

life of spiritual power. In this new life, Peter tells us that Jesus “went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey” (1 Peter 3:19-20). While the identity of these “spirits in prison” is unknown to us, we may presume them to be people who made a mess of their lives or the lives of others. Or they may have been spirits who led people astray in the time of Noah.

Peter makes a connection between Jesus and Noah because he remembers the story of the Great Flood. This story in Genesis is another example of divine stain removal, one in which God flooded the earth because “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence” (Genesis 6:11). Peter says that “God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight lives, were saved through water” (1 Peter 3:20). In this story of wiping away sin, God spared only the lives of Noah, his wife, their three sons and their wives.

Fortunately, God promised never again to use this method of stain removal. Instead, God applied the Jesus Method, in which we are baptized into his death and resurrection. Once baptized, we are part of the body of Christ, the church. In baptism, we die to sin and are raised to new life in Christ. Peter tells us that baptism is meant to remind us of the Great Flood, a washing that saves us “not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21).

Like the people who received Peter’s letter, we know that sin can make a mess of our lives. Some sins cause extremely stubborn stains. Thankfully, Jesus is the greatest of God’s stain removers, able to handle any mess we make. No one remains stained if they seek the forgiveness of Jesus. No one can be permanently stained in the eyes of our merciful Savior. Jesus’ power over sin and death is complete, since he “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him” (1 Peter 3:22). When it comes to sin removal, Jesus is the most powerful of solvents.

When we to admit our sins and ask for God’s forgiveness, we do this with full confidence that Jesus can and will remove the stain of sin by his sacrifice on the cross. None of us should ever despair, because in the world of stains, there is always a solution. Mildew? Treat with a bleaching agent. Red wine? Use club soda. Lipstick? Remove with a solution of Vaseline and a grease solvent. For sin, there is no better solution than faith in Jesus. We need never be afraid to ask for forgiveness.

Jesus forgives us so that we are freed from the sin that holds us back and freed to do his work in the world. Be “eager to do what is good,” writes Peter, even if you “suffer for doing

what is right” (1 Peter 3:13-14). Do not be “intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord” (1 Peter 3:14-15). Be ready to make a defense “for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15-16). In a world of heartless power politics, says Peter, it is more important than ever that we try to do good, resist intimidation, live with hope, and show gentleness and respect.

A Virginia man named Mac recently died at age 89. Over his lifetime, he provided well for his family as an electrical engineer, a computer scientist, and an expert in software programming and database design. Mac was always very humble about his abilities and contributions, and he was gracious to family members and friends. According to his daughter, Mac believed that “in life there are no mistakes, only lessons to be learned.” If you make a mess, you ask for forgiveness, and then you move forward with wisdom.

Mac was a faithful servant of Jesus. He served his church as an elder and deacon and was the creator of “Fix-It Day,” which brought people together to do repairs around the church building. His wife says, “Mac loved his God, loved his church, and he always wanted to help people.” He renovated the homes of low-income neighbors, led an effort to provide immediate help to people in need, and supported a project that built affordable homes in the church parking lot. Mac knew himself to be forgiven by Christ so that he could be free to do Christ’s work in the world.

On this theme, Pastor Leonard Sweet recalls a discussion about trees. “Every tree [is] a mirror of the church. A tree...is a Stick of Redemption. It drinks in our toxins, our pollutions, the wreckage of human waste, and — through some divine alchemy — breathes out oxygen, life itself. More than that, it offers fruit, sustenance, beauty. So it is with the church...The church is no sterile sanctuary; it is a living grove, a sacred arbor. It gathers the broken, the wounded, the poisoned, the damaged, and through the wild mystery of grace, transfigures them into something radiant — beautiful, good, and true. The church is where the toxic becomes tonic, where the ruined is reborn, where the Cross, that ultimate Tree of Life, whispers redemption to all who draw near.”

The forgiveness Jesus offers is designed not simply to make us feel better, but to restore order to the world. Forgiveness is a gift we receive so that we can be the gift of Jesus to the people around us. Anne Tyler’s novel, *Saint Maybe*, is the story of Ian Bedloe. Ian grows up in the shadow of his brilliant older brother, Danny. The teenaged Ian looks up to Danny and feels bewildered by his brother’s abrupt decision to marry an older woman with two children. In no time at all, a third child comes along, a little too quickly if you count the number of months since the wedding. Tension grows between Ian and Danny over Danny’s

wife. One day, Ian spills out his frustration, telling Danny he thinks his wife is taking advantage of him, that she's ruining his life. Danny flies out of the house in a rage and tragically dies in a car accident.

Ian is convinced he caused his brother's death. He lives with that terrible guilt until, now a college student, he gets word that his troubled sister-in-law has died of a drug overdose, leaving three young children behind. Ian's parents try to raise their grandchildren, but their own health is failing. Ian's toxic guilt continues to metastasize. One night, walking aimlessly around the town, he happens upon a storefront with a sign that proclaims, "The Church of the Second Chance." On impulse, he steps inside. He meets Reverend Emmett and pours out his burden of guilt. Emmett shares the good news of Jesus, assuring Ian that forgiveness can be his. But he advises him, he's got to do something in return: he's got to raise his brother's kids. Ian drops out of school and raises those kids.

Saint Maybe wrestles with the true nature of repentance and forgiveness. Ian is obsessed with earning absolution for his sins, even if he must devote his entire life to the pursuit. Neither Reverend Emmet nor Ian himself seem to realize the true nature of the grace of Jesus. Such grace can never be earned, it can only be received, in awe and gratitude. In the end, Ian does discover this truth. After years of struggling to raise three children who were not his own, he comes to realize the great love those kids have for one another and for him. The stain of guilt truly can be removed, and only Jesus can do it.

Between birth and death, we have an opportunity to be forgiven and to forgive others; to receive cleansing and then do the work of cleaning in the world. Giles believes that it is important to sweep, scrub, and share solutions to various stains. As an expert cleaner, Giles knows that almost any mess can be corrected. For streaks of mud, let it dry, then scrape it. For oil paint, use turpentine. On spilled coffee, try soap and sunshine. For the stain of sin, apply the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, then we can allow him to work through you to restore order to the world.

Prayer: Faithful God, you draw near to us in our joy and in our grief, in our hope and in our despair. When we are bowed down, you raise us anew. We turn to you now in search of your healing touch. God of compassion and love, move among us this hour. Open our eyes, dispel our fears, and show us the real life you have to offer. We pray this in the name of the Risen One, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Sources:

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God's Stain Remover

Sunday, May 10, 2026

1 Peter 3:13-22

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In the beginning, he was a freelance window cleaner, paid by the pane. Then a client asked him to clean a vacant property, one that was an absolute mess. From there, he started a company that will tidy up anything, no matter how repulsive. His name is Ben Giles. Along with the members of his team, he can clean everything from crime scenes to industrial accidents. Giles is an expert at removing evidence of spillages, collisions, protests, explosions, fires, and floods. He is "a self-taught stain savant, a walking database of remedies."

Coffee spills. *Easy*. Soot, smoke, grease, and blood. *Can do*. Roadkill. *Check*. Overturned garbage trucks. *No problem*. A dead whale in a harbor. *Been there, done that*. Giles often sends his trainees into filthy prison cells, where they learn good cleaning techniques: down on all fours, moving slowly, inch by inch. The Giles Method begins with an important principle: "Everything in front of you is dirty. Everything behind you is clean."

Life was messy for the early followers of Jesus in Asia Minor, a region that is now part of Turkey. They had made a mess of their lives through malice, insincerity, envy, and slander. This is why the apostle Peter wrote a letter assuring them that the stain of their sin could be removed. Jesus "bore our sins in his body on the cross," Peter wrote, "so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Peter wanted them to know that Jesus had taken their sins on himself and paid their penalty for all time.

We tend to think of sin as a mistake that can be erased; but sin is deep stain: like red wine on a plush carpet, coffee on a favorite shirt, permanent marker on a whiteboard, or grease on a pair of jeans. The only way to get rid of a tough stain is by using a stronger solvent. Thus, to get rid of the stain of sin we need Jesus, God's stain remover.

Peter says that Jesus "suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous" to bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18). When Jesus was nailed to the cross, everything in front of him was dirty. After his death, everything behind him was clean. Jesus was a righteous man who sacrificed himself for unrighteous people, and his death continues to bring us forgiveness and new life.

Peter tells us that Jesus "was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). In his death on the cross, Jesus let go of any earthly limitations and entered a new