

The mystery and the miracle of Grace

When a person becomes a Christian and is set free to respond to God

1 - Salvation through our Priest, King and Prophet.

We have seen that God has been faithful to us; it is his righteousness that has saved us. He has expressed this faithfulness to us in the person of Jesus Christ. In the history of Jesus Christ God has accomplished a full salvation for us.

He is the God Man who has come to us from heaven, as God has reached down to us to provide for us a Revelation of Himself through Christ, his incarnate Word. This One is at the same time, the Reconciler between us and God. In this priestly work Christ has, in His person bridged the gap between us and God.

Christ, in His earthly life, has also been for us the proper man who has offered to God a life of repentance for us, a proper confession of our sin because He did not contest the rightness of God's judgment upon us. His priestly work of offering himself for us has, in his death and resurrection been vindicated for Him; His justification has become ours in Him. Our justification before God is secured in this way.

He has also lived the proper faithful life that a man should before God. His faith has triumphed in the way that He has responded to God fully as we should of but could not. Consequently when we have faith in Him as the true man of faith, we find that He is the pioneer of our faith. We live by the "faith of the Son of God" [Galatians 2.20] who loved us and gave himself for us. He has, in his resurrection been enthroned as king and this human life that He has elevated we share in; He has become to us our sanctification. The resurrected life that He has becomes ours in Him.

2 - How does a man become a Christian?

How does a man become the subject of this event – when and how does it come to be applied to him? Because this is a mystery and a miracle. For the man is by his own situation and fallen nature now an enemy of God, he is not alive to God and it is impossible for him to have faith in God, to hope in Him let alone to love Him. How is it that a man can be set in place within a relationship to become the faithful partner of such a gracious God; a partner in the covenant of grace?

No man can go on a pilgrimage to find God, or reason himself to God. It is a given that the darkness of mind, and the estranged position of the man and woman who lives for themselves and their own life and soul in no way means they can find God.

Mark 10.24 has Jesus laying it down that it is hard to enter the kingdom of God and in fact, for the rich especially, although really for all men and women it is impossible. When the disciples as in astonishment, "then who can be saved?" Jesus answers in a general way, applicable to all men and women, "that with men it is impossible" but it is not so "with God".

He will have to find us. It is part of his faithfulness to us that just as He has provided for us in Jesus Christ to be saved, so He brings that salvation to our knowledge through the Spirit of Christ.

As God makes Jesus Christ a true prophet to/for us as well. Through the apostolic message, which speaks of the historic work that Jesus Christ has accomplished for us we find that there is an accompanying work of the Spirit to wake us up [awakening] and to make us alive [quickening] and to illuminate us. This new beginning of life is his baptism with the Holy Spirit. This is a judgment of God upon us

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and yet it is the judgment of a God who keeps us free within His judgment upon us. The possibility is not within the grasp of man, it is only within the possibility of God.

3 - The nature of the mystery.

Scripture helps us to understand the nature of the mystery of this miracle of what is involved with us when we are recipients of the judgment of God to set us free to become what we ought to be and do what we ought to do – to have faith in God. It helps us by way of a number of pictures.

[1] Changed persons implied by new garments

The first thing we must be sure of in understanding these pictures of the new garments is to see that in the ancient world clothes did not make the man; that is a modern understanding. An ancient person never wore clothes that were inappropriate to him – for in that way he would be claiming to be someone he wasn't and so would be socially deceptive. Whether we think of the poor man elevating himself by wearing clothes of the upper class; or by the intentional deceptive way in which a person who was wanting to pass themselves off as a less important person, and so to travel incognito, would "dress down" so as not to stand out as a normally conspicuous person of society.

Second, we must not think that the image of clothes merely means that something external has been draped over a man as he becomes a Christian. As if a thing external to his inner self has been thrown over him so that he appears from without to be something which he is not. Rather it is the reverse, as we shall see from the inner man spoken of below. It is that something radical has come about in the very changing of the person that there is a miraculous change that requires the new clothes to fit the man.

Matthew 22.1-14 - Not without a wedding garment

At the rejection of the king's invitation by those who were invited as his covenant people there is the command to go out into the highway's and invite to come in those who would have been dressed as the riff-raff, the poor, hungry and the destitute, both good and bad. They are provided with the marriage garment as a festive clothing fitted to their new status as they approach the marriage banquet laid out by the king. The garment is the essential part of the gift as they are invited.

It is no simple fault of etiquette that Jesus castigates here as the failure of the man without the garment who attempts to seat himself at the table. He is coming in his natural old self, with the old rags in which he was accustomed to live. The implication is profound, he cannot come in his old natural way to the king's table. This is a parable told to the Pharisees and chief priests [Matt 21.45] who understood themselves as able by their own standard life style to be "righteous" and so able to enter. What Jesus is teaching them is that the entry is a gift and the dress is indicative of a new man who is made new, and dressed as a gift worthy of the access granted to him.

Revelation 3.4-5; 6.11; 7.2 – White robes as official robes

Those elect, called of God who are seen gathered around the throne of God in worship are not dressed in any old clothes or accordingly how they would like to dress themselves. The whose garments are an official designation of their new being, and that they are empowered and able to take place in the activity of the worship of God in heaven. Their clothing speaks of who they are in the grace and call of God.

1 Thessalonians 5.8 and Ephesians 6.11-16 – The whole armour of God

This armour is something a Christian can take in the freedom and the power of who he is but it is not available to a man because of his own natural self. It comes with the miracle of being those who must put into effect a resistance in the evil day in which they find themselves. This is a position to occupy because the call of God has placed us in relation to evil powers that are His

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enemies and have now become ours. Formerly, they were our conquering enemies but now there is a new stance that may be taken toward them because of a new change that has been worked in us by the judgment and call of God. So there is a new dress to stand in which is appropriate to the new way of the conflict.

Colossians 3.9-14; Ephesians 4.22-24 – Putting off the old man; putting on the new man

We have seen the use of similes of garments, robes and armour; these signal an external statement of an inner change. Now we are directed to the metaphor that expresses the inner change itself. It is an exhortation to the Christian in any given moment to be putting off of an old man, which belonged to the former manner of life and to the putting on the new man. This new man is created according to God and after the image of in true righteousness and holiness. This last sees the image of God as found by God truly reflected back to Him in Christ Jesus. We are being made more and more to be conformed to that image.

Romans 7.22; 1 Peter 3.4 – The inner man, the hidden man of the heart

Just as the man of Psalm 119, there is in the miracle of the Christian an inner man who delights in the Law of God. While this man stands in need of strengthening every day [Ephesians 3.16] through the Spirit of God and while the [2 Cor 4.16] outer man is perishing constantly, the inner man is being renewed day by day. This “man of God” [2 Timothy 3.17] is a man fully equipped for every good work.

This man who is being described as putting on a wedding garment, the armour of God, the white robes means that he should grasp the opportunity to express himself as who he is. In every case the reference to the man is uppermost, and that he is radically changed in such a way as completely overshadows what he was before and is otherwise than through this miracle. He has become the bearer of a new name, which is appropriate to his new reality. It is so new that no one knows it except the man who receives it [Revelation 3.5,13.8, 17.8] but under which his name is indelibly entered into the book of life.

[2] The heart of the man is changed

Just as we saw the inability of the “self-righteous” Jew to enter to the wedding table, so we come across in Romans 2 some folks who are justified in the judgment.

In Romans 2 they stand as Gentiles [2.14] and in a remarkable way they do what is commended by the things of the Law [2.14]; without having the Law they are a law unto themselves. They show, and give evidence of the ‘work of the Law’ [not the actual Law] is written in their hearts. This is discernable because for they are acting out of who they are.

The contrast here is between a Jew who is one outwardly, in an external way, and one who is a Jew inwardly, in secret where only God in his truth knows him. The circumcision that counts is that of the heart, worked by the Spirit and not of the letter. That this doesn’t refer to Gentiles who have some access to these things by nature is clear from 3.9-22 where the whole world is seen as guilty and standing before God with no hope of being justified by works of the law.

What Paul is referring to the current Jewish community is Christians who have allowed themselves to be brought to conversion and change by the grace of the gospel emanating from the Jewish Messiah.

So Jeremiah 31.33f speaks of the day when God shall put his laws in their hearts. Jeremiah 32.38-41 speaks of giving them another heart that they may fear Him. Even clearer is Ezekiel 11.19-20 where He speaks of giving them a new heart and a new spirit. This is what is described in Romans 2. Paul is stating that in the messianic age there are such persons around – in Israel in only small numbers, among the Gentiles very large numbers. These folks have become different men and women, true Israelites. The matter underlying the Christian way is a new man, a different one from the old man.

[3] The new [second] birth; in contrast to natural birth is a birth “from above”

A new birth is a new beginning, yet it is worked on the man who has already had a birth through his father’s seed and has then come to birth “through a woman”

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[1 Cor]. It is a miracle and mystery which Nicodemus, a “master of Israel” cannot grasp [John 3.9ff]

Matthew 19.28 uses the word *παλιγγενεσία* to describe the total renewal of the world [“the new world” RSV] at the appearance of Jesus Christ. This word, is translated “regeneration” in Titus 3.5 as applied to those God has saved. “...but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal [*ἀνακαίνωσέω*] of the Holy Spirit.”

The natural procreation which comes about through the will of a father has its origin, likeness and characteristics in flesh, “what is born of flesh is flesh” [John 3.6]. Such a birth through “the will of man” [John 1.12] is overshadowed by the man becoming a Christian through a creative act in sharp contrast to the former birth. This second birth, this regeneration, is “an authority to become children of God” [John 1.12]. It is given by Jesus Christ and speaks of becoming what we ought to have always been but lost; authority to be faithful to God in response to His faithfulness to us; and to be such as those in whom He finds the reflection of his image.

In our own history, the active power God has used is the living and abiding Word of God in bringing us to be begotten again [*ἀναγεννημένοι*] as is developed in 1 Peter 1.22-25 where the seed which has brought us to this birth is an incorruptible one. That it is “living and abiding” means that it will not fade away, and so our siring is seen to be by that which abides forever. The contrast is that flesh is as grass and does not abide. This word is identified as that which was preached to us – it is the apostolic gospel. We are begotten by God through the word of truth [James 1.18] which from the day we first heard it bears fruit in us as it continues to grow and increase through the world as it does with us [Col.1-6].

Not as a child, but like a newborn child [1 Peter 2.2], a man comes to see the kingdom of God [John 3.3], receives it and enters it. Here he is born again, or born from above by direct divine fatherhood. He is begotten to a living hope and the sharing of an inheritance [1 Peter 1.3ff] understood as laid up for him in heaven already [Col.1.5]. For all our treasure is found in that man who is in the heavens [Col 3.1].

So we see that the Christian life begins with a change that cannot be understood, but cannot be stated too radically. That God works this in a person’s life is the Christian’s basis for being who he is and acting as he now can.

[4] The transition through dying and rising with Christ

The Christian man is one who has died, but who has been raised to a new life. Man died, but in doing so he has begun to live. This whole understanding of dying and rising with Christ which is developed powerfully in Paul’s apostolic teaching.

In Galatians 2.19ff Paul can speak of himself as “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live; but Christ who lives in me”. How can it be him no longer who is living? It is a crucifixion with Christ that is the death he means, and this crucifixion has gone on to the shared resurrection life of Jesus. And he now thinks of Jesus alive within himself; and that there is the centre of his life – “no longer I, but Christ...”. Paul can go on speaking about this continued living as bearing about this dying in his own body [2 Cor.4.10].

Paul understands that for all Christians they would not be what they are if they did not have this crucifixion, dying and death behind them; if this is not so then there is no future for them either. In 1 Corinthians 10.1-4 Paul has understood of the old Israel that they have been baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. He understands that they have been united powerfully with Moses by going through this powerful salvation event together. In Moses and Israel’s case it was done at the same time and in company with one another – and it bound their common union of participating in the saving work which God had done for them.

Now, in the case of Christ He has done this wonderful saving work for us all alone; fittingly so, for only He could and that He was deserted by those around Him is in the wisdom of God. Now, in the wonderful baptism of the Holy Spirit we shall find that we have been baptised into Christ, of which our baptism in water is simply our acknowledgement of this wonderful truth as we look to the community to baptise us. This is the powerful picture of Romans 6.2,6,8,11; Colossians 3.3; 2 Timothy 2.11.

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From this dying with Christ the Christian is to go forward to the resurrection and the “newness of life” [Romans 6.4]. From death they have passed to life [John 5.24, 1 John 3.14]. If the old were not passed away and have perished the new would not have come [2 Cor 5.17]. Going forward is the only option to this new man. The Christian man’s Christian life begins with this beginning. This is a divine change and that is why it can be described in these terms and images of new garment, new heart, new generation and birth.

This new beginning brings the possibility which is not at man’s disposal. It must first set him free to be free for God in a way which he was not previously so.

4 - The man set free for God by the Baptism in the Holy Spirit

There are two questions that have to be assessed in thinking about the man who becomes a Christian. One viewed from above as a work of God done there and then, for us and outside of us; the other as a work of God done here and now, for us and inside of us.

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[1] How does the work of Jesus Christ which took place in the past [there and then] come to be effective for all men and women, both forward and backwards in space and time?

When a man does things in his own life and then dies, what we find is that all that he has done is imprisoned in the time he lived and in his own experience; it is not available to us. His own history is separated from us by his death and we cannot appropriate it to ourselves now, just as even in his own life he could not always convey it to us except in response to him as he was alive; and even then, we might not have the experience as he did. Also, a man only comes once in time; he does not repeat.

Further, once a man dies, if he has a new history, it is not one we share or may even know of. He has passed into a setting where his own history in this life is transcended and outmoded by the new; what ever that is.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ makes clear who He is and that His history and all that He did in it. In Christ's resurrection then, His history in time was not superseded or outmoded. His history, what He did there and then was not past or transient; nor does He enter a new history which is different from what He did there and then. On the contrary, the resurrection makes all that He did, there and then, alive to us now because it is present to all times. What passed away with the resurrection was not the history of Jesus past actions, but the idea that it might be transient - his history is not imprisoned in time and space because it was not threatened by death like everyone else's life is. Jesus' history is accessible to all men and women. The resurrection makes it applicable now – for He ever lives.

[2] How can it happen that once in time specific men and women may experience the history of Jesus Christ and that it becomes for them [here and now], the renewing event?

The particular change which we have been discussing, that changes a person so that they are now free and able and willing to respond to God is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In this way the history which is manifest to all men in Jesus Christ's history is manifest to a particular man in his own history here and now. As a result he becomes a man who is open, seeing, comprehending [Colossians 1.6]. This man will have a witness inside himself that will tell him he is a child of God [Romans 8.15, Gal 4.6]. He will know that he is the brother of the Son of God, and a child of God.

He will come to himself, and become fully rational. What was done there and then in the history of Jesus Christ, becomes this man's here and now, and not only something done for him, but is now done in him. The power of this divine change in a person is the baptism in the Holy Spirit.