



RETURNING TO GRACE

Rediscovering
the Historical
Atonement



Markku Sarento

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Foreword

It is true. One single sermon can change your entire life. That is precisely what happened to me a few years ago. I was preaching.

Quite unexpectedly, God gave me a whole new vision of the Gospel of Jesus, the truth I had confessed for over thirty years as a Christian. It was as if my eyes were opened for the first time in decades.

Is it possible to be a Christian and not see the gospel? Read this and find out for yourself.

Soon after that day, my dear wife Johanna and I knew the time had come to write our first book. *Children of God* is a testimony of God's love and faithfulness as He looked after our family in Canada in the 1990s. It is a call to child-like reliance on Jesus.

Returning to Grace maintains the same basic approach, focusing on the atonement in Christ. Johanna's input has again been most invaluable in this second work.

I have written this book with an unwavering conviction of the truth God has revealed, yet I am fully aware of the restrictions of human comprehension. As with every

teaching we read or hear, we should ask God to confirm what is really of Him, for it is His wisdom we must rely on.

Striving to be as concise and easy to read as possible, Returning to Grace is by no means trying to present itself as a full-fledged doctrinal tree with all its branches and leaves fully grown. Instead, my prayer is that it would prove to be a good seed, capable of producing a good and favorable crop in your life through the testimony and work of the Holy Spirit.

I wish you the blessing and love of our Father through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Markku Sarento
November 2023

*I praise you, Father,
Lord of heaven and earth,
because you have hidden these things
from the wise and learned,
and revealed them to little children.*

*Yes, Father, for this is what
you were pleased to do.*

Luke 10:21

— CHAPTER 1 —

Gospel for Goats

It was not like I didn't know what to say. After all, preparing a sermon for the Good Friday service was not supposed to be too difficult. Everyone in the congregation would be familiar with the theme. All the Bible passages were about the crucifixion of Christ. Wasn't the atonement through the sacrifice of Jesus the cornerstone of Christianity as a whole?

But still, I couldn't help it. My prayer was the same as it had always been during all my years in the ministry.

"Father, give me the words and thoughts from your heart..."

Had I said my prayer out loud, it would have probably sounded more spiritual than it was. The truth was, this sincere prayer of mine was often born out of insecurity. Although I had studied for many years to become a pastor, I had never had the slightest desire to give public speeches. Even as a student, whenever there had been more than just a few people gathered, I had instead kept my mouth shut. With a personality trait like that, I figured it did not make much sense to dream of a full-time

ministry. But I couldn't let it go. It was more than a dream for me; it was my calling.

No, standing before a multitude of people and struggling to deliver a sermon was definitely no dream. It was more like a nightmare.

But I will never forget my first few weeks as an ordained minister. Just as I had anticipated, the greatest challenge was preaching. But as I knew I could not make it on my own, I didn't even try it—not on my own strength or wisdom.

“Give me your words and thoughts...” That was my prayer every time I stood up to preach. And God did answer that simple plea. As a matter of fact, it was surprisingly easy to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit at first. It was not until later, as I became a bit more accustomed to preaching, that it became much more difficult. The more I thought I knew, the harder I tried—and the more tensed up I became.

And because of all that striving, I would sometimes forget to breathe properly during a speech. I assure you it really does change the atmosphere when the minister passes out in a worship service. Or at a funeral.

However, those early days helped me to stay focused. I kept listening to the Lord and gradually remembered to breathe, too. My sole desire was to proclaim the Word of God. But I can still recall the big Bible at the altar of my second church in Canada. It was opened so that

Isaiah 55 was staring right at me every time I was about to preach.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

(Isaiah 55:8-9)

How could I be sure I wasn't just relying on my own understanding? No matter how much I hated that Bible passage confronting me again and again, I couldn't make myself turn the page.

Now, twenty-five years and several churches after my ordination, I still couldn't break away from those verses. Even as I was preparing for this Good Friday service, I could only pray to God to speak His thoughts to me and through me once more.

The Friday morning dawned, looking 'good' at least, promising another sunny day. The Bible lessons had not offered any big surprises. But as I decided to read through the texts one more time, my eyes became affixed to Hebrews chapter 10, verses 12-14. Referring to Jesus, it declared:

“But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his

footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

I had read the passage numerous times over the years. This time, however, I was drawn to the meaning of the words in a whole new way. The historical nature of the one-time sacrifice of Jesus began to unfold before my eyes. It was like looking at a side-by-side comparison between the Old and the New Covenant. I was perplexed.

How come I had not seen it before?

I stood at the pulpit and watched the audience. The church was packed because of the Easter Conference at the picturesque lakeside setting of Vivamo Retreat Center in southern Finland. As I read the Gospel Lesson aloud, I felt an urgency I had seldom experienced before a speech. The message was burning in my heart.

I began the sermon with a few sentences on the fallen state of all humanity, how every man, woman, and child has this natural, ongoing tendency to stray from God's ways and not follow Him. Then, I continued with a brief narration of God's desire to renew the original relationship with His creation.

I spoke about God's attempts to draw His people back to Him in the Old Testament, and how he gave the Israelites the law to remind them of His ways so they would

not get lost forever. And how He decided to provide His people a way of repentance through shedding the blood of sacrificial goats and lambs as a confession of sins.

As a somewhat unrefined demonstration, I picked up a stack of hymnals representing various sins and brought them to the church altar. I didn't have a lamb with me, although there would have been a few of them available in the field close to the church. Then again, no small flock of lambs would have been sufficient to cover all the sins of the people.

I brought more hymnals to the altar, along with an unlucky, imaginary goat. And more sins with more goats. This turned out to be the real issue with the Old Covenant: not the lack of goats per se, but the fact that these sacrifices needed to be administered over and over again. Every time, only the past sins were forgiven. After a while, it became evident that the animal offerings had no real power to overcome the sinful nature of man.

Thus comes the New Covenant, the new and fundamentally better way of dealing with the problem. God sends His only son to the world. Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary and raised as an ordinary boy, but with no sin. At around thirty, Jesus gives His life on the cross on Calvary as the pure, perfect sacrifice. And since then, there has been absolutely no need for another sacrifice to be offered.

But here comes the interesting part. What if we, even now that Jesus has given His life for us, commit a sin

again, quite ‘unintentionally’ of course, as Leviticus 4:27 so kindly phrases it? What are we supposed to do then?

I placed a wooden twelve-inch cross on the altar rail. Then, I grabbed a couple of hymnals and looked at the audience.

“What must I do with these hymnals, these so very unintentional sins of mine?”

“You must confess them to God”, someone replied.
“Bring them to the cross.”

“And that’s it?” I asked. “They will be forgiven just like that, because of what Jesus did?”

“Yes”, people nodded.

“No goats needed?”

“No.” Many smiles.

“Okay.”

I left the hymnals with the cross and took a few steps, looking happy. But then I realized I had a hymnal under the white gown I was wearing. I brought it out for everyone to see, seemingly embarrassed.

“Where did this come from?” I said to myself. “What am I going to do with this?”

“You just take it to the cross”, said the helpful audience.

“Like this?” I put the hymnal beside the cross. A sin confessed and forgiven. And then another one. And one more. I discovered more hymnals, one after another, undoubtedly setting a very bad example for the

congregation.

“Well then, can you please tell me the difference between the Old and the New Covenant?”

Everyone was quiet. After a moment, someone answered:

“There is no need for a sacrificial goat.”

“Correct. And as you watched me walking back and forth before the altar, at first repenting the Old Testament way, and then as a Christian, the lack of goats was about the only difference there was.”

“This is the Good News I’ve believed in for over thirty years. But now I have finally acknowledged what it truly is. It is a gospel for goats.”

“You see, because of Jesus, all the goats have been set free. No more fear, no more threat of sudden death.” I raised my hands and shouted:

“Hallelujah! Hear the Good News: Jesus has died for all goats!”

People laughed. After a moment, I said with a solemn voice: “But if you think of us humans, nothing has changed, really. Just like in the Old Testament, in this demonstration of mine, forgiveness still depends on us, on our feeble repentance. We are condemned to stagger in circles, struggling to believe that maybe God will forgive us yet again, even though we have so often failed him.”

Nobody said a word.

“So, is there something wrong about this kind of a gospel?” I asked. “Now, listen to what the Bible says in Hebrews, chapter 10.”

“And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again, and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his foot-stool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First, he says: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” Then he adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.’

And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.” (Hebrews 10:10-18)

I went on with the sermon, looking intensely at the audience.

“The problem is we might have never quite understood the most fundamental difference between the Old and the New Covenant. Unlike the repeated and powerless offerings officiated by the Old Testament priests, the sacrifice of Jesus was a unique one-time act of grace, fully completed on Calvary nearly two thousand years

ago. It was never to be repeated. That is because this time, our past, present, and future sins were all forgiven, once and for all."

I took the wooden cross from the altar rail and walked to the left front corner of the church.

"This is where the cross should be standing in history. A long way from us and two thousand years before our time.

After all, this is the truth Christians have always confessed: Jesus died on the cross for all people, and through His sacrifice, we have been forgiven. But it is one thing to confess it and quite another to really absorb and believe it. I should know, having not seen that for decades.

We must allow the forgiveness and grace of God to be given to us on Calvary as a gift. We need to understand there is no way we can pay for it, and there is absolutely nothing we can do to deserve it—because it was all given to us in advance. This is the true gospel Apostle Paul himself cherished. It brought him such great joy and assurance to know that Christ had redeemed him *before* he became a Christian:"

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6,8)

"To be honest, the whole idea of us carrying our sins repeatedly to the cross is plain foolishness, regardless of

how sincere we may feel about it. It's no more than a mental exercise. We need to see the crucifixion of Jesus as an actual historical event. To take anything to the cross, we would require a time machine.

We must understand how treacherous and wrong it is to keep replicating or time-shifting the atonement in our minds. So imperceptibly, it hides the actual grace of God from us."

After forty-five minutes of turning around my previous understanding of the cross, I was finally coming to the end of my sermon.

"The minute we realize that the atonement in Christ is a genuine historical fact, our ongoing struggle to fulfill the demands of God's law is over. Suddenly, it becomes irrelevant for us to try to carry our sins anywhere. Why should we? Has Jesus not carried them to the cross already? Where could we possibly take them?"

"We might as well drop them off." I let the remaining hymnals fall from my hands to the floor and lifted my empty hands.

"And now that I'm not holding them anymore, I could even consider doing something else with my life. Maybe something... good?"

It wasn't until the service was over that what had happened really dawned on me. My whole understanding of

the atonement had changed. And judging by the looks on several faces in the audience, it wasn't just me. It seemed that many others were deeply touched by this newfound message as well.

After the service, a lady came to me, looking astonished.

"Thank you," the lady blurted out. "I had never understood the gospel before, not like this!"

Her eyes were bright and full of joy. Even though she had been a Christian for many years, that was the first time she had grasped what it meant to be fully redeemed through Christ.

I had no trouble relating to that.

A couple of days later, my wife Johanna said she had something to tell me. Before the Easter Conference, she had also been praying to God to give her the right words and thoughts for a speech she was scheduled to deliver at the Conference. But in the middle of her prayer, she had suddenly sensed the Holy Spirit saying: *"Ask for a MESSAGE."*

So, instead of asking for thoughts or words only, she had begun to pray for a complete message. After sharing this, she said:

"You know, the teaching I was preparing for turned out all right. But I think this message the Holy Spirit urged me to pray for was not for me, after all."

"It was for you."

— CHAPTER 2 —

Another Surprise

“Now I declare to you, brothers, the Good News which I preached to you, which also you received, in which you also stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold firmly the word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:1-2)

The gospel had suddenly become the only message I ever wanted to proclaim. What could possibly be more important than this?

But the longer I kept preaching the cross, the more baffled and concerned I became. On many occasions, it felt almost like this most fundamental Christian truth had somehow become one of the least comprehended. The original grace of God given to us on Calvary had been replaced by something different.

At some point, the free gift of forgiveness had become a graceful *promise* of forgiveness, an offer that could only be received by someone with the right heart. The unconditional love of God had become very much conditional.

But however drastic this change was, no one seemed

to realize what had happened. And though I had to admit I had not recognized the problem for three decades either, I still found it strange.

Wasn't the original gospel the most straightforward way to phrase the meaning of the cross? Wasn't it something that even little children learned in Sunday schools: all our sins are forgiven because Jesus died for us on the cross? And that we can go to heaven if He lives in our hearts.

Apparently, it is the adults who often have a hard time figuring it out. Leading a life amidst the realities of this world has taken its toll on our faith. It has become difficult for us to receive anything as a gift. There is no free lunch, we knowingly point out. You need to pay for everything.

Eventually, I became curious enough to dig a little deeper into the subject. I took a couple of brick-sized books off the shelf and prepared myself for a long dive into systematic theology. Soon, I realized I wouldn't have to hold my breath for too long. Scanning through various interpretations proved not to be too hard, as the doctrines on the grace of God in most of the Western churches could be traced back to one theologian.

But even though I had a good hunch about what I was looking for, it still blew my mind. Virtually all the teachings I encountered had one particular underlying factor in common: *the forgiveness of sins did not take place on Calvary.*

And in the rare cases the atonement was not ripped from its rightful place, it was bundled and gift-wrapped with salvation—and, as such, not given to everyone.

I will briefly share the theological findings I discovered in the following two chapters.

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— CHAPTER 15 —

Atonement Means Forgiveness

As a former Pharisee, Apostle Paul understood that the Old Testament sin offerings brought forth the forgiveness of sins. After all, in Leviticus 4-5, the idea of sacrificial forgiveness is presented as many as nine times:

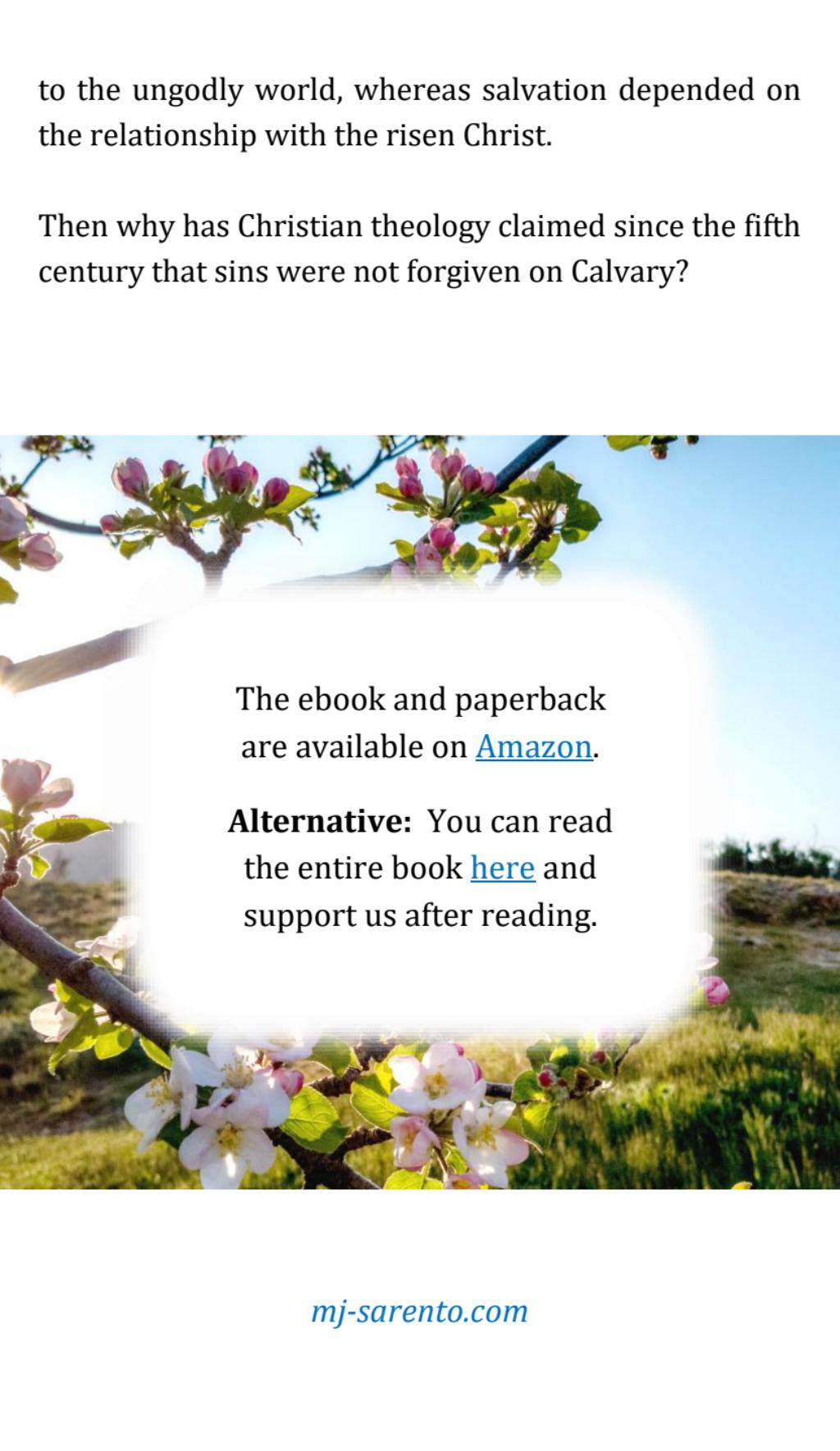
“The priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven.”

Therefore, it was clear to Paul that Jesus's one-time sacrifice gave people complete forgiveness. That's why he consistently writes about the atonement of sins in the past tense.

That said, Paul also knew perfectly well the moment when he became a Christian. It wasn't until the sudden encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus that his rebellious heart was changed. For Apostle Paul, the forgiveness of sins and salvation through faith were two different things, even time-wise. Forgiveness was a gift

to the ungodly world, whereas salvation depended on the relationship with the risen Christ.

Then why has Christian theology claimed since the fifth century that sins were not forgiven on Calvary?



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