

A wooden cross stands on a rocky outcrop. The background features a range of mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is bright and clear.

RETURNING TO  
**Grace**

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— SAMPLE —

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# 1. Gospel for Goats

It was not like I didn't know what to say. After all, preparing a sermon for the Good Friday service was not supposed to be too difficult. Everyone in the congregation would be familiar with the theme, to say the least. 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?

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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.*

Obviously, 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 just 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?

**[ The sermon is in the ebook ]**

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

So, instead of asking for thoughts or words only, she had begun to pray for a full 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.”

## 2. Another Surprise

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

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

But the longer I kept on preaching the cross the more baffled and concerned I became. In many occasions, it felt almost like this most fundamental Christian truth had somehow turned to 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 which could

only be received by someone with the right state of heart. The unconditional love of God had become very much conditional.

But however drastic this change was, still 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 simple and 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?

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

Eventually I became curious enough to start digging 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. Fairly 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.

In the next two chapters, I will briefly share the theological findings I discovered.

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