



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 little 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

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.”

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.

The Augustinian Flaw

The son of a Christian mother and a pagan father, Augustine (354-430) was born in the Roman province of Numidia in North Africa. In his youth, no one could have guessed that he would become one of the most influential figures in the history of the Christian Church, as he was far more interested in games and carnal pleasures than in his mother's faith.

Augustine studied rhetoric in Carthage and embraced the Persian religion of Manichaeism, a combination of all the religious systems known at the time, with some Christian elements. Its fundamental doctrine was the eternal conflict between light and dark, and it regarded matter as dark and evil.

However, Augustine's philosophical interest was eventually turned more towards academic skepticism as he began to teach rhetoric, first in Carthage and then in Rome.

Shortly after arriving in Rome, Augustine was appointed professor of rhetoric for the imperial court at Milan in 384. There, he became acquainted with one

Bishop Ambrose—and the Neoplatonist philosophical ideas and highly eloquent allegorical preaching of this famous theologian. In particular, Bishop Ambrose's symbolic interpretation of the Scriptures appealed to Augustine's intellect and soon changed his understanding of the Christian doctrine. Augustine was baptized by Ambrose in 387. He decided to return to North Africa, and being such a prominent, educated, and well-known Christian, he was eventually pressed into service against his own will and ordained a priest at the age of thirty-six. A few years later, in 396, he became the bishop of Hippo.

In his autobiography, Augustine describes his life as a colorful drama of sin and conversion. It should probably be noted, however, that many of his contemporaries in the African Church questioned the depth of his conversion and thought his testimony suspiciously self-serving. It is indeed likely that his story was somewhat elaborated to reassure his followers and disarm his opponents.

Nevertheless, one cannot overestimate the significance of Augustine for Christian theology. His contribution to the development of several essential doctrines has been far-reaching. With good reason, it can be said that virtually everything the Western Church teaches about the grace of God can be derived from his views.

Augustine defined his doctrine of divine grace using

concepts that were to be widely accepted in later Western theology. According to him, there are essentially three intertwined modes of grace.

The preparatory phase can be called *prevenient grace*, which regenerates man's will in his (infant) baptism and prepares him for his conversion.

The *operative grace* is God's sovereign mercy working towards man's justification in his actual conversion, accomplishing it with no contribution or merit of the man himself.

The conversion through the operative grace is followed by an ongoing process in which God's *cooperative grace* starts working with the liberated will of man to perform good works.

It should be noted that Augustine was the first theologian after Apostle Paul to really delve into this subject. His thorough and well-defined teachings managed to set the basic assumptions and boundaries for all subsequent discussions on grace. Therefore, while we might not disagree with what he says, it is equally important to pay attention to what he does *not* say.

As we look at Augustine's definition of God's grace, isn't something missing? Where is the cross of Christ? Can the sacrifice of Jesus not be called 'grace'?

It is most interesting, indeed, how far in the background

the cross has to stay in Augustine's' theology. That doesn't mean he would explicitly deny its value or anything like that. But for him, the crucifixion of Jesus on Calvary is not even as closely pivotal as you might think. Frankly, for the most part, the cross of Christ is utterly non-existent in his writings.

The reason is quite obvious: in his thinking, the cross doesn't change much. Not for the man deprived by the original sin, anyway. Until God finally decides to break the bondage of sin through His operative grace, mankind continues to be every bit as condemned by the law as it used to be, despite the cross.

What Augustine does here is that he chooses to separate the atonement and the forgiveness from each other and merge the forgiveness with salvation. Yes, the atoning sacrifice took place on Calvary, but man's sins are not forgiven until his justification comes into effect by the grace of God. In Augustine's thinking, the sacrifice of Jesus becomes nothing more than a prerequisite of grace, something that needed to be done before God could give His actual grace to man.

Augustine seeks to follow Apostle Paul by adopting two basic assumptions from him: the total depravity of fallen man and his atonement by the grace of God alone. But somehow, he fails to see what Paul teaches about them.

According to Paul, the irreversibly corrupted nature of man was sentenced to death and taken to the cross by

Jesus Christ. There is no reconciliation for the fallen man, for the sinful nature of the flesh. As Jesus died, we were all brought to death with him. But at the same time, through the blood of Christ, the price has been paid in full, and the complete atonement for all mankind has been acquired on Calvary. And because of the cross, the gift of salvation will be given freely to those who receive Jesus as Lord. This is what Apostle Paul calls grace, comprehensively administered by Jesus and only acknowledged and consented to by man.

Very differently, the Augustinian view on atonement is not focused on the one historical event on Calvary but on all the present encounters between God and man. It is in those encounters that the remission of sins takes place. In other words, 'grace' does not refer to the cross anymore but to everything God will accomplish as He gracefully approaches the sinful man.

That puts an immense theological weight on man's encounter with God, and with an obvious result: in his conversion, no part can be trusted to man himself, not even receiving Christ, for it must be the sole grace of the Sovereign God which saves the man. For Augustine, the Good News is no more about Jesus atoning for everyone on the cross. The gospel becomes just a message of the Church that reveals the grace of God as it is proclaimed, with only a nominal dependence on the actual historical events. This theological twist is quite remarkable.

But what could have been the reason for this esteemed Teacher of the Church to dismiss the historical nature of the atonement?

Was it due to his philosophical approach in general, or more specifically, the influence of Neoplatonism, which emphasized the importance of divine ideas and principles over physical reality?

Or could it be related to his pronounced and strongly defensive position against theological opposition like the British monk Pelagius, who persistently advocated man's freedom of will?

Or was it just something in Augustine's personal history that blurred his vision of the sacrifice of Jesus?

It is not possible here, in this brief and concise book, to try to determine why and how it all happened. However, it is the outcome that is of the greatest interest: theologians all over the world have followed faithfully in the footsteps of Augustine for sixteen hundred years.

And as they all have—either consciously or without noticing it at all—agreed to build on the foundation laid by this revered Teacher of the Church, they have been equally unable to recognize the true significance of the cross anymore.

And that is truly astonishing.

Derailed Western Theology

Theologians have always been known for their tireless enthusiasm for building and rebuilding their doctrinal towers. Carefully and in great detail, they have laid their theological bricks and stones on top of others, layer after layer. And yet, for some reason, the taller each tower has become, the more nooks and crannies have always been found between the stones.

This discovery has led to more and more bricks being needed to fill the gaps, eventually resulting in a doctrinal complexity beyond all comprehension.

Little attention has ever been paid to the so-called ‘Ockham’s razor’ in theology. It is a principle that claims that *the simplest solution tends to be the best*, and it has proved very useful in all science.

Theological structures have gradually reached magnificent heights, yet only a few builders have considered it an actual problem. Therefore, they have failed to see that behind all this theological complexity, the two fundamental, elementary cornerstones of Christianity—the

atonement in Jesus Christ and salvation through faith—have been severely displaced.

Augustine has often been praised for his groundbreaking efforts in building bridges between Christianity and Classical Greek philosophy. Depending on the tradition, he has been called St. Augustine, Doctor of the Church, Blessed Augustine, Teacher of Grace, and even the Second Founder of Christianity, thus giving him credit for his undeniable significance in Christian theology.

But while it is most certainly true that the teachings of Augustine have indeed defined the course of theological doctrine to this day, his input regarding the doctrine of grace is to be deeply regretted. By detaching the grace of God from Calvary and moving it to our encounters with God instead, he reconstructed the whole concept of grace—and effectively removed the only true and lasting foundation for the Christian faith.

What could be more devastating than that?

Since the days of Augustine, the inability to see the atonement as a historical one-time event, fully accomplished by Jesus alone, has had a tremendous impact on Church history.

The blurring of the original cross has greatly affected doctrines such as grace, justification, faith, sin, salvation, sacraments, and predestination. One can safely

assume that all these views, and quite a few others too, would have developed very differently had the forgiveness of sins been allowed to remain on Calvary.

Inevitably, this confusion has led to numerous counter-productive disputes within the Church. It is highly plausible that, had the foundation of the New Covenant been clearly understood and proclaimed, many of the divisions in its history could have been avoided.

And even if certain views of Augustine may have been explicitly denied, theologians have never been able to detach themselves from the philosophical and theological framework he introduced. This seems to be the case in all the Western Churches, the Roman Catholic and the Protestant alike. This is unsurprising as the entirety of medieval theology has been called merely a series of footnotes to Augustine.

And, as Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk before taking the lead in the Reformation, it was quite natural that his doctrine on justification was built upon the same foundation. Through Luther and other reformers, the influence of Augustine was then spread to all the various Protestant churches to come.

It seems justifiable to claim that the Augustinian approach to grace and atonement has derailed the whole Western theology.

This is not to say that the gospel has been completely

lost throughout Church history. Luckily, the Good News of Jesus giving His life for all people has been proclaimed by many faithful pastors, evangelists, and ordinary Christians alike. But as the 'wise' have decisively taken possession of the doctrine, the original genuine gospel has been left to the individuals and churches least fascinated by intellectual speculations.

It is hardly a coincidence that the Christian Church seems to have lost much of its power in the Western world. Therefore, the question to be raised is whether we should let evangelists do the teaching on grace instead of theologians.

Or should we aim even higher and consider, just consider, revising our theology?

Hidden Treasure

We had just returned home after a very good weekend, having led a retreat together in eastern Finland. As I entered our living room, I found Johanna relaxing on the couch with an amazed look on her face. She glanced at me and told me she had just been pondering how impossible it is for anyone to interpret the Bible without God's help.

“So, I asked the Holy Spirit to teach me something about the words of Jesus, for He always said such wise things. Suddenly, a familiar Bible passage came to my mind: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid.”

“Then I saw a picture of a golden wheat field waving in the breeze. As I was looking at the field I felt the Holy Spirit speaking to me:

Do you see the golden field? The treasure is in the field itself, in the crop. It is not buried in the ground, as it is often thought. The treasure of the field is the good wheat, which grows together with the weeds. And the word 'hide'

in the paragraph means withholding it, not telling anyone.”

Johanna got pretty excited and took out her Bible. She found the parable of the treasure field and asked me to help her with the text. I blew the dust off my Greek New Testament, and we sat down to study.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.”

(Matthew 13:44)

After a while, we discovered that the Greek word, often translated as ‘hide’ or even ‘bury in the ground’, can indeed quite well be translated as ‘withhold’ or ‘conceal’. And the longer we looked into the whole chapter, the more obvious it became.

In the parable, the man saw the good crop, the treasure of the field, and decided not to tell anyone about it, for he considered it so precious. Then he went and sold everything he had and purchased the whole field.

And that’s precisely what Jesus did on the cross: He gave His life for all mankind—the whole field—to receive and save those who believe in Him.

As we start reading the four Gospels in the New Testament, it soon becomes evident that Jesus did indeed conceal the plan of salvation from the crowds. Frankly, He barely told His disciples He would give His life and

be resurrected. Not that the disciples would have understood his words even if he had given them more details. It was truly a secret mission set to be revealed only after its conclusion, after the cross, through the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit.

But when you think it over, concealing the atonement did not end on the Day of Pentecost. As Apostle Paul writes, although the Gospel of Christ was the core message to be proclaimed to all people, it remained hidden from the wise:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.” (1 Corinthians 1:18-21)

Even today, two thousand years later, the same message of God’s ultimate love is still revealed to the childlike. And quite deliberately hidden from many.

Immovable Rock

Since the days of Augustine, the cross of Christ has no longer been firmly rooted in history. It has become more of an ever-present symbol of God's grace.

With the help of contemporary Christian art, literature, movies—and sincere preachers, of course—the crucifixion of Jesus on Calvary has been turned into a familiar, movable object, an image that is now available to all of us in our thoughts, any time we feel the need to repent. For too many devoted Christians, Calvary has become a holy place they think God insists they visit daily. *As if traveling through time was even possible for us, and as if Jesus was still hanging on the cross.*

The imminent and unfortunate consequence of making these imaginary pilgrimages is the subtle blurring of the original sacrifice of Jesus. Eventually, the trust in Jesus Christ is replaced by unceasing self-examination and continuous efforts to meet the demands of a pure Christian life. The confusion regarding this subject can be illustrated by presenting two competing views on atonement:

1. Jesus atoned for our sins on the cross, and we have been fully forgiven through this one sacrifice. Therefore, we can be saved through faith, by receiving Him into our hearts.
2. Jesus atoned for our sins on the cross, and because of that, God will grant us forgiveness and salvation as we repent and confess our sins.

As we consider these two options, the following questions should be asked:

- What did Apostle Paul teach? Did he merge the atonement with salvation? (Romans 5:6-10; 10:9-13)
- Is forgiveness a gift, or does it depend on us?

We might think option one would conquer the competition hands down, for it is the genuine gospel presented to us in the New Testament. But that seems not to be the case. Surprisingly, it is the second option, which is the most common and widely accepted, at least in the Western theological context.

We can see this very problem arising already in the New Testament, so there is nothing new here. As we can read in Apostle Paul's Letter to the Galatians, it did not take long before the gospel was severely challenged.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at

all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”

(Galatians 1:6-7)

There is no other option here: either we trust what Jesus did on Calvary, or we don't. The present-day 'gospel' with its replicated movable cross may look much like the original, but isn't that the main requirement of a good counterfeit? After all, were the differences between the two more apparent, we would detect them with ease. Only through the authentic message of the completed atonement on the cross can we find the lasting peace Christ has already given us. There is no other source of grace and forgiveness before God than what Jesus did for us. The only immovable foundation for our faith and life is the solid rock of Calvary.

Choice of Love

Why would it be so essential to focus our faith on something so far in the past, while God is full of grace today, too? Surely, we can't think of God as being so stingy that He won't give us His grace in any way or form we ask, can we?

Well, it is true that God loves us very much indeed, as He loves all His creation, every human in this world. But now that we live in the New Covenant era, we must remember the love He has already given us.

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."
(1 John 4:9-10)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

God has graciously given His infinite love to all people through Jesus. And yet, how many times have I

repeatedly pleaded with God for a new forgiveness, disregarding the one sacrifice already given on Calvary?

Or how many times throughout the centuries has this unique one-time offering been fictionally replicated in churches due to the symbolic, non-historical model of grace?

As I reflected on this, a strong sense of love began to fill my heart. It grew more intense until it became almost unbearable. Then the Holy Spirit said with a silent voice:

This is how the Father loves Jesus for what He did on the cross.

It was difficult for me to hold back my tears. But the following sentence, which came in the form of a thought, was just as overwhelming:

Every time we ask God to forgive us again, bypassing the sacrifice on Calvary, we ask Him to choose between His love for us and His love for His Son.

Was it true? If I chose to ignore the sacrifice Jesus had already given and kept begging for some sort of new grace... Was I not asking God to neglect His Son, too?

And that was something the Father was most certainly never going to do.

Two Apostles

But is there not a contradiction between the two apostles, Paul and John? If Paul thinks our sins have all been forgiven on Calvary, then how come John writes like this:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

Actually, that’s not what John wrote. The Greek word *aphiemi* used here (and in many other passages) should be translated according to its original meaning—not as ‘forgiving’ our sins but as ‘setting us free’ of sin. It does not refer to forgiveness or atonement but to the life-changing work of the Holy Spirit as we become Christians. The more correct translation of 1 John 1:9 would go like this: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will set us free of our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*

John’s brief reference to the atonement for sin comes a couple of verses later:

“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:1-2)

We need to understand something about John. This young, uneducated lad had learned his simple theology straight from Jesus.

“I am the vine, you are the branches, Jesus had said to his disciples. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

In John’s simple and straightforward argumentation, no one living in the darkness of sin can ever claim to have a genuine fellowship with Jesus (1 John 1:6). And at the same time, whoever is born of God, cannot and will not sin (3:9). As the Master had said: *“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognised by its fruit.” (Matthew 12:33)*

For John, sin is not primarily about breaking the law but being separated from Jesus. The evil deeds are just bad fruit. The rebellion of the heart is the ultimate unrighteousness, and it will be overcome and ‘forgiven’ when a person becomes a Christian.

Therefore, the phrase ‘confession of sins’ here bridges

these two states, representing the transition from unbelief to faith. It refers to the person confessing the darkness in which he has lived as he acknowledges the truth in Jesus.

Overall, we must appreciate the differences in how the two apostles think and use their language. Ultimately, they did have very different backgrounds.

Paul, or Saul as he was called at the time, was a devoted Pharisee who had received the most meticulous education a young Jewish man could have obtained, having studied God's law at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel. John, on the other hand, had spent his youth helping his father, a fisherman.

Paul had become a zealous fundamentalist, a fanatical oppressor of Christians who already had blood on his hands despite being a relatively young man. In contrast, the worst thing John had probably done was throw small rocks at some persistent gulls trying to steal fish on the shore.

Paul had traveled all across Judea to have Christians arrested. John had followed Jesus from the beginning. And, as he had the true heart of a disciple, he was always ready to spend time at the feet of his Teacher, listening to His words.

As a result of all that, Paul had to struggle with his past throughout his life. As we look at his letters to Romans

and Galatians, that is why he had to do such an extensive theological work to detach himself from his past and receive his new identity. To reach the point where he could say: “That is not me anymore. I am no longer defined by my flesh or my past life.”

But Apostle John... He stepped into his new life and identity just like that, with no excruciating self-examination involved. He was hardly able even to imagine a life without Jesus. That was ultimately why he didn't give much thought to the old, corrupt flesh of man. For him, there was no past life to be troubled by, no rebellious youth to overcome. Ever since his early days, he had stayed close to his friend and master.

Sitting down and conversing, these two great apostles would have probably had some difficulties in understanding each other. But it is for our benefit that we can look at the same gospel from two different biblical angles.

And while the letters of Paul show some great insight into the imperfection of human nature, there is still something refreshingly genuine about the straightforward phrasing of John.

Maybe it just comes a little closer to the original, pure relationship between God and man.

New Covenant

Sometimes, shaking your entire world doesn't take more than a few words, especially if those words come from your wife. And, given that wives are usually right about many things, husbands do live in a land prone to sudden earthquakes. But while it is inevitable that there will be days when every man encounters a wisdom far greater than his own, he could, nevertheless, ask himself the following profound question:

If a man walks into a forest alone, opens his mouth, and says something no woman can hear, is he still wrong?

But it still struck me when Johanna asked me one morning: “Markku, have you ever thought of when the New Covenant came into effect? Listen to this:

‘In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living.’ (Hebrews 9:16-17)

No, of course, I had never thought of it before. And no, I

wasn't going to say it out loud. Call it theological dignity if you wish. But in fact, I had always quite unconsciously gone along with the common idea of the New Covenant starting at the beginning of Matthew 1.

Was it not obvious that the Old Covenant belonged to the Old Testament, whereas the books of the New Testament were all about the newly revealed New Covenant?

Well, it sounds logical, all right. It's just not biblical.

The Old Testament prophets proclaimed the coming of a new, better covenant that would be demonstrated through God pouring out a new spirit to man. Thus, the law would be written in the hearts instead of stone tablets:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my ordinances, and do them."
(Ezekiel 36:26-27)

"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says Yahweh: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people: and they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know Yahweh; for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,

says Yahweh: for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

At the beginning of the New Testament, we see the first signs of the promises being fulfilled as the Son of God is born into this world. Yet, after that, the salvation plan gets shrouded, unfolding only gradually. Completing this plan will require Jesus to be crucified and resurrected, followed by His ascension to heaven. It is not until the Day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the New Covenant comes into effect.

This means that the four gospels at the beginning of the New Testament are, in fact, still within the realm of the Old Covenant.

Acknowledging that is important because it helps us understand some of Jesus' teachings. For instance, when He speaks about the essence of God's law in His Sermon on the Mount, He is teaching the people of the Old Covenant exactly the way every good rabbi in the Old Testament should have. Another good example of this is in Mark 10:

“As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

‘Why do you call me good?’ Jesus answered. ‘No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you

shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'

'Teacher,' he declared, 'all these I have kept since I was a boy.'

Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, 'Who then can be saved?'

Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.'"
(Mark 10:17-22, 26-27)

Unlike all the other teachers of the law, Jesus would not teach that man could reach salvation through his deeds. Wasn't the law of God far too perfect for any fallen man to fulfill? That is why Jesus deliberately points out the one thing this devout Old Covenant believer cannot do.

Although it was still hidden from his audience, this was the very reason why Jesus had come: to meet the requirements of the law on behalf of others.

As we study the New Testament, we must not ignore or bypass the atoning work of Jesus on the cross, not even while reading his own words. If Jesus didn't teach the works of the law as the way to the Kingdom to the Old

Covenant people, much less does He teach such to Christians.

For it is through the death and resurrection of Christ alone that we are redeemed. And it is by the Holy Spirit and by faith alone that we can enter the new life of the blessed New Covenant.

Saving Relationship

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

(John 1:12)

After the Reformation, it has been common Christian knowledge to confess that man is saved by faith in Christ. And yet, there seems to be quite a bit of confusion about what that saving faith is. Maybe it is because we too often mix up the atonement and salvation.

We need to understand that the forgiveness of sins does not depend on our works, nor does it rely on our faith. There is nothing we can do or not do to change that which has already happened. All our sins have been forgiven because of what Jesus did on Calvary two thousand years ago. There is nothing more to be added to it, not by Jesus, the Father, us, or anybody else.

Just as Jesus himself said: “It is finished.” (John 19:30)

But while it is the cornerstone of the Christian faith that we have all been atoned through Christ’s death, we will

be saved through *His life*, by our *faith in the resurrected*. Apostle Paul phrased the distinction like this:

“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:9-10)

In Paul’s vocabulary, ‘believing in Jesus’ refers to our relationship with him. We are saved by believing in a person, by receiving the life of Jesus within us through the Holy Spirit. While the whole of mankind was truly redeemed on Calvary, the ones to be saved are those who accept Jesus and believe in Him.

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” (Romans 10: 9-10)

Indeed, we must understand this biblical difference: the atonement in Christ is based on His sacrificial death a long time ago, in the past, but our salvation relies on the fact that He is alive today, and we can receive Him into our lives. We will inevitably be led astray if we merge these two sides of the gospel.

Either we begin to think that universal forgiveness

must lead to universal salvation. Or, because it is unthinkable that everyone would be saved, we start believing that forgiveness depends on our wholehearted repentance. And since we see no difference between forgiveness and salvation, we conclude falsely that man must be saved by faith *in forgiveness*.

So, without even noticing it, we begin to teach *conditional atonement, misdirected faith, and salvation, which is no longer based on the living relationship with Jesus*.

And we still wonder why the 'gospel' we preach bears so little fruit!

Understanding the Good News is so tremendously important because it has the power to set us free. Now that we no longer have to work hard to become forgiven, saved, and loved by God, we are free to love Him back.

And by discovering the love and acceptance of the Father, we finally begin to grasp the relationship that God has planned for us all along.

Judgment Day

I can still remember crawling towards the church on the first anniversary of my ordination. I had been ordained on the last Sunday before Advent in November 1989. That day, I did not need to preach, for the task obviously belonged to the Bishop. But now, one year later, there was no escape.

The cross-shaped church of the little country village called Maaninka was the second-largest wooden church in Finland, with room for over a thousand worshippers. I had no idea how many would actually be there, but I certainly did not want to be one of them.

Not today, not this Sunday.

The last Sunday of the church year is called by different names depending on the denomination. The Feast of Christ the King had to be the most magnificent I had ever heard of. But I had always found the Finnish Lutheran version the most appropriate: the Judgment Sunday. Even now, as I was forced to prepare for my first sermon on the theme, I was terrified.

No matter how many times I tried to read the text, it just kept condemning me. Searching, judging, and dooming. How could I ever be sure that Jesus would let me go through the Gates of Heaven? How could anybody be? What would I be able to say to others?

Not feeling so great about my sermon was nothing new to me, but I had never felt so beaten up *before* delivering it.

The Gospel Lesson was from Matthew 25. As I read it once more, the words were like a hundred nails, relentlessly piercing my anxious soul.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you

something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

I have no recollection of my sermon that day. Somehow, I managed to struggle through it. But ever since that Sunday, the words of Jesus continued to haunt me.

Over the next twenty-five years, I came across countless attempts to interpret that Bible passage. Every single one of those forced interpretations seemed to fall short. They left me frustrated and sad, striving to discover at

least a drop of grace in the text but unable to find one.

It seemed inescapable. Eventually, we would all be judged by our deeds, regardless of the cross or the said atonement. Apparently, Jesus wanted to leave even his own disciples uncertain of their eternal fate.

It was not until God cleared my distorted vision of the atonement that it all became apparent. I realized I had never grasped the true meaning of Jesus' words before.

There is no way around it. This Bible passage will always remain impossible to understand until we become immersed in those two simple truths about the gospel:

1) On the cross of Calvary, Jesus gave His life for all people in the world, atoning for their every sin, once and for all.

2) Now that all the sins are atoned for, man's salvation depends solely and exclusively on his relationship with Jesus.

Upon remembering these two fundamentals, the words of Jesus will suddenly become quite trivial and self-evident.

Well, then... Let's try it again.

If we take a closer look at the text, we perceive quite clearly that the judgment is not about deeds or works per se, but *to whom we have done them*. Jesus says that every nation, people, and individual in this world will be

judged according to how they have related to Him during their earthly life.

At the end of the day, the only thing that will matter is how we have treated the Lord, i.e., what we have done or left undone to Jesus himself.

Secondly, Jesus assures His followers that, as His witnesses, they are truly his ambassadors in this world. They represent the Kingdom of God. Wherever the disciples are, the King himself will also be. Through His Spirit, Jesus dwells within His brothers and sisters, within even 'the least of them'.

Because of this, just as people have either received or rejected His disciples, they have indeed received or rejected Jesus himself, too. And that will eventually determine their fate on the last day.

The same truth can also be found in Matthew 10:

"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.

And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

(Matthew 10:40-42)

This is what Jesus said.

Come to think of it, it is amazing how words of encouragement can become a source of fear if not understood correctly. How much joy and assurance have been denied to the people of God because of the long history of the erroneous teaching of God's grace? And how much more love has the Father had in His heart all the time?

“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” (John 5:24)

There will be people who will not be saved; that is a fact for sure. But we need to understand that because of what Jesus did on Calvary, it is not according to our deeds that we will be judged. The judgment will go way beyond any wrongdoing, for it is the state of our heart that will be measured.

The essence of all sin is rebellion. And as such, it is rooted much more deeply than our evil deeds. After all, we may have a rebellious heart even if our works seem utterly blameless.

After the gracious atonement on Calvary, our hearts will be brought to light and evaluated through one thing only: how we respond to Jesus—whether we accept or reject the Son of God.

*“For God so loved the world
that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him
shall not perish but have eternal life.*

*For God did not send his Son
into the world to condemn the world,
but to save the world through him.*

*Whoever believes in him
is not condemned,
but whoever does not believe
stands condemned already
because they have not believed in
the name of God’s one and only Son.”*

John 3: 16-18

A Night to Remember

Besides the monotonous chirping of the unseen band of crickets, accompanied by the constant, erratic crackle of the firewood, no sounds were breaking the silence. The restless dance of the flames did its best, pushing back the sudden coolness of the darkening night.

The two men watching the fire seemed to be lost in their thoughts. In the serenity of the Mediterranean night, it felt almost like time had paused, strangely overlapping the past, the present, and the future under the pale shimmer of the waning moon.

“You are thinking of him, aren’t you...?” said the man with graying hair, frowning. “Me too, although it’s not quite the same.”

“I do miss him”, the younger one said quietly.

“Good thing he is not far.”

“Yup.” The lad stood up, apparently not ready to talk.

“I’ll get some more wood.”

He walked away, leaving his well-meaning friend alone for a moment.

The older man had his own memories. Some sharp like stings, always tormenting him in solitary moments like this. Too often had he been haunted by his past, by the images of men and women thrown mercilessly in prison, along with their children. Quite a few of those prisoners getting killed. They all deserved it, he had thought at the time. Now he knew better. So much better.

Tears were rolling down his cheeks. He could not fathom such love. It was beyond him that the Son of God had been willing to give his life for him on the cross, forgiving it all—while at the same time, all he was dreaming of was persecuting and killing more Christians.

The young man returned, carrying a few logs in his arms.

“How was your week, by the way?” the old man asked, trying to shake off his mood.

“Good, of course.”

Of course. Obviously, the guy had never had a cloudy day in his life. He had no sinful past, no haunting images in his head. A fisherman’s son who came across this Jesus and began to follow him with his older brother. Just like that. Sometimes, it was plain infuriating.

“Johnny boy, do you ever even feel the need to repent?”

“I’m sorry?”

"I mean, don't you ever get that feeling? You know, that I-am-the-greatest-sinner-there-is type of a thing?"

"Uhm... I don't think so. Why, should I?"

They'd had similar discussions before, several times. It was not that they didn't share the same faith. They just had such different histories. In fact, their backgrounds couldn't have been much more diverse.

"I think you should read my letter to the Romans. And the other letters, too, so you could better grasp what depths of self-examination I've had to go through."

"Uh-huh..."

"You know, we must never forget our past."

Johnny thought of his dad's fishing boat and the beautiful sunsets at the glimmering lake. And he remembered how the teachings of Jesus always touched his heart.

"I remember seeing the light", the young man said, pondering. "It was brighter than anything I had seen before. The light was Jesus himself. I think that was my repentance, acknowledging the Lord, stepping into that light. And I knew I would never want to go away."

The old man didn't say anything for a while. Then he went on: "But still, I believe reading my letters would be good for you. They are fairly easy to read."

"If you say so."

Suddenly, there was movement in the dusk close by.

Another young man approached the campfire.

“Hi there! May I join you?”

“Sure thing! Come on closer, it’s pretty chilly out there”, the old man said. The young fellow sat down by the fire.

“Hello, I’m Gus. Nice to meet you.”

“Hi Gus, I’m Johnny. And this is my good old friend...”

“Oh my, I know who you are, sir. It is such an honor to meet you in person! I’ve read all your letters.”

The old man smiled, slightly flattered.

“Sounds great, son. I wish all the young people had”, he said, not looking at Johnny.

“But how did you get hold of all of them...?”

“Good thing I managed to find them in Latin. My Greek is lousy.”

The old man looked even more puzzled.

“However, now that we are here, there is something I would really like to ask you”, Gus continued, seemingly excited.

“I have just been wondering if *liberum arbitrium captivatum* can be called *liberum arbitrium* at all before it is turned to *liberum arbitrium liberatum*? And at what point exactly does that change happen, the *liberum arbitrium captivatum* becoming the said *liberum arbitrium* again? If it does indeed do so?”

Gus fixed his eyes on the older man, who was just about to answer when an abrupt coughing fit made it

impossible for him to speak. It took him so long to recover that Gus dropped another question:

“Have you ever been to Rome? That’s a great city, full of life...” A sudden glimpse of sadness shadowed his face. “Full of everything.”

Johnny shook his head. The old man said, “No, I have not been to Rome yet. But I do know some people there.”

“You have to see the Colosseum!” Gus said, full of excitement. “Really! They arrange all kinds of activities there, with lions and all. That could make a terrific site for a good philosophical debate.”

“I have been to Athens, though”, the old man said. “And speaking of intellectual debates, I can still remember my speech at the Areopagus. I was trying to persuade the Greeks and convince them about the gospel by appealing to their intellect. That was a great sermon—except that it wasn’t. It was a disaster.”

“Oh, I could’ve given you a few good tips”, Gus smiled. “I’m very good at rhetoric...”

“But that experience taught me a lot. After leaving Athens, I had to walk about fifty miles to get to Corinth. It took me two days. No, it *gave* me two days to think about what had happened. And when I reached Corinth, I knew exactly what I needed to do.”

The eyes of the old, seasoned preacher were shining bright. “In my recent letter to the congregation, I reminded them about the day I arrived in Corinth.”

“And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I

came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power." (1 Cor 2:1-5)

"Look, son, since that day, I have never put my trust in rhetorical skills again."

For a moment, Gus didn't say anything. Then he continued in a somewhat subdued voice:

"There is something in your letters that I have always been able to relate to. I know what you mean when you teach about the sinful desires of the flesh. My life has been... Less than perfect. Before I became a Christian, I did all kinds of things. The chains of sin are so strong." Gus couldn't lift his eyes.

"Gus, you know what Jesus did on Calvary, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, I know the gospel. I know that God forgives me because of Jesus, as I come to him and repent. God is full of grace, for he has chosen me to be saved."

The words were uttered promptly. But maybe just a little bit too quickly. "I have to say your teachings mean the world to me. And I want to spread them to the whole world, too."

Johnny had been silent for a long time. "Uhm, have you read anything I have written, by any chance?"

Gus looked at Johnny as if realizing right then that he was still there.

"Oh... Yes, of course. Word and light and all that. Very eloquent, very philosophical."

"But I'm sorry, I really have to move on. Busy, busy, busy... I was just ordained a priest a little while ago, and now I'm on the fast track to becoming a bishop. It was nice to meet you two. Blessings!"

The next moment, he was gone.

"Whoa, the guy is a real talker. He's going to get a lot of followers", Johnny said.

"I guess he is all right", the other one replied. "I'm just wondering if he has got it all right. You know what I mean."

The old man dropped a fresh log onto the fire.

PART TWO

Historical Atonement

Word of the Cross

Apostle Paul preached of the crucified Christ. Not that Jesus was still hanging on the cross, but had indeed died for all men and atoned for all sins on Calvary. That's the way we preach today, too. Or do we?

We claim that we hold tightly to the gospel, but at the same time, we are blind to its true meaning. We often think of our sins—and the sins of others—as if they were not yet forgiven, as if Jesus had not atoned for them already. And we still don't see the contradiction at all. The truth is, most of today's Christians do not believe that sins were forgiven on the cross of Calvary.

As odd as it may sound, *the message of the atonement has taken the place of the actual atonement.*

We are convinced that people are forgiven when they receive the message of forgiveness. That is why we believe that only believers have been forgiven, while others have not. And we're so amazed that this "Good News" doesn't seem to reach people too well.

In reality, this merging of forgiveness and salvation is a grave mistake. According to the New Testament, they must be seen as different matters. The forgiveness of sins was a gift to the whole world, given to everyone despite works, faith, or unbelief. And yet, it is not enough for salvation.

Because of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, man can partake of salvation simply by believing in Jesus, that is, by receiving Him into his life. That is called the saving faith: a relationship with the risen Christ.

Eventually, the word of the cross is so simple that only the child-like can understand it. In the eyes of the world, it remains nonsense. But for those who receive Jesus and are saved, it is the power of God that can change their whole life from the inside.

What kind of gospel do you believe in today?

What are you going to tell people about Jesus?

Best Before

You could assume that the simpler a particular fact is, the longer it will remain unchanged in history. But it doesn't always work that way.

For what could be simpler than the gospel: Jesus died on the cross and atoned for all sins, and therefore, we are now saved through faith alone if we receive Jesus into our lives.

It seems inevitable, however, that even the plainest truth of the Bible must be brought up repeatedly. Otherwise, it will quickly become blurred and forgotten. Or it will not clear up at all.

Jesus would have wanted to share more about his coming crucifixion with his disciples, but they could not receive his words (John 16:12-13). They just turned him down every time, and Peter even rebuked him because of what he tried to say. Even on the day of Pentecost, Peter and other disciples had no clue why Jesus had died on the cross (Acts 2:38, 3:19).

It was Paul who was the first apostle to discover the

true meaning of Jesus' sacrifice. After becoming a disciple—and through direct teaching of the Spirit—this former teacher of the law was able to compare the New Covenant with the old one like no other. Through preaching and writings, his influence on the early Church was fundamental... at first. It seems, however, that Paul's clear teaching on the atonement on the cross and salvation through a relationship with Christ was surprisingly sidelined in the second century. In that sense, studying church history turns out to be somewhat horrifying.

Back in the 80s, as I was preparing my master's thesis on Church Father Tertullian's doctrines on Christology and Trinity, I thought I had entered pretty close to the center of Christian theology.

At that time, though, I didn't notice something was missing in Tertullian's texts. There are not many references to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus in those Latin second and third-century writings. Instead, you can find a "pearl" like this:

"Further, how inconsistent is it to expect pardon of sins (to be granted) to a repentance which they have not fulfilled! This is to hold out your hand for merchandise, but not produce the price. For repentance is the price at which the Lord has determined to award pardon: He proposes the redemption of release from penalty at this compensating exchange of repentance.

If, then, sellers first examine the coin with which they make their bargains, to see whether it be cut, or scraped, or adulterated, we believe likewise that the Lord, when about to make us the grant of so costly merchandise, even of eternal life, first institutes a probation of our repentance.” (Tertullian: On Repentance, Chapter 6)

This is how Christians were taught merely two hundred years after Calvary.

The significance of the atoning death of Jesus remained theoretical in Tertullian’s thinking, as man did not receive forgiveness until after adequate, thorough repentance. And since Tertullian joined salvation into the same package, too, he ended up teaching a very different gospel than the one Paul had proclaimed.

The legalistic views of Tertullian eventually led him outside the Church. Still, many of his doctrinal formulations were rightfully accepted, and he is considered the founder of Latin theology.

Unfortunately, this gravest theological error—neglecting the historical atonement on Calvary—was also passed to the fifth century. And the entire doctrine of grace was then built on that foundation.

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?

The Greatest Lie of All

What is the greatest truth of all, the foundation of our Christian faith? Is it not the cross of Jesus Christ: the precious fact that the Son of God atoned for our sins on Calvary, and we have all been forgiven through His sacrifice?

Well then, what would be the greatest lie of all? Wouldn't that be the outrageous claim that Jesus did not atone for our sins on Calvary and that we have not been forgiven through His sacrifice?

And yet, even if it may sound unthinkable, this is what most Christians and non-Christians have been told to believe since the beginning of the fifth century.

That's when the highly esteemed Church Father Augustine presented a new approach to the cross: Jesus died for all men, but still, no one was redeemed, not at the time of the crucifixion. Sure, sins were to be forgiven because of Jesus, but only later on—by repentance, faith, and the holy sacraments administered by the Church. Thus, without a single theologian realizing what had

happened, the forgiveness of sins became detached from the historical events on Calvary.

This revolutionary change—the time-shifting of the atonement—remained unnoticed throughout the centuries. And eventually, it was adopted into all Western theology: Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed alike.

That said, we cannot blame just one theologian for this error, for it must be the father of lies behind all this. After all, who benefits the most if the true meaning of the cross is clouded? Who reaps the harvest if the Christians are too occupied with their sins to proclaim the Good News to the world?

I believe we will not see another great revival in Western countries until we return to the original gospel. We need to stop lying to people. We have no right to give anyone the impression that his sins have not yet been forgiven through the one-time sacrifice of Jesus.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses, and having committed to us the word of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:19)

On the other hand, we must also understand that this universal grace of forgiveness does not save any of us.

“But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God’s children, to those who believe in his name: who were born not of blood, nor the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13)

Due to the complete forgiveness on the cross, we are now saved by faith alone as we receive Jesus into our hearts and lives.

By the Well of Sychar

“The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband.” (John 4:18)

The direct words of Jesus birthed a surprising reaction in the Samaritan woman: “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.”

The conversation with Jesus and the grace and truth behind his words had transformed her life in an instant. And many of the Samaritans believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.

In the mouths of many present-day disciples, however, the words of Jesus are turned into accusations. Those so-called followers of Christ do not believe that sins have already been atoned for and forgiven on Calvary. And that the new life is given to anyone who opens their heart to Jesus. That’s the reason their words have a very different effect.

And no one wants to come to see Jesus anymore.

Old Switcheroo

Why is it so rare to see a genuine revival in Western countries? Many answers have been offered. Sometimes it is because of the sinful world, and sometimes, of us believers. I'm sure there is not just one answer to this question. But what if we no longer preach the gospel? Could that be the main reason?

You often hear the following message proclaimed: "If you believe in your heart that Jesus died for you at the cross, you will be forgiven and saved."

Well, it sounds all right, doesn't it? Except that it contains a few minor misunderstandings. *It is based on flawed interpretations of atonement, faith, and salvation.*

The roots of the problem extend to the fifth century when Church Father Augustine presented his newly polished doctrine of God's grace. The premise of his doctrine seemed so self-evident that neither he nor anyone else paid any attention to it. His starting point was clear: even though Jesus atoned for all sins on the cross, no one

was forgiven at the time.

Augustine has sometimes been named the second founder of Christianity. However, he was the first theologian who detached the forgiveness of sins from the atonement of Jesus and changed the historical atonement into a grace transferred by the Church. Since then, this doctrinal change has stained the entire Western theology.

But it didn't stop there. Because the forgiveness of sins was no longer considered a historical fact, it was thought to be dependent on man's efforts. As a result, the significance of good works grew in the Late Middle Ages. After a personal struggle, Martin Luther reacted strongly to this and found the biblical truth about salvation through faith.

If only Luther could have seen that, according to the New Testament, the atonement on Calvary and salvation through faith are two different things, even time-wise. Sins have been forgiven a long time ago, and our faith or unbelief will never be able to change that. But we can not be saved without a living relationship with Jesus. That's what saving faith means: receiving Jesus into your life, through the Holy Spirit.

Following the Augustinian Order, the young monk Martin Luther could not make that distinction. Even in his later years, he automatically joined together salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

This theological development has had a catastrophic impact on Christianity. God's unconditional gift to the ungodly world has been turned into an offer of grace, as forgiveness of sins is said not to come into effect before it is received by faith.

Consequently, we are now told that we are saved by believing in the work of Jesus on Calvary. Saving faith is no longer seen as a living relationship with Christ. And therefore, preaching in traditional Western churches rarely focuses on receiving the Lord.

What do you think? Is this how we should proclaim:

Don't you understand that God is angry with you and has not forgiven your sins? But if you repent, give up your bad deeds, and believe that Jesus has died because of them, you will be forgiven and saved.

Or should we return to the original gospel and start inviting people to Jesus without conditions, depending on his finished work? Should we not trust the Holy Spirit's ability to grow them up in the knowledge of God and bear good fruit in their lives?

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (Acts 16:31)

Unilateral

Forgiving someone who doesn't ask for forgiveness and shows no regret because of the wrongdoing can be difficult. Really difficult.

However, we can read from the Bible that Jesus urged his disciples to love their enemies and show them mercy and forgiveness, so that we would be children of the Most High. (see Luke 6:27-38)

This is something we do understand.

Having taught that to his followers, Jesus went to the cross and gave his life to atone for the sins of the whole world...

How on earth can we think he did not act upon his own teaching? Why would Jesus or the Father now be waiting for apologies before they can forgive people? Were they not capable of forgiving their enemies as well?

According to the New Testament, true forgiveness is unilateral. It does not depend on the regrets or

apologies of the other party. Neither does forgiveness *remove* anyone's sins; it just forgives them. It does not cleanse him or make him better. The evildoer doesn't even necessarily come to know he has been forgiven.

Well then, don't you think it's somewhat interesting that such an unconditional, unilateral forgiveness of sins is not part of Christian theology?

Forgiven or Set Free

The Greek word for forgiving is *'charizomai'*. Its root is *'charis'*, freely bestowed grace. Apostle Paul uses the word in the past (and concluded) tense when he refers to the atoning work of Jesus on the cross.

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Col 3:13)

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Eph 4:32)

However, in the New Testament, there is another, more common Greek word, *'aphiemi'*, which has also been translated as 'forgive'—even though the original and primary meaning of the word is 'let go' and 'set free'. As a result, the work of Jesus on the cross and the present work of the Holy Spirit have been mixed.

Because of this wrong interpretation, we fail to see that it is not the Holy Spirit's task to forgive us but to set us free of the bondage of sin. And because of this flaw, it becomes almost impossible for us to believe that sins

have already been forgiven on Calvary. The problem appears in around fifty Bible verses. For example, can you see how different the following passages look when you retain the original meaning?

“For if you set people free of their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also set you free. But if you do not let people go, neither will your Father let you.” (Matthew 6:14-15)

“Release us from our transgressions, for we also release everyone who is in our debt.” (Luke 11:4)

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will set us free of our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

APHIEMI, setting people free, is the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit. It is the task Jesus received from the Father and then left to his followers to accomplish:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

CHARIZOMAI, however, took place a long time ago. For sins have already been forgiven.

Original Language of the Bible

Did you know that you can read the Bible in two ways, in two very different languages? I don't mean Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, or English. I mean the language of *Relations* and the language of *Law*. The first of these two is the actual, original language of the Bible.

The language of Relations speaks about God and man from the relationship viewpoint. Falling into sin is described as a tragic breaking of trust and unity. The desire of God's heart to restore that unity is echoed throughout the Old Testament.

"I myself said, 'How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.' I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me. But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me, declares the Lord." (Jer 3:19-20)

Over the centuries, the language of Relations started to lose meaning as people receded from God. "What is He like? What does He want from us? We don't understand

Him.” Finally, God decided to give people his law. Its purpose was to remind them of what kind of God he was—and to help them follow Him.

However, as the language of Law became increasingly familiar to the people, it eventually substituted the original language of Relation. Sin was thought to merely break the law; it was no longer considered bad fruit resulting from a broken relationship. Repentance was no longer focused on returning to God but on replacing unlawful deeds with good ones. Even faith was no longer a living relationship; its main content was obedience to God’s commands. And when the language changed, it could no longer pass on the right image of God to the people.

Jesus came not only to redeem his people but also to restore to them the language of Relations. Ordinary people did receive his teaching, but many teachers of the law resented him because they could not understand his words. Neither can we if we don’t recognize the language he was using. And the same goes for the writings of Paul and John.

Apostle Paul was bilingual, though; he could speak the languages of both Relations and the Law. His letter to Romans is a good example: in the first three chapters, Paul describes the fallen state of every human before the arrival of Jesus. Then, up to the seventh chapter, he writes about atonement and justification—still, a bit

reluctantly using the language of the Law, “in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh” (Romans 6:19). After that, Paul finally gets to write about faith in its own language.

Unfortunately, Bible teachers do not usually see this bilingualism and cannot quite understand Paul’s logic.

John, on the other hand... He was quite something. That fisherboy learned his language and thinking straight from Jesus. Plus, he didn’t have such a burden of the past as Paul did.

So, when John writes that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will ‘forgive us our sins’ (*aphiemi*, ‘set us free of our sins’) and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9), the meaning of his words unfolds only in the simple language of Relations.

John does not refer to sinful deeds or the law, for they have been completely dealt with on the cross (1 John 2:1-2). For Apostle John, man’s darkness and sin are symptoms of a lack of relationship. Confession, freedom, and purification signify encountering and receiving Jesus, for the root cause of all sin is unbelief.

If we wish to understand the Bible, we must read it as it is written. And in the right language.

The Lord's Prayer

*Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.
(Luke 11:1)*

But how can you teach people who don't yet have the Holy Spirit...? Of course, you could give them a simple model prayer: "When you pray, say..." (The Lord's Prayer, Luke 11:2-4)

Then, you could advise them to pray firmly, to ask, seek, and knock, even if there is no immediate answer (verses 5-10). And you could compare God to an earthly father who wants to give nothing but good to his children (verses 11-12).

At that time, there was not much more Jesus could teach them because the disciples lacked the prerequisite of prayer: a close relationship with the Father. That's why Jesus described their prayer as shouting through the door. And that's why Jesus concludes his teaching in verse thirteen with the most essential part, the promise of the Holy Spirit.

As the people of the New Covenant, we are called to step inside through the door, into a much deeper communion with God than before Pentecost.

After all, true prayer is not about the quantity of words or the loudness of our voice. Our privilege is to pray to the Father in Spirit and truth, by listening and following His guidance.

Trespassing

“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

This is the familiar petition in the Lord’s Prayer we have all probably often repeated. However, it has been translated from the Greek New Testament texts in a way that makes forgiveness of sins conditional and transfers it from the cross to the present time.

The prayer is based on Bible passages (Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:4) which do not talk about forgiving or receiving forgiveness but ‘letting go’ and ‘setting free’ (*aphiemi*). The more correct wording of the petition would be:

“Set us free of our trespasses, as we set free those who trespass against us.”

Jesus is warning his disciples against holding a grudge when people treat them in the wrong way. Bitterness is like a prison; it holds us in captivity. We should ask the Father to set us free from every bondage, but we must

be ready to give the same freedom to others as well. If we do not set people free, neither will our heavenly Father let us go free.

This is illustrated well in Jesus' parable of a servant who owed a huge amount of money to the king. As he was unable to pay the debt, the servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go. This servant, however, refused to do the same to his fellow servant, who owed him just a little sum. He had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

As a result, the unmerciful servant was recaptured and left in chains. *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you let your brother go (aphiemi) from your heart."* (Matthew 18:35)

It's not about some sort of conditional forgiveness. It's about setting people free. The difference between the two can be seen in Luke 7, too.

Jesus is having dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee. A woman who has lived a sinful life is standing behind Jesus, weeping and pouring perfume on his feet. Simon resents the woman in his heart, and Jesus asks him a question:

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he

canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" (Luke 7:41-42)

The Greek word Luke is using here is *charizomai*, the same term Paul uses when he writes about the forgiveness of sins on Calvary. Both of the debtors had their whole debts canceled. Having written that, Luke switches the tense to the present time and the wording to *aphiemi*.

"Therefore, I tell you, she has been set free (aphiemi) from many sins—that's why she loved much. But he who is delivered from little loves little." (Luke 7:47-48)

Being 'forgiven' and being 'set free' are two different things. The former refers to the past, to the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary. The second one refers to the present work of the Holy Spirit.

If we mix these two and melt them together, as various Bible translations do, we will not be able to see the true Gospel.

How to Talk About Sin

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2)

Nowadays, there is not enough talk about sin. Or there is too much and the wrong kind of talk. The subject is difficult and causes anxiety in many. Would it be better to clam up? But aren't there so many warnings of the dangers of sin in the New Testament, too?

True, but the apostles taught about sin differently than we hear today.

When we read the Bible, we need to keep in mind that the Old Testament tells us about the time before Christ, before the atonement. And when we read the New Testament from the Book of Acts forward, we must remember that the forgiveness of sins has already happened.

The gospel is the center of the Bible, the twofold

message about final atonement on the cross and salvation through a living relationship with Jesus. Our count of years should be based on Calvary, for the death and resurrection of Jesus was the actual turning point in history. This change of era determines how we must talk about sin today. The sacrifice of Jesus was complete. All sin has been atoned for, and the curse of the law has been broken.

If we rebuke people without telling them that all their sins have already been forgiven on the cross, we are guilty of lying, despising the sacrificial death of Jesus, and giving a false testimony of God.

This is a mistake the apostles did not make.

Sin indeed causes lots of bad things in people's lives. It may also draw them away from God permanently. That's why we still have to keep talking about sin and warn about its consequences. But it has to be done according to the truth, based on the cross.

Then, and only then, it will be heard right.

Feeding and Beating

There was an interesting thought in the Mental Health Association's bulletin: "If the same hand feeds and beats, the child believes he deserves the evil."

The statement is quite understandable. If the parent, who should always protect the little one, is alternately loving and violent, the child can draw no other conclusion than that the beating is his fault.

Sounds important. Too bad it comes so close to today's teaching about God. According to some denominations, the purpose of preaching is always twofold: one must accuse and beat sinners for their sins and then show them mercy and love, as if God had two very different faces.

Christianity is not about deserving anything from God; that should be clear. But why should we accuse people of their sins if they have already been forgiven? And how could sharing the gospel bring forgiveness to anyone? After all, it's just telling people about what has already taken place on Calvary.

We don't need to believe in forgiveness or 'receive it' to make it happen. Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, all sins have already been irrevocably forgiven. Forgiveness is not a matter of faith but a historical fact.

Salvation, on the other hand, is a matter of faith. The other side of the gospel is the request to receive the living Lord into one's heart, for salvation always requires a personal relationship with Jesus. The Bible calls that living relationship 'faith'. The object of the saving faith is Jesus himself, not the atonement or any other part of the doctrine.

Christianity is all about love and communion. And we have heard many times how much God loves us. But at the same time, we have been beaten by flawed, legalistic teaching. We have been told that God will not tolerate looking straight at us because of our sinfulness. We have been led to believe that just like Adam and Eve after the fall, we must still seek cover and hide from His sight—now behind Jesus or Mary or someone else.

But why should we hide from God if Jesus has already atoned for our sins? Why wouldn't we just turn to him and ask for his help?

Banking Business

There is a neat description of evangelism: “Preaching the gospel is like telling people on behalf of the bank that all their debts have been paid off. A true Good News for everyone!”

Except no bank would ever be able to wipe all debts away. Banks don’t benefit from people who have no obligations. After all, it is the debtor who pays the loan amortizations, margins, and interests, thus upholding the entire system with his money.

Accordingly, it is difficult for churches to declare people free from their sin debt, no matter how biblical and truthful it would be. By churches, I mean all denominations whose doctrine is based on the fifth-century Augustinian concept of atonement and grace. Namely, it was the Church Father Augustine who presumed that the events on Calvary did not bestow grace on anyone. It just authorized the Church to pass on forgiveness to the believers through baptism, communion, and confession.

Priests and theologians received this new, modified doctrine willingly because now the Church was turned into a grace bank, to which anyone in need of God's mercy had to come over and over again.

Even today, as grace banks, those churches cannot let people think that Jesus has already wiped away all debts on Calvary. It is far better that they keep paying them off in small installments. The main thing is that people remain loyal customers of the Church.

What would happen if we understood that all debts have already been forgiven? Would it really diminish the significance of churches and congregations?

Would this realization finally turn our gaze to Jesus, away from our good and bad deeds?

The Keys and What To Do With Them

“If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (John 20:23)

The words of Jesus in this Bible passage have not been translated correctly into English. Instead of ‘forgive’ and ‘not forgive’, the original manuscripts use the words ‘loose’ and ‘bind’ (just like in Matthew 16:19).

Additionally, this verse relates closely to the previous verses. It should be understood following the New Testament teaching of historical atonement.

Jesus defined the mission of disciples like this: *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21)*. For what purpose did the Father send Jesus?

As we can see in the four Gospels of the Bible, Jesus did not come to pass judgments or retain forgiveness from anyone. He did not come to judge the world but to save it (John 12:47). Salvation was not about works but

receiving a Person (John 1:11-12, John 6:38-40, John 13:20). The work of God was believing in the one he has sent (John 6:28-29). The sin that releasing or retaining referred to was not breaking the law, but unbelief (John 16:9).

The other preceding verse sheds more light on this. "*Receive the Holy Spirit*" (John 20:22). The kingdom of God is present within the followers of Jesus. Whoever rejects the disciples also rejects the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom. But as Jesus did not come to judge people, neither do his disciples pass judgments. Instead, they will become the judgment of the world by representing Jesus in the same way Jesus represented the Father.

The description of the last judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) brings forth this truth brilliantly. This passage is a classic example of how the distorted Augustinian view prevents Christians from correctly understanding the words of Jesus.

The story has nothing to do with good or bad works per se or a judgment that would be passed because of unlawful deeds. It says the world will be rewarded or judged because of what people have done or left undone to Jesus himself, who lives within his disciples through the Holy Spirit. The same idea can be found in Matthew 10:40-42 as well.

These findings also help us gain insight into Jesus' words about *the keys of the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew

16:19). The “power of the keys” is not an authorization to forgive or retain forgiveness, nor does it give us any right to leave people in bondage.

It signifies the tremendous responsibility Jesus has given to the entire Church and every Christian. These keys have not been given to anyone else but us. We are in the key position, Christ’s true ambassadors in this world.

It is a bit like an owner of a large apartment building giving a set of keys to the janitor.

“Hold on to these. This is the only set of keys; there are no spare ones. You can open any door with these. If the residents are left outside, you are responsible for opening the door for them.”

Now, does the janitor have the right *not* to open the doors?

We have all been forgiven on Calvary, but it is our task to set people free through the power of the Holy Spirit. If we do not let them hear the true gospel, they will likely remain bound and may not ever get to heaven.

What Paradigm?

Johanna and I were teaching a group of counselors and mentors about the historical atonement.

After the session, an academic lady came to us and said that this teaching challenges the entire paradigm of Christian theology. I hadn't thought about it that far yet, but later, I realized she was right.

All branches of science are based on a set of thought patterns, and theology is no exception. These patterns may be conscious or unconscious, and they form an invisible framework that can direct our thoughts quite imperceptibly. Paradigm does not dictate the answers to theological questions but *sets the boundaries to the questions we ask*.

One of the premises of Christian theology for the past 1600 years has been that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross *did not* pass forgiveness to anyone, not when it happened. Had this outrageous claim been said aloud at the time, it would have probably been rejected immediately. But it became accepted into Western

theology (and Eastern, too) on the paradigm level, as a basic assumption for the fancy new doctrine. And for some reason, it has never been contested.

What if we switched this faulty paradigm back to the original?

Non Bis In Idem

The title translates literally from Latin as ‘not twice in the same’.

According to this fundamental legal principle, a person can not be prosecuted more than once for the same (criminal) behavior. And no one shall be liable to be tried again in criminal proceedings for an offense for which they have already been finally acquitted or convicted by the law.

Jesus Christ was prosecuted, tried, and convicted for all the past, present, and coming sins of the world. He was sentenced to death because of our iniquities. He was the blameless Lamb of God who shed his blood on the cross and gave his life for us. In this trial, the innocent took the place of the guilty ones.

And because of the one sacrifice of Jesus, the price has been paid, and the demands of the law fulfilled. Christ is indeed the end of the Law, as Paul declared. Following the divine justice of God’s kingdom, the entire human race has now been acquitted. And no legal action can

ever be instituted twice for the same cause of action.

There is going to be another trial at the end of the age. In this case, however, the procedure will be different. The charges will have nothing to do with the law. In this last trial, it is our relationship with the Lord that will be under scrutiny.

Did we accept the Son of God as our Lord, or did we reject Him?

“But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” (Romans 3:21)

“To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

(John 1:12)

Two Crops

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.” (Matthew 13:24-28)

Have you noticed that there are two different versions of atonement presented in Christian literature?

1. Jesus atoned for all sins on the cross. Our sins have been forgiven with a single sacrifice.
2. Jesus atoned for all sins on the cross. Therefore, God forgives us every time we confess and ask for forgiveness.

The definitions resemble each other and have appeared side by side in Christian teaching throughout the

centuries. In reality, though, these crops are very different and entirely incompatible. They come from a different source, and they bear different fruit. Only one is a gift for which we can do nothing but give thanks to Jesus.

Seeing the difference between these two crops is difficult because practically all Christian literature and music we know has been written after the fifth century. The non-historical interpretation of atonement has soured much of the teaching we have received.

That being the case, you could think Christians would understand things better in the circles that are least keen on theological doctrines. Unfortunately, we can quickly become legalistic without knowing anything about doctrines if there is only bad teaching available.

Luckily, the atonement and full forgiveness through the cross are valid no matter what. Our beliefs and correct or flawed views do not have the slightest effect on what Jesus did two thousand years ago.

However, our interpretation has a significant impact on the message we share with others. And what we believe God thinks about us.

Are you in favor of version one or two? You can pick only one.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let

both grow together until the harvest.

At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”

(Matthew 13:28-30)

Imaginary

“Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.” (1 Cor 15:1-2)

The disciples standing on Calvary when Jesus died could never forget the scene. The memory of Jesus hanging on the cross undoubtedly stayed with them for the rest of their lives. Other Christians did not have this remembrance, for they had not been there. The message about the cross was brought to them as a word.

That’s how Christians throughout history have received the gospel, us included.

But even though we don’t have these memories of the cross, after two thousand years, we can still try to imagine the course of events. Books, sermons, teachings, movies... They all deliver memory-like images into our minds. And those images bring the gospel close to us. Just as if we were standing there near the cross, too.

These mental images can be useful if they help us remember what truly happened on Calvary.

But it may just be that sometimes the reality is concealed behind the images, and the complete, historical, and fully finished atonement becomes clouded. We are no longer able to see the atonement where it truly was. Instead, we transfer it to the moment we live right now.

Without noticing, the cross of Calvary is replaced by an imaginary cross. And the grace God has already bestowed on us becomes a mere promise of grace.

Consequently, we sincerely believe God will grant us forgiveness for Christ's sake if we repent with all our hearts. In reality, though, our trust is based on our own deeds and no longer the work of Jesus.

Only by ignoring those images and looking at the real, historical Jesus can we see God's immeasurable gift.

In One Package?

One of the worst misconceptions of the gospel is the claim that our sins are forgiven when we become Christians.

This kind of merging of atonement and salvation is contrary to the gospel that Apostle Paul preached. For him, it was self-evident that all sins were forgiven on Calvary. And it was equally clear to him that forgiveness of sins had not saved him. It was the encounter with the living Jesus that changed his life.

“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

(Romans 10:9-13)

If we preach God's forgiveness only to those who believe in Jesus, we steal that gift of forgiveness from the world. As a result, we do not let people come to Jesus unconditionally, just as they are.

This is how we Christians hide the gospel from the ungodly world. And now we reap what we have sown.

The Gospel of Jesus

We should go and make disciples of all nations. But how? No matter how hard we try, it seems virtually impossible to bring people to such deep repentance that they would ask God for forgiveness.

Has it ever occurred to you that it might be so difficult because all the sins have already been forgiven?

It is not nice to say, but probably over 90 percent of believers today do not think Jesus atoned for all sins on the cross. Of course, we claim that we do believe in his atoning sacrifice, but we don't truly understand what it means.

When Jesus atoned for the sins of the world, they were quite literally forgiven. Therefore, all we need to do to be saved is believe in Jesus. That means to receive him in our hearts and confess him as our Lord.

Frankly, the whole idea of sins being "atoned for" but not yet forgiven is idiotic. It is like saying to someone that I forgave you a long time ago, but you won't be forgiven until you receive it. Hello??

Proving people guilty before God's law is overwhelmingly hard because we must try it alone. The Holy Spirit will probably not come along with us. Why would he take anything away from the atoning work of Jesus on the cross?

The Holy Spirit may well show people where they are heading without Jesus. He will "convict the world regarding sin, and righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8-11 NASB).

But the sin here no longer refers to the law. The judgment will be targeted much deeper than that: at the unbelief and rebellion of the heart.

After the atoning sacrifice on Calvary, all people will be convicted of one sin and one sin only: rejecting the one whom the Father sent to be our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord.

*“For God so loved the world
that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him
shall not perish but have eternal life.*

*For God did not send his Son
into the world to condemn the world,
but to save the world through him.*

*Whoever believes in him
is not condemned,
but whoever does not believe
stands condemned already
because they have not believed in
the name of God’s one and only Son.”*

John 3:16-18

Epilogue

That car was my greatest treasure. Chevrolet Impala 1962, a real classic. Red chassis, white leather benches inside. That's how I remember it, anyway. I think I was no more than two or three years old.

But I do know I cried my heart out when the Chevy slipped into the street inlet and vanished near our home in Helsinki. The car had to be pretty small, too.

It's hard to face the realities of life when you're so young. Then again, Jesus warned us not to store up riches on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, thieves break in, and Impalas fall into pits. It would be much better to store up treasures in heaven, where everything is imperishable. But how can you gather riches in heaven?

Jesus gave us peculiar instructions. We should give up greed and self-interest, be willing to share with others, and always seek the kingdom of God first. We should let go of everything and give ourselves wholeheartedly to God.

That way, our life would be stored in heaven.

Clear and straightforward financial advice. But the longer you chew them over, the more challenging they become. The return expectations per se are great: Jesus told his followers about a hundred-fold blessing here and eternal life after this—if we dare to let Him lead our way.

That's the tricky part. You should let go. Sometimes, it feels like dropping your treasure straight into a pit and trying to rely on God's wisdom. If you could just make a tiny little protected investment... But no, you have to put everything on the line.

Then again, giving everything into God's hands is so liberating. I am no longer alone in the middle of all this. It's not just up to me anymore.

There is someone with me who wants to bless every single day of my life. He looks at me, loves what he sees, and promises to care for me and my loved ones.

Why wouldn't I let him?



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