

“The Believer’s Continual Sin”
Genesis 9:18-29

August 23, 2015

SI: We’re studying the first eleven chapters of Genesis this summer. Christians should be thoroughly familiar with these early chapters because they are foundational for a biblical world view. All the great themes of Scripture are introduced here. In this passage we see an important aspect of the Christian life revealed.

INTRO: The 14th anniversary of September 11th is approaching.

I want to take you back and remind you of some things that happened on the days immediately after the terrorist attack.

First, on the evening of September 11, members of Congress from both parties gathered on the steps of the Capitol. They had a moment of silence, remembering those who had been lost, praying for the country, and then they spontaneously sang, *God Bless America*.

Second, on Sunday following the attack, church attendance across America was up 25%, and in NYC itself, churches were overflowing.

A pastor friend of mine on Staten Island who normally had less than 100 in worship, had standing room only with over 300 attending.

Third, six days after the attack, David Letterman came back on the air.

And in his opening monologue he fought back tears, and without any cynicism or irreverence he talked about the nature of true courage and sacrifice.

A great disaster had befallen our nation.

Symbols of our dominance had been reduced to piles of smoking ruins.

The lives of thousands of our countrymen had been snuffed out.

It shook people deeply, shook them out of their pettiness and their secularism.

It sobered and changed them—for a little while.

But it didn't take long at all before political animosity returned to normal levels.

And the same with church attendance. There was no lasting increase.

And the same with the irreverence and cynicism of pop culture.

And let's be honest.

Christians were also guilty of superficial changes.

Who do you think those extra 25% were who briefly swelled church attendance?

Mostly professing Christians who felt compelled to be turn to God on that day.

But they didn't say: This has reminded me life is short, big things are at stake.

I'm going to make corporate worship my first priority on the Lord's Day.

Very quickly they returned to their old sloppy habits of worship.

Speaking for myself,

I remember how much more vivid God's judgment seemed after Sept 11.

All disasters are foreshadowings of God's final judgment.

I felt an urgency to pray for the church and pray for our country and our leaders.

And I did pray more—for a while. But then I petered off.
I wanted to be more faithful in prayer, but I failed to be consistent,
even with such a powerful motivation.
Now you would think that after Noah and his family had witnessed the flood,
and had seen God destroy all life because of mankind's wickedness.
After they had experienced their amazing salvation,
and had heard God make his covenant with them and give the sign of rainbow.
After all that they would have been the most sober, devout, careful, worshipful folk
in the world. They would have said to themselves, we're never going to sin again.

But what do we find in this passage?
How does Genesis 9 describe the world of men after the judgment of the flood?
It's the same as it was before the flood.
It's populated by both unbelievers who find it natural to do evil,
and by believers who want to obey God, but remain sinners themselves,
and who fail in some pretty spectacular ways.

Why did Noah, a believer, a man who had experienced an exceptional outpouring
of God's grace and who had witnessed God's terrible judgment of sin—
why did he take God's good gifts and throw them in God's face?
Why did he get drunk and in his stupid lack of self-control shamefully expose
himself? In doing that, provided an occasion of temptation for his son.
(Read between the lines) Ham's response was to gloat over and mock his father's
failure. He told his brother's for a laugh. God hated that disrespect so much,
he cursed Ham's son Canaan for it. But Noah himself provided the occasion!

Here's the point: Noah had walked with God many years. He knew better.
His story is the first biblical example of the mysterious and sad fact
that believers continue to sin.
Even after we experience God's grace and salvation—we continue to sin.
Even after we grasp the truth about death, hell, judgment, the cross and heaven—
we continue to sin.
Even after God gives us the Holy Spirit and the Bible and a church full of fellow
believers we can turn to for help—we continue to sin.
We take all those blessings of God and throw them in his face.

So let's look at this sobering reality under three headings”
1. What it tells us about God.

2. What it tells us about ourselves.
3. How we ought to live.

Credit where credit is due. Sermon on passage by Dr. Robert Rayburn.

MP#1 What the believer's continual sin tells us about God

Last week we looked at God's covenant with Noah.

We noted that the essence of that covenant were the wonderful promises.

That's the heart of all God's covenant dealings with us.

He enters into personal relationship with us that is framed and ordered by promises.

Right after God made those wonderful covenant promises,

Noah threw them back in God's face with his drunken escapade.

But it's not just Noah. This is the story of the whole Bible. Think about it.

After every major covenant God made with his people—

they promptly spit in his face.

Abraham was a pagan. He grew up worshipping the gods of Mesopotamia.

The Lord called him, saved him, made a covenant with him.

The Lord promised to him and Sarah a son.

And from that son he promised to make Abraham a great nation,

and to bless all the world through him, and to bring from his line the Redeemer.

But those gracious words had barely been spoken when do you remember what

Abraham did? In a fearful panic he lied about his wife, said she was his sister.

Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem.

Abraham put not only his wife at risk, he risked ruining God's promise of a son.

All in a mad dash to save his own skin.

The same thing happened when God made his covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai.

He brought this nation of pitiful slaves out of Egypt,

brought them through the Red Sea, told them they were going to be his chosen

people, his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests to serve the whole world.

But Moses wasn't even down from the mountain after receiving that covenant,

before the Israelites made a golden calf.

God's glory was still present on Mt. Sinai. They could see the smoke and fire.

They could hear the thunder of his voice and they still did it.

When God made his covenant with King David

he promised that from David's line would come the King of kings.

He promised eternal honor to the house of David if he would walk before him.
You would think that after a promise like that,
David would have walked on eggshells the rest of life.
He would have been careful not to do anything that in any way
would offend against the grace of God. But you know the story.
The promise had barely been made before David was in a soap opera.
He behaved no differently from the worst pagan king—
stealing another man's wife, murdering her husband, one of his loyal soldiers.

And we're still not done.

In the Upper Room, on that fateful and wonderful night,
our Lord Jesus Christ renewed the covenant of grace once more.
Those 12 disciples at the table that evening represented the entire church.
And to them Jesus promised his Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins,
room in his father's heavenly mansion.
He spoke of his coming suffering for the salvation of his people.
He gave them a sign of all those promises, the Lord's Supper.
"This bread is my body, broken for you. This cup new covenant in my blood."
And after all that, you know what happened.
One betrayed him, one denied him, and all the rest deserted him.

Those aren't the only examples of God's grace to his people being thrown in face.
There are many, many more—the Bible is full of them!
What's the meaning of this? It certainly tells us something about ourselves.
We'll get to that in just a second.
But that's not the big thing. The big thing is what it tells us about God.
It tells us that the Lord is faithful. The Lord saves from first to last.

It wasn't Noah's faithfulness that made the covenant stand, or Abraham's,
or Israel's or David's or the Disciples'—it was the Lord's from beginning to end.
We are no more able continue our salvation than we were to start it to begin with.

We are saved by grace and we are kept saved by grace.
Our relationship with the Lord depends on his faithfulness to us,
not our faithfulness to him, his love for us, not our love for him,
his promise-keeping, not ours.
If you are in covenant with God this morning by faith in Jesus Christ his Son,
you can be assured that he is faithful in spite of your failure.

It's the story of the Bible from first to last.

That brings us to the next observation, we've already hinted at it.

MP#2 What the believer's continuing sin tells us about ourselves.

This biblical history I've recounted tells us that even the Lord's best friends can't seem to help betraying him, dishonoring him, disobeying him, and belittling his goodness and kindness toward them.

We don't need to be criticizing unbelievers.

What chance do they have? They really can't help it.

We have the Holy Spirit and the new birth and the Word of God—and we still sin.

There is a dark ugliness in each of our hearts.

We've all done and said things for which we are terribly ashamed.

Hurtful things to other people, selfish things, petty things.

Sins of commission. Sins of omission.

But let's be honest, the bad things we've done and said pale in comparison to the hideousness of our thoughts.

What if all our thoughts were exposed for others to see?

Our thoughts are the true measure of our character and minds are cesspools.

There are Christians who can't take this.

They reject it. They raise theological and practical objections against it.

Years ago a family worshipped at Christ Covenant for about a year.

They often said to me:

We enjoy the worship service but we don't like the confession of sin.

Why do you do that?

I said, because it's biblical and the church has done it for 4,000 years.

But they argued that it was too negative, that's not who we are,

we're not sinners, we're saints, we're not sinners, we're sons of God,

we're not sinners, we're born again, regenerated people.

And I said: Yes, we're all those things, and we're still wretched sinners.

It came to a head when they went through the Inquirers Class.

I'm always ready for people to question two aspects of our doctrine—predestination and infant baptism. So I'm geared up for that.

I said: Let's read the membership vows.

“Do you believe you are a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope, save in his sovereign mercy?”

No. What do you mean, no? Do you never sin?

Well, they said: And then they started doing some amazing gymnastics. If anything bad happens to be done, if any “sins” happened to be committed, it's not really the true me doing it—

It's that old part of me which was my flesh, but that is no longer me.

I asked them: What about your thoughts and desires?

Nope, no problems there.

They defined sin as mostly external actions, not motives of the heart.

Their view is called perfectionism.

It has crops up from time to time throughout the history of the church.

It takes different forms but that's a good outline.

I'm not really the one committing the sins, it's my sinful nature, which is not me.

And sin is shallowly defined as external actions, not heart motives.

I liked this couple, but there was such a profound divide in our self-consciousness as believers that they couldn't connect with us and left.

On the other hand, I once got a phone call from the wife of a friend of mine.

She wanted me to go get her husband out of jail where he had spent the night for public intoxication—just like Noah. She was disgusted with him.

I picked him up and we drove in silence for a long time.

Then he started talking and he said:

I know I don't look like a Christian right now, but I am.

And out poured the shame and regret of his struggle with alcohol

but also his desire to serve God and his sense of the presence of the Spirit.

He knew he was a saint and a child of God, he knew it in his bones.

And he also knew that he was still, in this life, very much a sinner.

Martin Luther coined a famous Latin phrase: *simul justus et peccator*.

Simul—simultaneously, justus—justified, et—and, peccator—a sinner.

I'm simultaneously justified, righteous in God's eyes and a sinner.

William Beveridge was a 15th century Anglican Bishop. Here's how he put it:

“I cannot pray, but I sin; I cannot hear or preach a sermon, but I sin; I cannot give an alms, or receive the sacrament, but I sin: nay, I cannot so much as confess my sins, but my confessions are still aggravations of them. My repentance needs to be repented of, my tears want

washing, and the very washing of my tears needs still to be washed over again with the blood of my Redeemer.”

The only consistent thing we bring to our relationship with the Lord is our sin and failure. Praise him for his grace to us in Jesus.

Brings us to the practical matter and last point . . .

MP#3 How we ought to live in light of this.

In Romans 6,

Paul deals with the foolish argument some people make that goes like this:
If God is gracious, and is always meeting our sin with more grace and mercy,
And if I’m still a sinner and I’m going to be sinning anyway,
Then, why worry about it? There’s no need to try not to sin.

There’s no need trying to live in obedience to God’s commands.

Of course, Paul demolishes that thinking.

And all true believers understand intuitively that it’s bogus.

All of you know it’s bogus. We can’t treat sin in our lives like it’s no big deal.
God’s grace to us in Jesus compels us to try our hardest to serve him.

We’ve been delivered from the consequences of sin,
it’s power over us has been broken, we’ve died to it, no longer enslaved to it.
How can we live in it any longer.

Those are all phrases Paul uses in Romans 6 to say—

Never, never, never will we treat sin lightly and say—

Oh well, God’s merciful and I’m still a sinner, no big deal.

And then, Romans 6 is followed by Romans 7, and you know that chapter.

Paul then describes the enormous, life-long, painful struggle against sin.
It’s remarkable. Just after saying that he has died to sin and been delivered from it
through Christ, he says: I’m a wretched man, I’m still struggling.

He’s describing the experiential side of the Christian life.

Yes, I’ve been saved and delivered, but oh this sanctification stuff is hard.
It hurts to say no to myself. It’s a struggle to do the good things I know I must do.
It’s a struggle to be a good husband and a good dad.

It’s a struggle to be generous and content with what I have.

It’s a struggle to control my tongue, to bless and not curse.

When I fail, even though I know Lord forgives me, it’s still shameful and painful.

Rabbi Duncan was a famous Scottish missionary and theologian.

He put it this way:

“‘Nobody’s perfect’ is the hypocrite’s couch of ease but the believer’s bed of thorns.”

Let’s take that apart:

“‘Nobody’s perfect.’”

Noah wasn’t perfect. He got drunk. He had an alcohol problem.

Abraham wasn’t perfect, he hurt his wife. He operated out of fear.

Moses wasn’t perfect, he lashed out in anger.

David wasn’t perfect, he committed adultery.

Peter wasn’t perfect, he denied the Lord Jesus with curses.

True, nobody’s perfect. And you’re not perfect either.

But if you use that as couch of ease, you’re a hypocrite.

In other words, if you say “‘nobody’s perfect’”

as a justification to continue your pet sins.

Or if you say it to compare yourself to other people and excuse yourself,

then you’re not a Christian, you’re a hypocrite.

How does Rabbi Duncan say “‘nobody’s perfect’” ought to strike a true Christian?

As a bed of thorns. It ought to hurt you.

It ought to hurt you to see the sins and failures of other people.

That’s why Noah’s sons Shem and Japheth got blessed.

They grieved over their father’s drunken lack of self control.

They covered him up, and they even walked backwards so they wouldn’t see him

lying there in his shame and failure.

The opposite of Ham who told his brothers:

Look at old holier than thou dad in there.

Noah, the preacher of righteousness two sheets to the wind.

And “‘nobody’s perfect’” ought to hurt you that you’re not perfect yet either.

And this is not the life you were saved to live.

That’s what will be great about heaven.

We’ll no longer be at the beck and call of sin.

We’ll finally be able to give the Lord a life worthy of the grace we’ve received.

But so long as we continue in this life as sinners,

let’s show our love for Jesus by being unwilling and unhappy sinners.

Let's be joyful Christians, optimistic and cheerful about God's grace toward us,
amazed and confident at our righteousness in Jesus . . .

But unhappy with ourselves as sinners

and striving every day to put away and put to death the bad things,
and to love God and love our neighbor and serve them.