

Reflections on God's Work of Salvation

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it...

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth...

For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (*John 1:1-18 NASB*)

When we attempt to describe God's saving work through Jesus Christ in words we do so on the one hand in the awareness of the limitations of our intellect and the constraints of our language which cannot adequately grasp and reflect the greatness of what God has done in sending us his Son. On the other hand, we do this out of gratitude for everything our creator and saviour has done for us, and that he enables us to comprehend the greatness of his love together with all those who follow him.

Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created. (*Revelation 4:11*)

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!" (*Revelation 5:11-13*)

From the beginning of creation, before our earth and immeasurable universe existed, God already knew the whole of what we call "history". From the very beginning God knew about the fall of man, that he would listen to the serpent (Satan) who deceived him, promising that he would become like God. This attitude of wanting to be like God caused the tragedy of humanity. Ever since, sin has determined and formed the history of man and will continue to do so until the end of time.

God knew what would happen. He knew that mankind would rebel, longing for "independence" and "self-

determination". Nevertheless he created man because he loves him. God planned from all eternity to lead man back to himself. This is the other power that influences history and although it is much less visible than the influence of sin, it is much stronger because "invisibly" it leads the world to the consummation of God's will. One day the truth will be evident for everybody, for some it will be their judgement, for others their salvation.

This power is not visible now but real nonetheless, just like a tiny mustard seed grows to a great plant thanks to its vital force or like a little leaven leavens all the flour (*Matthew 13:31-35*). Though invisible, it is not imperceptible because God has hidden it from the wise and intelligent and revealed it to infants (*Matthew 11:25-26*). It is visible for the humble and invisible for those who harden their hearts so that they do not recognize what God revealed about Himself in nature and in history.

And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

'You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.' " (*Matthew 13:11-15*)

History is laid out before us: the obvious tragedy of man caused by sin and the presence of God's love for man with its historical impact—a conflict which escorts mankind to the end. Sin and rebellion meet love and righteousness—a fight in which God wants to save man, the very creatures who had turned against Him. We want to follow the path of this struggle later. Here we just want to briefly call to mind the most important event of this struggle which found its dramatic climax at the fulfilment of times. God became man and dwelt among us. He came to his chosen people which he had delivered from slavery in Egypt. He made a covenant with them, took care of them, protected and taught them. Over a long period of time he prepared them so that their meeting with him at the end of the ages would be like a bride longing for the arrival of her bridegroom.

The voice of my beloved!
Behold, he comes,
leaping over the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Behold, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
looking through the lattice.

My beloved speaks and says to me:
"Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away,
for behold, the winter is past;
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree ripens its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away.
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the crannies of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely." (*Song of Solomon 2:8-14*)

Directly before his arrival he even sent a messenger to prepare them for his coming:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. (*John 1:6-7*)

This passage shows that God sent John the Baptist so that all might believe through him. Jesus himself mentions a similar longing in the parable about the wicked vine-growers.

And he began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the wine press and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this Scripture:

'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is marvellous in our eyes?'"

And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away. (*Mark 12:1-12*)

Despite all previous failed attempts he sends his only beloved son with the words, "They will respect my son." This is what God is like!

Although God knew what would be done to Jesus, he behaved in a way that is incomprehensible for us: he sent his Son. Simply because God is love! He cannot give, wish or want anything else but what is good! God gave himself because he could not give more. That is why he did everything so that people would honour and accept his only Son. He did it because it is best for everybody. However, things turned out differently:

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it...

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. (*John 1:5+9-11 NASB*)

Jesus also pointed out this painful possibility in his parable mentioned above: Woe to you if you kill the son because the vineyard will be taken away from you and you will perish...

Jesus' painful sigh, when he mourned over Jerusalem, expresses this, too:

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade round you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation." (*Luke 19:41-44*)

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her!
How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood

under her wings, and you would not have it! 35 Behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, you will not see Me until the time comes when you say, “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 13:34–35 NASB)

*How often I wanted what would have brought you freedom and salvation, **but you did not want it!***

Here the invitation to a wedding turns into grief. The bridegroom has been killed. We might think that God’s love and patience end here. No greater act of unrighteousness and wickedness could have ever been done in this world. Indeed! They killed the one who never did anything wrong, who came to serve in humility in order to lead us out of darkness, out of the shadow of death to eternal life!

On Golgotha the conflict between God and man reached its climax.

The short earthly life of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, bears the marks of the conflict that ran through the whole history of the world. It is the struggle between the creature that has turned away from God to focus on himself and the Creator who fights for his creatures. It is on the cross that sin and unrighteousness meet love and righteousness most clearly. The life of Jesus was the invitation, the cross was man’s response.

But what will God do next? What will become of the darkness which covered the whole earth like a mourning-veil at the crucifixion? [1]

The light that shines on the morning of the third day gives us the answer. Jesus is risen!

“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” (Luke 24:5b-6a)

This is God’s answer—God, through his love, has made the fruit of human wickedness, the cross, into an instrument of salvation.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:12–14 NASB)

In this way, Jesus’ obedient, self-giving life became the path to salvation leading through Golgotha. Everyone who calls him their Lord has to walk this path. We must take up the cross every day because we have been called to suffer with him and in this way to enter into glory. (Romans 8,17–18) His life should transform our lives and enable us to be prepared to meet him when he arrives.

The fruit of Jesus’ resurrection is the Church,

... which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:23)

The goal of salvation is not just the redemption of the individual, the establishment of a relationship between me and God. God does not want everyone to fight alone, left to themselves. **The fruit of salvation is the Church in which the love of God forms the redeemed through fellowship with one another and with Christ into one body. The Church is thus the visible community of those in whose lives God’s sanctifying work is visible.**

This is why the Church is a visible sign for the world, like a city set on a hill or a lamp on a lampstand (Matthew 5:13–16)

. The Church moves forward in history in a continuous struggle for sanctification, always prepared to be found without any spot or wrinkle when the Bridegroom arrives.

... as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (*Ephesians 5:25b-27*)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son." (*Revelation 21:1-7*)

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. (*Revelation 22:17*)

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Footnotes

1. Compare Mark 15:33 **And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.**

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