

Dying and rising

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Years ago, I wrote a book on sin. To estimate its breadth and depth, I studied biblical and theological sources. But as much as the standard sources taught me, I was surprised to discover that I could also learn a lot about sin and grace by reading storytellers, biographers, poets and journalists.

Such writers are always pondering good and evil, including the ways they twist and twine around each other. Robert Caro, for example, has completed four volumes of his definitive biography of Lyndon Baines Johnson, revealing along the way that Johnson was sinner and saint,—an opponent of civil rights legislation when opposition suited his political ambition, and a champion of it when his compassion and sense of fair play could at last run parallel to his ambition. Like every biographer's dream subject, Johnson harbored in himself a boatload of warring instincts and impulses.

But the main thing I learned about sin is that it is stubborn and inexplicable. Why would I insist on living against the purpose of my own existence? And what could cure me?

Maybe the central thing St. Paul teaches about sinners is that they need to die and rise with Jesus Christ. Regeneration of stubborn human hearts has almost nothing to do with trying to clean ourselves up. As Bryan Chappell said at my school a few years ago, spiritual health isn't about repairing the repairable or improving the improvable. It's got nothing to do with polishing up a decent apple to make it shine.

Spiritual health is about raising the dead. It's all about bringing someone or something back to *life*. "You have to be born again," Jesus said to Nicodemus, in order even to see the kingdom of God.

In preparing [this week's lectionary column](#) for the *Century*, what intrigued me was the connection between Naaman's going down into the Jordan to be cleansed of his leprosy and St. Paul's theology of dying and rising with Jesus Christ—of which a main emblem is that Israel was baptized into Moses and into the Red Sea. The Paulinist who wrote 2nd Timothy (call her "Pauline") knew all about it: "If we died with him we will also live with him" (2:11).