

THE SCAPEGOAT

John 10:11-18

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

MESSAGE:

The word “Gospel” means “Good News!” But good news about what? I remember a Wizard of Id comic strip where the king was making his “state of the kingdom” speech to his subjects from the “imperial balcony. His speech went like this: *“This year I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is that there is no bad news. The bad news is that that’s all the good news there is!”* The last panel showed one of his subjects saying to another one: *“I guess it could have been worse.”* Well, the Gospel Good News is a lot more than that. In fact, it’s the best news and the most important news you will ever hear in your life and so what exactly is this good news?

To answer that we first have to consider some very bad news about something that took place at the dawn of human history. After God had created the first man and woman He placed them in a garden, told them to work it and tend it and gave them one simple instruction: *“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”* (Genesis 2:16-17) Well we all know what happened: Satan lied to them, telling them that they would not die if they ate the forbidden fruit. On the contrary, they would *“...be like God, knowing good and evil.”* (Genesis 3:3) And they bought the lie and ate the forbidden fruit and let sin into the world and brought its curse upon themselves and the rest of creation. The effects of sin were horrendous. Peace was replaced by competitiveness; love turned into selfishness; harmony became dissonance, and order crumbled into disorder. And just as God had warned them, on the day they ate of it they did in fact die—not biologically but spiritually—because when they disobeyed God they severed the relationship they had with Him—and God is the source of all life—biological and spiritual. Adam and Eve chose to be on their own and went to live east of Eden in the land of Nod—the name means

“wandering.” They became strangers in a strange land. Worst of all, having imbibed the knowledge of evil, they passed it on—genetically—to their children, and their children passed it on to their children—right on down to us. This is called “original sin” and we are all born with it because we are all children of Father Adam.

But God is full of love and mercy and He didn’t abandon His children. Instead, He put a plan into effect to save them from the consequences of their sin, to heal their relationship with Him and to restore creation to its original perfection. But to accomplish this he had to deal with the sin that had done all the damage.

God initiated his plan through a man by the name of Abram. Abram was a pagan who also lived in the land of Nod, a place called Ur of the Chaldeans, where he worshiped a pagan god by the name of Nimrod. God came to Abram and said: *“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* (Genesis 12:1-3) God added that this blessing to all peoples on earth would come through one of Abram’s descendants—a descendent who would later be called “the Messiah”—who would rob sin and Satan of all their power. He would form Abram’s descendants into a nation which would be a model, an example to other nations of what God would do for those who called on Him. A nation which would be a light to the rest of the world, a kingdom of priests who would mediate God’s love to all mankind. And all God asked of Abram in return is that he believe his word and trust him to fulfill his promise. So, we are told, *“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”* (Genesis 15:6)

True to His promise, God molded Abram’s children into the nation He had promised. He called the nation “Israel” and its people “Israelites.” He gave them moral and civil laws to live by. He promised them blessings if they obeyed these laws but warned them that curses that would come if they failed to obey them. He said, *“All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God.”* (Deuteronomy 28:2) But, He said, if they failed to obey them, *“The Lord will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking Him.”* (Deuteronomy 28:20)

Sounds simple and straightforward, doesn’t it? Obey the laws and everything will be fine—in fact better than you can imagine. Break the laws and things are going to get bad—worse than you can imagine. So all the Israelites went out and obeyed all the laws God had given them and everything turned out peachy keen, right? Well, not exactly. In spite of God’s clear warning, the Israelites broke his laws—and broke them and broke them and broke them until the entire history of Old Testament Israel became a history of lawlessness and God-less-ness. To make it worse, instead of asking God to forgive their sins, they ignored Him and sought out pagan gods to worship. The reason, of course, is that even though they were God’s chosen people, they were also they were also children of Adam and had inherited his sinful nature. And their sinful nature bore fruit in sin.

The question is, why would God give His people laws which He knew they wouldn't obey? God is omniscient which means that he knows everything—including the fact that man has a sinful nature which drives him to rebel against laws rather than obey them. So why would God give His people laws which would provoke them to sin? God hates sin: why would he do something which would increase it?

Sounds like a conundrum. But as the saying goes: "Scripture interprets Scripture," which means that when we have difficulty understanding one part of Scripture, we go to other parts to explain it. And in Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, we find the explanation of why God gave them laws they couldn't obey: "...no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." (*Romans 3:20*) When God gave us the law, it wasn't so that we could earn his blessings by obeying it; He knew that wasn't going to happen. He gave us the law to teach us how incapable we are of obeying it—to show us that our desire to sin is more powerful than our desire to be righteous. And why would God want to show us how sinful and unrighteous we are?

The answer to that is simple: so that we would abandon all hope of being able to lead sinless lives and turn to Him to forgive us. To despair of our own righteousness and cast ourselves upon his mercy. To forget about trying to overcome the power of sin by ourselves and trusting in His promise to overcome it for us. To understand that, "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." (*Romans 22:32*)

This is called repentance. Being shamed by our sins and our inability to stop sinning, we have no other recourse than to hope that God will forgive our sins and help us turn away from them.

But how could God forgive our sins and let us live when He promised Adam that anyone who sins must die? How could He be merciful and just at the same time? How could he punish sin yet spare the sinner? The answer was that he needed a "scapegoat"—someone who was willing to assume responsibility for our sins, be judged for them, and die for them. If that could be arranged then we could live. But no one can die for another person's sins and that left God to do it for us. And so it came to pass: God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, as our divine Scapegoat—to die for our sins. As it is written, "God so loved the world that he gave His only-begotten Son, so that all who believed in Him would not perish, but have eternal life." (*John 3:16*)

And all God asked of us in return was the same thing He had asked of Abram: that we believe his word and trust His promise that Jesus Christ has set us free from our sins. Free not only from being judged for them in the next life but free of their control over our lives in this life as well. As Paul wrote, "...sin shall not be master over you for you are not under law, but under grace." (*Romans 6:14*) When we trust that God has forgiven our sins for the sake of Jesus Christ's death on the cross—we are set free from the Law. It has been replaced by the Holy Spirit of God who changes our hearts so that instead of striving to obey the Law, we can fulfill the Law by loving God with all our hearts and souls and

mind and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves. No longer driven by the hope of being rewarded for obeying the Law or by the fear of punishment for disobeying it, we are motivated by hearts which have been transformed by God's grace. The power of grace has replaced the authority of the Law, thanks to Jesus Christ, God's Divine Scapegoat.

That's what the Good News is all about! Amen.

Psalm 32 Of David. A *maskil*.

¹ Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ² Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

⁶ Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. ⁷ You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. ⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. ¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him.

¹¹ Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Romans 3:9-24 ⁹ What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. ¹⁰ As it is written:

"There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." ¹³ "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.