each time the person sinned, the hands on the clock representing him made a complete revolution. Dean began to recognize the names of people he knew - Karl, Howard, Jim, Tom ... but he never saw Joe’s clock so he asked about it. St. Peter explained, “Joe’s clock is over at the office. We needed it for a fan.”

Paul once called himself the “chief of sinners.” We can appreciate his humility, but several characters appear in the Old Testament who easily deserve “a shot at the title.” Ahab and Jezebel were a pair of stinkers. Absalom, Cain, Haman – they’re all contenders. Still, I would have to cast my vote for a fellow named Manasseh, as evil a king as ever led Judah. Manasseh’s life was not anything that could be blamed on a disadvantaged life. He was the son of a king, but not just any king. Manasseh’s daddy was Hezekiah, who walked as closely with God as any king in Judah had since David, and no king that ever followed him was more righteous. Consider King Hezekiah’s recorded legacy:

⁵Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. ⁶He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. ⁷And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. – 2 Kings 18:5-7

But then, Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, messed it all up. Great advantages, a great legacy and a great fatherly example did not prove sufficient to restrain Manasseh from the vilest sins conceivable. His father was known for sweeping reforms in the worship of *JEHOVAH* throughout Judah, but everything that his father had restored, Manasseh destroyed. Hezekiah fought against idolatry in Judah. Manasseh reintroduced it with brazen abandon. He even erected idols in the temple of God.

These religious desecrations only scratched the surface of Manasseh’s despicability. He worshipped the heavenly bodies. He practiced divination, sorcery, witchcraft and consulted mediums. His was a reign of terror in which much innocent blood was shed. His *coup de grace* may have been when he sacrificed his own sons to pagan deities. Remember, this is Judah’s King, the shepherd of God’s covenant nation. Under Manasseh, God’s patience was exhausted. Judah fell into such a deep moral and spiritual morass that God’s judgment against the nation could not be reversed. In fact, it was Manasseh’s sins that are referenced three generations later as the cause of the Babylonia captivity: When Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar, the historians blamed Manasseh:

... ³Surely these things happened to Judah according to the LORD’s command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done, ⁴including the shedding of innocent blood. For he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD was not willing to forgive. – 2 Kings 24:3, 4

That’s not a legacy to covet, but even before that final judgment on Israel, Manasseh himself was judged in his own day. The Assyrians attacked and took him captive. Since Manasseh was Judah’s king, the Assyrians did all they could to humiliate him, dragging him to Babylon, bound in bronze shackles and with a hook in his nose. Not surprisingly, all this caused Manasseh great distress. He sought the favor of the LORD, but surely, it was too late now for such foxhole religion to matter. Manasseh had set Judah on an irreversible course toward judgment. This is the kind of “repentance” that causes good people to raise their eyebrows. It cannot be true repentance, so we think, but God sees what we cannot:

¹³And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God. – 2 Chronicles 33:13

Manasseh spent the rest of days working to clean up the mess he had made, but it was simply too late for the nation. But, it was not too late for the man.

Have you ever wondered if there is such a thing as going one sin too far? Take comfort in knowing that Jesus came to save sinners and, simply put, God’s grace is greater than your deepest sin.

Saul, a Vicious Opponent

Saul of Tarsus first appears as a cryptic figure at the stoning of Stephen. It is not clear if that event was simple mob violence or if it was endorsed by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling counsel, of which Saul was a member. The fact that those who killed Stephen laid their cloaks at Saul's feet implies that he was more than a bystander. He was heartily supportive of the deed. But, Stephen's demise failed to satisfy Saul's lust for Christian blood.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. – Acts 8:2, 3

Paul's identity as a righteous Pharisee was threatened by the Christian Gospel that challenged the worth of any righteousness that comes from keeping the law. His zealous defense of the old way meant that he must "destroy" all things Christian.

Still, in spite of this notorious first impression, Saul, later known as the Apostle Paul, would become a dominant character in the New Testament. We cannot number the churches he planted throughout Asia Minor and Greece. He wrote one-fourth of the New Testament. What we know of his ministry eclipses the sum-total of what we know of the ministries of the Twelve. Saul would become a true giant in church history. Who could have seen that the furious young Pharisee we first find endorsing the actions of a lynch mob would one day represent one of the most incredible turnabouts to a life that we will ever witness?

Eventually, after doing all the damage he could to the church in Jerusalem, Saul learned that many Christians had fled to Damascus, 140 miles to the north. He wanted a piece of them as well:

¹Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." – Acts 9:1-6

God can break any man in a flash, and with a literal flash of light, he knocked Saul to the ground. Jesus squashed this ravenous, angry and self-righteous persecutor of His church, and Saul would never be the same. He recounts this story twice in the book of Acts before government officials, but surely he told it more times than we can imagine. Saul intended to enter Damascus like a wild boar, but he would enter as a blind, helpless child. Sometimes, a person will not see his need without a nudge, so in love God nudges. He drove Saul to his knees, but ultimately, even such a dramatic breaking is an act of loving grace.

A broken man, Paul would embrace this same Jesus that he had vainly endeavored to destroy. God not only calls us out of sin. He also calls us into service. Saul's credentials could not save him, but they would come in handy. His learning prepared him to stand before rulers and philosophers. His status as a Jewish Pharisee prepared him to masterfully explain to others what a paltry righteousness is achieved when we try to earn it, but what a great righteousness is freely given to those who fall on the grace of God.

“Father Greg Boyle is in the business of erasing the past. This Jesuit priest founded Homeboy Industries in East Los Angeles. Father Boyle has put together a team of physicians trained in the laser technology of tattoo removal. The team is part of a program that takes the tattoos of ex-gang members and wipes the slate clean. For many, it is as crucial a service as it is merciful.

“Gang-related tattoos prevent many former gang members from getting jobs. For others, the markings critically impinge on mental health or put them in serious danger on the streets. There is no fee or community service required to receive the tattoo removal offered by Homeboy Industries. It is strictly a gift.

“For those involved, the spiritual imagery is compelling. The seeming permanence of a gang tattoo fosters the attitude that the gang’s claim is also permanent. It is a mark of ownership as much as identity. The emotional consequence is that it seems a part of you that can never be shaken.”

Some of you may have felt like this in regard to past mistakes - sins whose mark we cannot rub off though you know you have been cleansed by Christ. Perhaps the imagery of tattoo removal can evoke a renewed sense of our blessed assurance. Like former gang members who have had the marks of a former life removed, so our sins are blotted out by the blood of Christ. They are remembered no more.

Our sins have been removed “as far as the east is from the west.” This is what it means to be set free. This is what redemption is all about – to be loosed of our chains and restored to fellowship with God.

A few years ago a nationwide poll asked, “What word or phrase would you most like to hear uttered to you, sincerely?” You probably guessed the first thing people wanted to hear? “I love you.” The second was, “You are forgiven.” Number three, believe it or not, was, “Supper is ready.” Our redemption in Christ is, in fact, God’s declaration of all three of these things:

“I love you” - So much that He gave His Son to die for you!

“You are forgiven” – His grace is greater than any sin you can imagine!

“Supper is ready” – The estrangement is broken. Enter into the joy of your Lord and God!