Encounters with Jesus

Joel Edwards
Contents

5 Introduction

STUDY ONE

8 Jesus and Bad Stuff

STUDY TWO

18 Jesus and Negative Equity

STUDY THREE

28 Jesus and Pollution

STUDY FOUR

38 Jesus and People who Miss the Mark

STUDY FIVE

48 Jesus and a Blind Spot

STUDY SIX

58 Jesus and Slavery

68 Leader’s Notes
Introduction

It's not that people don't feel guilty any more. Most of us still get a pang of guilt if we tell a big lie, sleep around or even kick the cat in a fit of temper. It's just that we live in a culture which has successfully detached the idea of guilt from the reality of God. Which means that 'sin' is an anachronism, and to call someone a 'sinner' is an offensive condemnation rather than hope of redemption. And if sin is outdated, it means no one needs to be saved from anything; which makes Easter just another public holiday; which is a real problem because God still takes it seriously.

So while Christians talk about sin, it turns out that we are increasingly using in-house language which we understand, but which means very little to anyone else.

Telling Christians that ‘Sin is sin!’ is like saying ‘Gin is gin!’ It makes perfect sense if someone has already helped you to identify the taste. A century ago talk of sin would have been a very natural thing because everybody knew roughly what everybody else meant by it. At the very least it was a recognisable idea which meant that our behaviour fell outside God’s expectations and we had some kind of obligation to think about forgiveness. At worst it invoked ideas of God’s retribution for a warped, fallen nature and a condition so depraved that it begged for God’s mercy. So when the famous eighteenth-century American evangelist Jonathan Edwards preached about ‘sinners in the hands of an angry God’, the people of New England responded to the message because they understood it. A colleague who studied American history told me that her class found this story bizarre!

In recent years ‘sin’ has ceased to be a word which Christians and non-Christians share in the same way. In
the twenty-first century it may be as much a ‘sin’ to miss the lottery roll-over by a single digit as it is to murder a child.

All of this is much more than an academic discussion. It goes to the very heart of our Christian faith and the meaning of Lent. In the absence of a common vernacular about ‘sin’, we now have an urgent mission: to help people rediscover the awfulness of that condition which separates us from the love of God and which makes the life, death and resurrection of Jesus so central to our faith. It is not to gloss over the impact of sin; neither is it to insist brazenly that if ‘sin’ was good enough for Paul, it’s good enough for me! There is no harm in speaking Mandarin to the Chinese, but it is helpful to work at learning a new language if we are living in Spain.

Our Lent study will put Jesus where He belongs – at the very centre of our thoughts. But we will try to find some other images and current ideas which may act as cultural dictionaries when it comes to talking about the reality of sin and the meaning of Lent.

Each ‘Encounter with Jesus’ will point us to a biblical text. At the heart of each study is an account of an encounter with Jesus through which we can explore each of the contemporary themes, and which leads us on to some application, group exercises and a final prayer for devotion.

The study uses Psalm 51 as a common thread running sequentially through each of the six studies. It is meant to give some continuity while also providing an Old Testament complement to the New Testament encounters with Jesus.

Each study also has a built-in ‘To-Do Moment’, which is aimed deliberately at getting us to think and act on what
we have learned. No one ever came to Jesus and left the same. I hope this encounter will also make a difference in your life.
Jesus and Bad Stuff
Icebreaker

Either in teams or as individuals, have a competition for the best acronym for LENT. You may want to have the best and the runner-up read out or presented in the wider church service the following Sunday with a small gift!

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. (Romans 7:15)

A Story

When I was the pastor of a small congregation in the East End of London some years ago, the Sunday School superintendent gave me a very tough assignment. She asked me to take the class of 8- to 11-year-olds. That was scary enough, but what really made me think that I was being punished was the fact that the Sunday School lesson that day was on the topic of sin! Imagine having to wrestle with one of the most difficult theological issues with a group of 8- to 11-year-olds.

So I did what any nervous teacher does and began with questions. ‘Who can tell me what sin is?’ I asked sheepishly. A small tidal wave of hands floated upwards. Cassandra seemed to be bursting at the seams.

‘Yes, Cassandra. What do you think it is?’

‘Sin is bad stuff!’ she said with an air of someone who had just said something very important. And indeed she had, because I have used that illustration on more occasions than I care to remember. I use it for one special reason: it’s one of the most graphic and yet accessible descriptions of what Christians call ‘sin’ that I ever heard. And every time I mention it to Christians and non-Christians alike, it seems to make sense because it describes the tension between right and wrong which all of us know so well.
Encounter with Jesus: Acts 9:1–9

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and 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. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’

‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked.

‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’

The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Very few people in the New Testament exemplify this tension between good and evil as Saul of Tarsus did. A Hebrew scholar and champion for Judaism, Saul was a death sentence on horseback looking for Christians. His zeal made him an executioner and his love for truth made him a persecutor of the Way. For Saul bad stuff meant threats and murder.

His dramatic encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus was a turning point. The blinding light from heaven had shown up Saul’s bad stuff and this overpowering event was not the end of a process: it was to be the start of a long clean-up exercise in his life. It also uncovered something else: Saul’s attitudes and destructive behaviour didn’t just affect other people.
Jesus also took it personally. Saul’s guilt had a lot to do with God. Jesus said, ‘You’re persecuting me!’ Perhaps more than anything else, Saul (who came to be known as Paul) must have been struck by the realisation that he had actually been opposing the very God he thought he had been defending. His encounter with Christ made it clear to him that he was opposing more than a sectarian idea: he was actually standing in God’s way.

Paul’s encounter with Jesus wasn’t just for his benefit, however. It meant a radical reversal which would shape the Early Church and change the world. Paul’s encounter with Jesus is a powerful reminder that God always accepts us as He finds us but doesn’t leave us as He meets us. He always has something better in mind for us.

Reflections from Psalm 51:1–3

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

This is an opportunity for some group reflection on how the psalm relates to us today. In our passage a number of key words have been highlighted. Take some time to consider how you understand those words. Do they mean the same thing, or are they very different in their meaning for us? And then ask how they relate to the character and work of Jesus.
Application

Sin is that congenital disease of the human soul. It’s the substance of our fallen nature. To use a trite image, it’s the coffee beans in the cappuccino. But it’s also the taste of the coffee on our breath: the flavour of our fallenness which follows us about like a bad odour.

Like Paul, it doesn’t mean that we are bad people. But it does mean that we all carry bad stuff. Bad stuff happens to good people and perfectly nice human beings. But the bad stuff is usually more wearying than the congenital sin because it stays with us and shows up in a thousand ways we would rather ignore.

It can be as mundane as a really bad habit which dominates our lives and forces us into reluctant daily repentance. It’s the petty pride we keep saying ‘sorry’ for and that absurd argument which stops us from praying properly. But as Paul would remember for ever, it could also be the heinous act of murder which will remain with us for the rest of our lives.

Everybody has bad stuff, because everybody has the congenital condition. Our bad stuff has multiple manifestations and a wide range of ways in which we explain it away, so that parents describe it in one way, a policeman in another, and a politician in yet another! But it all comes down to the things we would rather not do and say and the things we really should have said and done. It amounts to the things which hurt us and the people we love. Our bad stuff emerges from the radioactive substance of the human soul. Our sinfulness is a part of our nature of sin.

It’s in us and all around us. Bad stuff is on every news channel every hour of every week. It stalks in dark alleys and is alive and well in the board room. It’s the reason why we gasp in disbelief at acts of atrocity or wilful
violence. Our bad stuff ignites our family feuds, tribalism, terror and hostilities.

Bad stuff confuses us because it stands in constant contradiction with what is good and noble in us. At the best of times everything in us wants to do what’s right and yet so much within us reaches out for what is less than good. The bad stuff we carry fogs up the good stuff. We are never sure which of the two people see in us most. Thankfully, Jesus saw more than a persecutor in Paul. What He saw was a defender of the faith and that’s what He made out of him.

A To-Do Moment!

Each week we want to give the group time to reflect and to make a note of what they feel the Holy Spirit is asking them to do about what has been said so far. This is not to pull us down, but to lift us up for Lent.

Jesus – A Quick Response: Luke 6:45

‘The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart.’
Discussion Starters

1. How would you evaluate Cassandra’s view of sin? Is ‘bad stuff’ too simplistic when dealing with such a serious issue as sin?

2. We talk of sinfulness and a nature of sin. Can we make any such distinction?

3. How would you explain the relationship between the things we experience around us and the things which take place within us?
4. Have you ever experienced a ‘Damascus’ moment? Can you describe what happened, and how your life changed as a result?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5. Can you imagine how Saul felt after his encounter on the road? What do you think was the significance of his temporary blindness and fasting?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

6. Take a moment to think of a time when God may have shown you ‘unfailing love’. How might we show God’s mercy and compassion to other people?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
A Prayer

Grant us, O Lord, the royalty of inward happiness and the serenity that comes from living close to Thee. Daily renew in us the sense of joy, and let Thy eternal spirit dwell in our souls and bodies, filling every corner of our hearts with light and gladness. So that, bearing about with us the infection of a good courage, we may be diffusers of life, and meet all that comes, of good or ill, even death itself, with gallant and high-hearted happiness; giving Thee thanks always for all things.

Robert Louis Stevenson, 1850–94
Jesus and Negative Equity
Retracing Our Steps
Take five minutes to explore any key reflections from the last session.

Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.’ (Luke 9:23–4)

A Story
I couldn’t quite get my head around what my friend was saying. He was a young, hard-working professional engineer with an emerging business acumen. Having bought their first family home on a new, upwardly mobile estate, he ran into trouble when the economic slump in the late 1980s overtook him and his circumstances. He said he was in negative equity. In other words, what he was paying for his house exceeded its value, meaning that his property was worth nothing.

It took an awful lot of courage, diligence and faith for him to keep going against the odds, and to come out the other end without giving in to depression and losing his way. Today he is a successful businessman.

Encounter with Jesus: Luke 19:1–10
Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.’ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.