

Clean Slate Campaign

Notes for Bible study

The Clean Slate theme in the Old Testament

The theme of restoration, of making a fresh start, runs right through the Old Testament. Perhaps the first, unfortunate, case is the story of Noah and what is literally a wiping of the slate and a fresh start: a new covenant between humanity and God. What is significant for us today is the promise that God will never again use such drastic methods - post-flood slate-cleaning has to be done at the level of moral change.

In Mosaic law the idea appears in two main ways: First there is the annual Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) in which the sins of the nation were paid for by animal sacrifice and the driving of a goat (the scapegoat representing the sins of the people) into the desert to die. For Christians, this idea of animal sacrifice was later replaced by Christ's death on the cross - a once-and-for-all atonement between humanity and God.

The other idea concerns atonement in relationships between humans: the Jubilee year. We could compare it to playing a game like Monopoly. As the game goes on some become richer and some lose out, but eventually you pack up all the pieces and the next time when you play you all make a fresh start. In life, though, it is as though the pieces are still on the table when you come down the next morning, and the morning after and on and on. When we get old and die, our children inherit the same place in the game of monopoly that we left, whether in grinding poverty or fabulous riches.

Leviticus 25: 8-55 spells out the idea that every 50 years there should be a fresh start - just like packing up the game of monopoly and starting again. Land that was sold in the past should be returned to its original owners. People, who through poverty and debt sold themselves into slavery, should be set free. It is based on the idea that property (whether land or slaves) doesn't ultimately belong to people, but to God. By the time the book of Deuteronomy came to be written, this principle was extended to a forgiveness of debts and release of slaves on every seventh year (Deuteronomy 15: 1-18).

Deuteronomy chapter 30 adds a further dimension: After spelling out the covenant between the people of Abraham and God and making clear the penalties of breaking the law, the author (v.2) holds out the promise of forgiveness for those who repent and return to the lord.

David and Bathsheba

Historians often like to point out that "history is written by the victors" and frequently therefore tends to whitewash its heroes at the expense of their enemies. In Jewish history there can be no greater hero than David, and so it is all the more remarkable that this shameful episode is preserved and in such wonderfully human detail. Its significance today is that it is such a human story and one we can identify with. David's sin is forgiven by God, and the relationship he enjoys with God is fully restored - but David has to live with the human consequences of his actions and there is high cost to pay.

2-Samuel ch.11-ch.12:25 tells the story from David's temptation (11:2), first crime (11:4) and the consequences - Bathsheba's pregnancy (11:5). Then follows David's attempt to cover up the crime by getting Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to sleep with his wife. But Uriah is fighting a holy war, and according to religious law must abstain. (11:6-13). So David is driven to more desperate measures and arranges to have Uriah killed in battle. (11:14-25). On the surface it appeared that David had got away with it. He was now free to take Bathsheba as his wife. But, we are told (v.26) that God saw what happened and was displeased.

In Chapter 12:1-4 God sends his prophet Nathan with a parable for David to pass judgement on. Unwittingly (v. 5-6) David condemns himself: "The man deserves death". Then Nathan delivers the punchline (v. 7) "You are the man". He then spells out the full extent of David's sin, God's displeasure and the consequences. We can imagine that having got away with his crime, David was probably well on the way to blotting it out of his mind. He may have told himself that Uriah would probably have died anyway in battle and that therefore he hadn't really done anything wrong.

The greatness of David lies in his readiness to accept his guilt and repent (v. 13) for which he receives forgiveness - "you shall not die" (contrasting with David's own statement "the man deserves death"). Tradition has it that David's penned psalm 51 at this point, - one of the all-time great expressions of repentance. In it David "acknowledges my offence, my sin is always before me." He asks for God to give him "a clean heart", recognising that it is not something he himself can achieve ("in guilt was I born and in sin my mother conceived me"), and David recognises that the traditional method of offering animal sacrifices will not suffice: "My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn". It seems a lasting repentance and we see later David's willingness to forgive others (16:5-14)

Nevertheless, the consequences of David's sin remain. Chapters 13-18 spell out the conflict among David's sons (after one of them succumbs to the same lust as his father) and then between David and his son Absalom. 16:20-22 has Absalom visiting his father's wife in public view, as prophesied (12:11) and the child of David's sinful union with Bathsheba dies.

Other psalms with a clean-slate theme:

Ps. 24: connects the quest for God with moral cleanliness. Its relevance is for those who seek spiritual enlightenment as mere "knowledge" without being ready to change the way they live.

v. 3-6 "Who can ascend the mountain of the Lord?
or who may stand in his holy place?
He whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean,
Who desires not what is in vain,
nor swears deceitfully to his neighbour.
He shall receive a blessing from the Lord,
a reward from God his saviour
Such is the race that seeks for him,
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

Ps. 32 "Happy is he whose fault is taken away, whose sin is covered"

This was a favourite of St Augustine's

v.3 "As long as I would not speak, my bones wasted away with my groaning all the day" (as long as I didn't confess my sins, I suffered)

v.5 "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, my guilt I covered not. I said 'I confess my faults to the Lord,' and you took away the guilt of my sin". St Augustine's comment is that even before the penitent sinner speaks of his sin, God hears the cry of his heart. Pardon at once follows sincere contrition.

Ps 106 is a corporate confession of the nation's sins.

v. 6-39 remembering the shameful, sinful, episodes of the nation's history

v. 40-48 remembering the consequences, and God's faithfulness

v. 45-46 "Yet he had regard for their affliction when he heard their cry; and for their sake he was mindful of his covenant and relented, in his abundant kindness."

v.47-48 the conclusion: "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in praising you. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, through all eternity! Let all the people say, Amen! Alleluia."

The clean-slate theme in the Prophets

The Israelites came to see their history rather in terms of Ps 106 (see above): a nation called into a special relationship (covenant) with God. When they were faithful to the covenant, God blessed them. When they were unfaithful they had to face the consequences of their sin - which often meant defeat at the hands of other nations or other disasters. The role of the prophet was to call the people back to their covenant. Sometimes this meant warning of dire consequences if they continued to be unfaithful. But the prophets never wanted their words to lead to despair - despair paralyses the will to change. Ultimately always the message was one of hope and the promise that God would never finally abandon his people.

The book of **Isaiah** is primarily a message of hope at a time when the Israelites had been taken into captivity in Babylon. Partly it is analysis of what has gone wrong, partly it is exhortation to faithfulness, and partly, especially from chapter 40, it is the promise of restoration.

True repentance precedes religious observance

From early times the Israelites, in common with other cultures, had recognised the value of fasting as part of atonement for their sins. It was part of the ritual for the Day of Atonement (Lev.16:31) but also observed at other times (e.g. Judg. 20:26; David's repentance in 2 Sam 12:16; Neh. 9:1) But it is very easy to get abstract and theoretical about sin as a way of avoiding the reality of it. **Isaiah 58:3-12** makes the point that when sin is not faced squarely then fasting doesn't work. When restitution is made then God will restore the people "you will be known as the people who have rebuilt the walls, who restored the ruined houses." **Isaiah 65: 17-25** concludes with a poetic vision of the world renewed "I am making a new earth and new heavens. The events of the past will be completely forgotten". This is a natural consequence of obedience to God "I will give a new name to those who obey me" (v.15).

These themes were taken up in the New Testament (Isaiah is the second most quoted O.T. book after the psalms). **Mark 12:28-34** makes the point that it is more important to "love the

Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength" and to "love your neighbour as yourself" than all the traditional sacrifices of religion. **Mathew 5:23-24** "So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God." As in Isaiah, making the necessary steps of restitution to restore our human relationships comes before attending to our religious duties. **Mathew 25:35-36** makes specific reference to the demands of Isaiah 58: 6-7 (feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked) in the context of our accountability to God at the Last Judgement. And the conclusion of the Book of Revelation (**Rev. 21**) echoes, at times word for word, the vision of a new creation found in the final chapters of Isaiah.

The prophet **Joel**, preached at a time of famine due to drought and a plague of locusts. **Joel 2: 12-18** is a plea for corporate repentance, and in verses **19-27** God promises to restore fertility to the land, including a promise (v.25) to "give back what you lost in the years when swarms of locusts ate your crops".

The book of **Jonah** is wonderfully descriptive, at times almost comic in its depiction of the reluctant prophet. It contrasts Jonah's judgmental attitude to the mercy of God when the people of Nineveh earnestly repent.

Personal responsibility

Throughout the times of the Bible and until the last 300 years people were far less individualistic than they are now. People were members of a community (clan, tribe or nation) first, and only individuals second. As we see in the rituals surrounding the Day of Atonement, sin was seen very much as a corporate thing. If a member of one clan wronged a member of another, then it was usual practice for the clan to be held responsible, rather than an individual - even to the point that if murder was committed, then the killing of any member of the guilty clan was considered to be justice. St Paul makes use of this in developing his theology of salvation (Romans 5: 12-19. Through the guilt of one man, Adam, all were condemned and through the righteousness of one man, Jesus, all are put right) In the Ten Commandments, God says that the consequences of worshipping false Gods will fall not only on those guilty, but also on their descendants "down to the third and fourth generations" (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 5:9)

There is much truth in this - sin can be a matter of culture and unjust economic structures as well as a matter for individuals. We see this clearly when it comes to things like pollution or the need to relieve the burden of debt for developing countries. Yet this argument can be overplayed to avoid personal responsibility. Perhaps the greatest paradox of our age is that while we enjoy unprecedented *personal freedom*, we have tended more and more to think in terms of *corporate responsibility*. The criminal is not to blame - he is the victim of negligent parents, a school system that failed him, a corrupt uncaring and materialistic society.

Ezekiel was one of the most colourful and eccentric of the prophets. In **Ez. 18** he argues eloquently against those who blame all their troubles on the sins of their forefathers. He concludes by pleading for repentance. v.21-23 "If the wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps my laws, if he does what is right and just, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of the crimes he committed shall be remembered against him; he shall live because he did what is right. Do you think I enjoy seeing an evil person die?" asks the Sovereign Lord. "No, I would rather see him repent and live."

The Clean Slate theme in the New Testament

Baptism

All four Gospels and the book of Acts start with mention of John the Baptist, who is described as preaching a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 1:5) Baptism quickly became a central rite of Christianity. The symbolism is rich: water is used for washing, and in the Law of Moses for ritual purification. Also, in a desert nation, nothing grows without water - it is a symbol of life. When a baby is born it first of all has to break the waters of the uterus and pass through them: baptism represents a second birth, new life. For the Israelites, it had even further symbolism. Genesis starts with the image of the face of God moving on the water. In the story of Noah, God used water to purify the earth. And for people, who recalled every year their escape from Egypt as a proto-act of God's salvation in the feast of the Passover, baptism recalled the passing through the waters of the Red Sea.

Baptism is the par-excellence symbol of the clean-slate theme. It goes hand in hand with the sacrament of the Lords Supper. It is about turning away from sin, turning to God, being forgiven and making a fresh start. The **Gospel of John, chapters 2-5** deal with these themes in great depth. Water is the common thread. First there is the story of the wedding where Jesus turns jars of water to wine (we are told that the water was for ritual washing - it is replaced by ritual washing by wine at the Lord's Supper). Then (at the time of the Passover) comes the cleansing of the Temple - symbolising the old Jewish practice of animal sacrifice - where Jesus alludes to his own death and resurrection as his authority for doing this. Then comes the conversation with Nicodemus where Jesus says "No-one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit". Immediately after this Jesus goes to John the Baptist and starts to take over his ministry of baptism. After this comes the meeting at the well with a Samaritan woman who has come to draw water. Jesus offers to give her "living water", and when she asks for this Jesus immediately draws her attention to her falsehood and promiscuity which she must face before she can accept what he has to offer. The next episode concerns the healing of a dying son of an official and John reminds us that this new life occurs in Cana "where he had turned water into wine". Then comes the healing of a cripple at the pool in Bethzatha. The man appears to try to avoid any sense of personal responsibility. Jesus confronts him "Do you want to be healed". The story contrasts the living water of Jesus with the ineffective healing water of the pool.

The condition of forgiveness

Jesus makes it clear that if we want to be forgiven then we must be ready to forgive. (**Luke 6:37**). In the story of the sinful woman (**Luke 7: 36-50**) Jesus links this further with love. The woman's sins are forgiven because she has shown great love (v.47) but the person to whom little has been forgiven loves little. **Mathew 18:21-35** gives the parable of the unforgiving servant as illustration of the principle that there should be no limits to the number of times we forgive - because we ourselves stand in need of much greater forgiveness by God.

Parable of the Prodigal Son: Luke 15: 11-32

The loving forgiveness of God the father

The context of this parable, coming after the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin suggests that Luke wanted to emphasise the great love of God for those who repent (turn back to God).

Sin: a breakdown of relationship

Anthony Bloom and other writers have pointed out that the sin of the son in this parable can be seen as representative of all sin: the son rejects relationship with the father and instead takes his money. Sin is always a rejection of true relationship, whether with God, people or Creation in favour of taking what we can get. It was common practice at the time for a father to divide up his property while still alive whilst continuing in practice as head of the household. In this case, the son would have been within his legal rights to take his inheritance, but in this case it would signify a total breakdown of relationship. In effect the son was saying "rather than waiting for you to die I will regard you as dead now - I don't want you, but only what you can give me - I prefer my freedom to a relationship with you, with all the obligations that that entails." The father, having been persuaded to part with the inheritance, would have discharged all his legal obligations to his son. From a legal standpoint the father-son relationship was no more.

Alienation - the fruit of sin

After the son has squandered his inheritance he finds that he has no one to help him (v. 16). The implication is that any cronies around him who benefited from his wealth disappeared as soon as the money ran out. In this way he finds that others have treated him in the same way that he treats his father - using him for what he can give, without real regard for his person. Having become alienated from true relationship (symbolised in his being in a far-off land v.13) he has no other recourse but to enter contractual relationships - to sell his labour. This accurately portrays the situation of many in contemporary society who measure their worth by what they earn. In the depths of his despair (nothing could be more degrading for a Jew than to feed the pigs of a gentile) he remembers the good life he had before - but so complete is his alienation that he cannot imagine returning to his home except in terms of a contractual relationship (which is all he might be legally entitled to). Thus the circle is complete - the son has moved from a relationship based on love where he is valued as a person unconditionally, to a contractual relationship where he is valued only for what he can give (his labour). Again, the theme is very contemporary: How many of our relationships are in some way contractual, whether based on money or other things we give each other. How often can we say "I will love you, no matter what you do, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, whether you give me what I need or not"? We live in a world where contractual relationships are the norm and as a result we feel more and more alienated.

The slate is wiped clean

The start of the son's redemption comes when "he came to himself" (v.17). This is more than coming to his senses, it signifies a return to authenticity, recognition of the falseness of his path. It goes hand in hand with a depth of humility: the son prepares a speech in which he

acknowledges that he has sinned and that he accepts the consequences of his actions (that he has no more right to be called a son). This decision can be contrasted with the response of most of us when we sin, which is to pretend that our course of action is a good one. "Look, father, I've decided to go into the pig trade - a career with great prospects!" Pride prevents us from admitting even to ourselves, let alone anyone else, that we have gone wrong - even when our lives are miserable beyond endurance.

The son returns with his prepared speech but before he has even finished it (v.21) the father acts, out of compassion, and restores the father-son relationship. Many translations have the father order his servants bring the "best robe" (v.22) but the Greek text mentions the "first robe" - possibly the first robe given to the adult son, or maybe the "original" robe worn before the son departed. It seems to symbolise a going back, a wiping of the slate. "My son was dead and is alive again" (v.24)

Although the relationship with the father is fully restored, there are some consequences of the sin which are not wiped clean. The inheritance, having once been squandered, cannot be given again (v.31) and the relationship with the older brother has been damaged: The older brother refuses to call his brother "brother", referring instead to "this son of yours" (v.30) What restoration there is is the gift of the father who, out of love, forgives. Where there is no forgiveness there can be no wiping of the slate, even where there is repentance.

Jesus and Zacchaeus: Luke 19:1-10

Background

Judea was an occupied nation. The Romans had a simple but effective method of collecting taxes from the resentful population: they appointed local agents to do the job and they didn't care how the agents got the money so long as a set sum was paid to the authorities. The tax collectors had no obligation to be fair and frequently extorted far more from the population than they needed to pay the Romans. This was how they became rich. Jericho, the scene of this story, was one of the main entry points to Judea for imports from the East. It is possible that Zacchaeus was a senior customs official.

The story

From the few things we know about Zacchaeus we can begin to get an idea of the man. We are told he was one of the senior tax-collectors and a very wealthy man, and also that he was short. As a senior tax collector he would have been seen by the Jews as a traitor, an agent of the hated Romans, and we can guess that his diminutive size made him the butt of many jokes.

What can have possessed him to climb a sycamore tree and risk ridicule, possibly violence, is hard to guess. Can mere curiosity explain this? Or was he perhaps inwardly unsatisfied by all his wealth. Was he driven by some half-formed desire to change his ways? Whatever the reason, he found himself exposed above a hostile crowd in a very precarious position. In a sense, Jesus saves his bacon by greeting him as a friend and saying that he is going to be a guest in Zacchaeus's home that night. Immediately Zacchaeus's status with the crowd changes from outcast to a friend of the hero - though some are unhappy with Jesus's decision. Unlike the crowd, Jesus seemed to have seen behind the successful facade to the questing, perhaps unhappy, person beneath.

The real miracle is what happens next. Zacchaeus rises to the faith and respect that Jesus has bestowed on him - we are told that he "stood his ground" - a delightful phrase that speaks of this little man growing in true stature and gaining in authenticity before the dis-believing crowd. The restitution he offers to all he has wronged goes far beyond what the Law of Moses requires, and Jesus proclaims that "Today salvation has come to this house: for he also is a son of Abraham". In other words he is no longer an outcast, a non-Jew, and the slate has been wiped clean.

Luke has placed this story shortly after the parable about the Pharisee and the tax-collector (18:9-14) and after the story of the rich official who, though he keeps the Commandments, is unable to let go of his wealth (18:18-30). It can therefore be seen both as an illustration of the parable (everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted) and also as an illustration of the possibility of salvation, for those who are rich - a right attitude to wealth. (v.25-27) "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard this said, "Then who can be saved?" And he said, "What is impossible for human beings is possible for God.")

St Paul 2 Cor. 5:17-6:2

Paul regarded his ministry to the people of Corinth as vitally important. The city was dominated by the temple to Aphrodite with its sacred prostitutes which attracted many tourists, and Corinth was a by-word for drunkenness and debauchery. Perhaps Paul had a sense that if the Gospel of Christ could work here it could work anywhere.

Paul's ministry was primarily to communities which contained many Gentiles. He had argued vigorously against the necessity of Gentiles following the letter of the Jewish law, and yet this was frequently misunderstood as a license for converts to do whatever they liked. The passage in 2 Cor. 5: 17-6:2 is one of the central passages of Paul's theology as he tries to explain to a confused church how he understands the Gospel.

He starts by saying "So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold new things have come". Then he explains that this "new creation" is part and parcel of reconciliation: reconciliation between humans and God, flowing from God's forgiveness, and reconciliation between humans. We have been given a "ministry of reconciliation" and are called to be "ambassadors for Christ". Finally he makes the point that the time to embrace this new life is now, not some undefined time in the future.