

God's Way With Men

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Ever since the Reformation Christians have disagreed about the way in which God saves men. Catholics maintain that with God's assistance men can actively and meritoriously work out their salvation, that they can, in a sense, "earn" their eternal reward. Protestants, on the other hand, stress man's passivity and inability to perform any work that can merit eternal life. It is not the purpose of this paper to show who is right or who is wrong. Rather, we wish to examine Sacred Scripture in order to discover two things: first, what God has offered to men by way of salvation; and second, how God wants men to lay hold of this salvation. Specifically, we wish to know whether or not God has allocated men an active and contributing role in the working out of their salvation.

Adam

Creation was a free and unsolicited gift of God, the product of His desire to share His goodness with others. Of all the corporeal realities which God brought into being Adam stood at the summit. God placed the first man and woman in a garden where they lived in friendship with Him.

Because of his refusal to obey God's command about the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam lost this familiarity with God. Now death would cut short his life and the earth would resist his efforts to cultivate it. His wife would be subject to him and bring forth children in travail. But the story of Adam and Eve did not end on a note of total failure. Before they left the garden they heard God promise that in the sometime future a champion would be born who would undo the evil that the serpent had done to them. He would conquer the serpent and thereby restore to mankind the blessings which they had lost.

It is significant that after God created Adam He gave him certain commands. That meant that from the beginning men were required to acknowledge God as their superior. Genesis does not say whether or not God meant to reward them for their homage. It does say, how-

ever, that God warned them that He would punish them if they were disobedient, and that when they did disobey, He punished them. Their break with God had disastrous effects upon all their descendents. Their action inflicted deep wounds upon human nature. Worst of all, it rendered men incapable of surrendering themselves completely to God.

Noah/Abraham

As the Bible traversed the ages, it traced a path of divine predilection from Adam to Noah. In the figure of Noah, the Bible presents its first "salvation" story. In those days the earth was so full of man's iniquities that God repented of having made man at all. "Only on Noah did God look with favor" (Genesis 6:8). God determined to purify humanity by means of a Deluge. The Deluge came and went, and God spoke to Noah in almost the same words that He had formerly spoken to Adam. "Increase and multiply and fill the earth. All the beasts of the earth, and the winged things of the sky, and the creeping things of earth, are to go in fear and dread of you, and I give you dominion over the fishes of the sea" (Genesis 9:1-2).

Why did God "save" Noah? The Bible does not say. It says that Noah was a "close friend of God," a "man who was accepted as faultless" (Genesis 6:9). It says, moreover, that he did all that God asked him to do. But whether these things were the cause of the effect of his "election" is not known.

After Noah, the Bible follows the progeny of his son, Sem, for ten generations until it reaches Abraham, son of Thare. At Haran, God appeared to Abraham. "Abraham," He said, "Leave thy country behind thee, thy kinsfolk, and thy father's house, and come away into a land I will show thee. Then I will make a great people of thee . . . in thee all the races of the world shall find a blessing" (Genesis 12:1-3). This was the first utterance of that divine promise which was to figure so greatly in all salvation history.

Abraham went forth from Haran as the Lord had told him—the first of many acts of "faith" on his part. Later, God solemnized his promise by making a covenant. Through it, He pledged Himself to make Abraham the father of a mighty nation, to give him the whole land of Chanaan, and most important of all, to make Abraham and his race the people of His choice (Genesis 17:7).

This covenant between God and Abraham committed God to the fulfillment of the promise and it committed Abraham to the worship of God and to circumcision as a sign of the covenant. Abraham's glory, as St. Paul says, did not lie in being circumcised, but in his belief in the promise. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3). Abraham's "salvation," his possession of the promise, resulted from his faith, his acceptance of it.

Moses

The promise made to Abraham was renewed to Isaac and Jacob. Not many decades after that God appeared to Moses on Mount Horeb and appointed him to lead the sons of Israel out of Egypt. Amid awesome manifestations of divine power Moses accomplished his task and led the tribes out into the desert that lies between Egypt and Chanaan.

On the first day of the third month of the Exodus, they reached Mount Sinai. There, through the instrumentality of Moses, the tribes of Israel became one people, the people of Yahweh. There, out of a sense of gratitude and indebtedness to God for the wonders He had worked in their behalf, they pledged themselves to do His will. This pledge obligated them, first of all, to render divine worship to Yahweh alone (Dt. 6:4-5). Secondly, the Covenant bound them to be just and merciful toward their fellow Israelites, especially the poor, the widows and the orphans (Lev. 19:11-18). Besides these general mandates, a great many other rules, rites and observances were laid down which had the purpose of making the Covenant a reality which permeated the whole of life. They were designed to remind the nation that Yahweh was their God.

For the Hebrews, the Law was basically a response. It was the way in which they could interiorly and exteriorly acknowledge God's historical interventions on their behalf. In this it differed from the covenant made with Abraham. That covenant, with its *Promise*, was principally the embodiment of God's commitment to Israel; this one, with its *Law*, embodied Israel's commitment to God. This, however, was only a matter of emphasis for, as has already been seen, Abraham was obligated by the earlier covenant, and God obligated Himself in the later one, as is evident from the rewards He promised for its observance.

"If you walk in my statutes, and are careful to observe my commands, I will give rain for you in due season, the land shall yield its crops, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. . . . I will establish peace in the land . . . no sword shall pass through the land . . . five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase a myriad, so that your enemies shall fall by the sword before you. . . . You shall have so much of old stores to eat that you shall cast out the old to make way for the new." (Lev. 26:3-10)

David

David, the shepherd boy of Juda, was Israel's greatest king. His greatness resulted not so much from his personal qualities as a leader as from his intense consciousness of being "the Lord's anointed". He was acutely aware of the fact that the people over which he ruled were not his people, but God's. He lived in this awareness. And although his life was not without blemish, he exercised his office as a faithful servant of God.

Under David the unity which the people sought became a reality, and under his son, Solomon, who built the Temple, it became for a short while a still more impressive reality. But Solomon and his successors turned the good which God had given them into an evil. The autonomy, the freedom, the independence which they could have used to intensify their communal devotion to Yahweh became instead a source of spiritual ruin. They mistook the means for the end; they sought national glory and national power as goods in themselves rather than as means of enhancing the reign of God. And because they did this, God punished them and shattered the mighty edifice He had raised.

The Prophets

The role of the prophets can be seen in terms of both the promise made to Abraham and the Law given to Moses. As regards the promise, when Israel's history began to become a tale of disaster, with the land of milk and honey being turned into a waste and desolation, the prophets were raised up to assure the Israelites that their God was faithful, and that He was still with them and that He would infallibly honor His promise. Even more than this, they were given insights into the way in which the promise was to be fulfilled. A savior was to come, born of a virgin, born in Bethlehem;

the spirit of the Lord would rest upon him; he would be a king like David, a priest like Melchisedech, a prophet like Moses; he would suffer horrible torments and death itself, but by his sufferings he would become the father of a great posterity; he would then reign forever at the right hand of God; on the last day he would come on the clouds of heaven, invested with universal power and majesty and judgment.

The second role of the prophets—no less important—was to call the people to be true to the spirit of the Law. For a great many Israelites the Law had become a kind of fetish, the material observance of which guaranteed them God's blessings. It had become a dodge, a way of avoiding the very things it was originally designed to inculcate—whole-souled fidelity to God, and the practice of mercy and justice towards men. It was for this reason that the prophets railed against the empty sacrifices and formalistic prayers of their contemporaries (cf. *Isaias* 58:5-6).

The Wise Men

Israel's inspired contemplatives, those men who meditated long and hard on God's saving plan for the Jews, were particularly hard put to explain the existence of evil and suffering. Why did men suffer? Who or what was the cause of their suffering? At first, their answers were simple enough. If a man suffers, they said, it is because he is a sinner. "The sinner must feel the lash" (*Psalms* 31:10). But explanations such as these did not square with experience. It was as clear then as it is now that treacherous men prosper while the good are often laid low with continual trials. So they turned to another explanation. "Ah yes," they said, "perhaps the good man himself has not sinned, but his parents have, or his parent's parents, or the nation itself, and he is paying the price." This too was unsatisfying. It could not be proved false, but it could not be proved true either, and so the author of *Job* had the honesty and good sense to admit that he himself saw no answer to this problem. "I have spoken as fools speak, of things far beyond my ken" (*Job* 42:3).

Not until the closing centuries of Israel's history were new insights brought to bear on this age-old problem. Then, it began to be said that no matter what might happen to a man, being good

brought with it its own reward. The just man lived in the knowledge that he was trying to be true to God and true to himself, and for him this was enough (Ps. 73:26-28).

An even more significant development took place when the Second Book of Machabees and the Book of Wisdom spoke of a life of happiness beyond the grave.

"The souls of the just are in the hand of God: the torment of death shall not touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure was taken for misery, and their going away from us, for utter destruction: but they are in peace." (Wisdom 3:1-3)

"The just shall live forever more: and their reward is with the Lord, and the care of them with the Most High." (Wisdom 5:16)

This insight marked a significant advance in Israelite soteriological thought. It meant that for the first time their ideas of divine retribution were transcending the limits of this world. It was now seen that the just man whose life on earth was filled with tragedy might enjoy after death a life of friendship with God.

Old Testament Conclusions

We have just seen that the Book of Wisdom provided the Israelites with a more profound concept of God's offering to them than they had previously. Till then, they had conceived of Yahweh's rewards in terms of earthly blessings—both on the national and individual level.

Regarding man's role in obtaining salvation, the Hebrews were well aware that they could not force God to favor them. Whenever they were tempted to think that they could "use" God, the prophets thundered out against them. Again, in every decisive divine-human encounter recorded in the Old Testament, the initiative rested with God. Yahweh opened each new stage of salvation history; He acted, then man responded. Finally throughout the Old Testament God approached the many through the few, and usually, through one. He did not contact men as isolated individuals, but as members of a community, and He contacted the community through its leaders—its chiefs, kings, prophets, priests, etc. This was a constant feature of Israelite history.

But, did God require men to do something to profit by His promises? One gets the impression that the Promise first made to Abraham and later expanded upon to the prophets was completely

independent of human doing. God made it, and He meant to keep it, no matter what men might do. As Ezechiel said: "What the Lord promises, the Lord fulfills" (36:36).

Nevertheless, on another level—on the level of immediate temporal rewards or punishments for good or evil—there does appear to have been a relation between man's doing and God's doing. The Israelite conscience was convinced that the evils which they suffered were the direct result of their sins. And contrariwise, they saw their blessings in terms of a reward for being faithful to the Covenant. This was the way in which they interpreted the fluctuations in their history. And later, when they began to think about a personal salvation as well as a collective one, the same idea persisted. It was the man who kept the Law that would be saved. The evil man, on the other hand, would perish.

There is something dark and mysterious about all this, as indeed there had to be, for all of these things were but distant shadows of the full reality to come.

Christ, the Fulfillment

God worked his final saving action in Christ. "In old days, God spoke to our fathers in many ways, and by many means . . . now, in these times, He has spoken to us with a Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). Creation, the Promise, the Covenant, "election", and "salvation"—all of these Old Testament concepts find their fulfillment in Christ. All of them obtain their ultimate meaning from him.

How was God's saving work in Christ related to His earlier entrances into history? Christ was, first of all, the New Adam. Fathered as Adam had been by God Himself, he became the "first born" of a new race. "If then any man is in Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17). As Adam passed on corporeal, physical life to his descendents, Christ transmitted an eternal, spiritual life to his. Similarly, as Adam's disobedience was the cause of mankind's fall from grace, so Christ's obedience was the cause of man's return.

Secondly, Christ was the full and ultimate fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham. "All the promises of God find their 'Yes' in him" (2 Cor. 1:20). He was that longed-for descendent in whom it was said that the whole world would find a blessing. It was through

Christ that Abraham's physical fatherhood reached its ultimate spiritual realization. "We now bring you the good news that the promise made to our fathers, God has fulfilled to our children, in raising up Christ Jesus" (Acts 13:32).

Thirdly, Christ was the new Moses, he led men from slavery to freedom; like him, he was the instrument of a covenant which brought into being a people of God, a people not generated by the flesh, but reborn in the Holy Spirit. Like Moses, he imparted a law and instituted religious rites, but the law of Christ and his Sacraments were more than external means of acknowledging submission to God. They were internal, spiritual forces capable of transforming the soul. Like Moses, he was a prophet, a man on whom rested the spirit of God, a man entrusted with a divine message.

Finally, Christ was the son of David, the new king of the new kingdom. Even more profoundly than David, he was conscious of his obligation to execute God's will, to do the works of his Father. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn. 4:34). The enemy which Christ conquered was far more formidable than those which David overcame. Christ was sent to do battle with the Prince of darkness and the powers of this world. And Christ's victory, unlike David's was definitive. It ushered in a kingdom which would never end, never be shaken, never be overcome. Christ's reign would last forever.

The Saving Work of Christ

Christ's whole life was a redemptive mystery, a mystery which was symbolized, or better, sacramentalized in his own life. Paul saw this mystery as embodying two phases: one of dispossession or emptying and one of exaltation or glorification. Christ, though he was rich, though he was God Himself, became poor for our sakes. He emptied himself, assumed the status of a slave, took upon himself the weight of the Law, the weight of incessant labor, and finally the weight of the cross. He died, nailed upright between two thieves, abandoned by his followers, mocked and disdained by his enemies. He drank a full chalice of human misery, and by doing this, he merited his exaltation—his resurrection, ascension and glorification. He arose victorious, and his victory was a conquest for the whole human race. He was constituted Lord of the universe and

Head of his body, the Church. He became the instrument of eternal salvation for all men; his humanity, the channel through which the life of God passed into men.

Men are enabled to lay hold of the salvation offered to them in Jesus Christ through living faith. "By faith we have access to grace" (Rom. 5:1). Faith, for St. Paul, was more than simply an intellectual assent to the fact that the risen Christ was man's Savior. It was a commitment of the whole being, a total adherence to Christ. "The just man *lives* by faith" (Rom. 1:17). Such an acceptance of Christ called for a conversion, a placing of Christ rather than self at the center of one's life.

The ability to do this was itself a gift of God. "God has appointed to each one the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). Still, it was a gift which men were free to accept or reject. By accepting it, they became sons of God and temples of the Holy Spirit, being reborn in Christ through the Holy Spirit. By living out one's faith, by effectively renouncing the "flesh" and living in the "Spirit," a man could achieve an ever greater likeness to God. He could continually perfect his adopted sonship. He could become ever more completely transformed by the divine life which was within him. And most important of all, by his day-in day-out conquests of self, he could lay hold of an eternal reward. "Behold I am coming soon, bringing my *recompense*, to repay everyone for what he has done" (Apoc. 22-12).

Another means given to men which enabled them to die to self and live to Christ was the Sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist. Through the Sacraments, the life of the glorified Christ is communicated to men. Through Baptism, they become members of Christ's body, and through the Eucharist, they are nourished upon Christ so that the Spirit of Christ might possess them more and more.

New Testament Conclusions

From this cursory analysis of the New Testament teaching on the roles of God and men in effecting human salvation, we can see several general principles at work. We see, first of all, the continuation of certain patterns already noted in the Old Testament. Here again, God takes the initiative, and He works with the many through one particular individual. We see also that the whole fabric of God's final communication to men in Christ is worked out in a context of

freedom. God's offer is free, and so too is Christ's response and the response of his followers. Thus, this final relationship with God, like those which went before it, is not between forces or objects, but persons.

The principal response which God here wishes to evoke from men is faith. For the writers of both the Old and New Testaments, faith meant saying "yes" to God no matter what He might ask or assert. This "yes," once given, placed a man in a new world, a new order of reality. It simultaneously united him to God and to all others who have made the same commitment.

Thus, the New Testament, though it did bring into being something new, did not involve a radical break in God's ways with men. In sending His Son, the Father was still taking the initiative, still working with a multitude through an individual, and still offering a free gift which men could freely accept or reject. The difference between the two testaments is a matter of completeness or fullness. All of the earlier divine initiatives and human responses were but preparations for this ultimate and definitive initiative and response. It was this final action, and it alone, that contained eternal life for men. The saints of the Old Testament were saved by an implicit acceptance of Christ; the saints of the New Testament, by an explicit acceptance of him. "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

This being so, that is, since Christ saved Adam just as surely as he saved St. Paul, it seems that God's action in Jesus Christ has entered history on two distinct levels. On one level there is progress, the gradual development of God's saving plan from the fallen Adam to the risen Christ. On another level, a supra-temporal level, there is no such development or progress. On this level, the reality of Christ's grace was always present. As it says in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, all men drink of the same spiritual rock, "and that rock is Christ" (I Cor. 10:4).