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The Three Stages of the Gospel*



Patrick Henry Reardon

LORD - SINCE IT SAYS IN THE BIBLE THAT A DAY WITH YOU IS LIKE A THOUSAND YEARS (AND VICE VERSA)....



SO... YOU THINK MAYBE I COULD HAVE A BUCK?



I FIGURE THAT MEANS THAT MAYBE A DOLLAR IS WORTH AROUND \$365,000, HUH?



PUT THAT ON TOMORROW'S PRAYER LIST.



REARDON

Although the theme engaged in this present gathering is "Law and Gospel," I sought the moderator's generous permission to arrange my own remarks in a different format. There are two reasons for this.

First, I was invited to participate in this conference precisely in order to provide a voice from the Christian East. If, however, this voice is to be authentic, it must speak in its own native modulations. The result would otherwise be a distortion. Now it happens that the classification of "Law and Gospel," which was introduced into Western theology chiefly through the *De Praecepto et Dispensatione* of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century, is not a common formula in the East. Indeed, I can think of no Eastern theologian at all who uses this Law/Gospel structure in any formal or systematic way. Consequently, were I to impose this schema on my own reflections, I would not be correctly representing the views of the Christian East. That is to say, mine would not be an Eastern Orthodox voice.

Second, Eastern Christians are especially fond of considering all theological matters under *three* heads. *Omne trinum perfectum* is a Latin expression, but it embodies an Eastern

*The *Three Stages of the Gospel* was originally presented at the March 2004 Symposium on Law and Gospel at Warrenville, Illinois. Much of the oral format has been retained in the published form.

emphasis. Eastern theology, whenever it can be, tends to be triadic, an obvious example being *The Triads* of Saint Gregory Palamas.

The reason for this is surely obvious. The very subject of theology is, after all, the Holy Trinity. All other parts of theology pertain in some way to Triadology. *Una et sola est theologia, id est contemplatio Dei*, wrote the Venerable Bede. That is to say, "the contemplation of God is the one and only theology," and the only true God is the Father, who begets the Son, and from whom proceeds the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, then, there are only three headings in the Eastern classification of theological subjects. These three headings are contained in the formula for Baptism, "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." This is also the structure of the Nicene Creed and the liturgical doxologies of the church.

For these reasons, I beg your indulgence today to speak of "The Three Stages of the Gospel." My division here is sequential, involving the stages of a progression, and all three stages have to do with membership in the church, which is the gospel's proper home. These three steps are (1) the proclamation of the gospel to those *outside* the church, (2) the preaching of the gospel to those *inside* the church, and (3) the fulfillment of the gospel in the church in glory.

I propose to present these stages of the gospel in two parts. First, I will give a general introduction to the schema itself. Second, I will apply this schema to an interpretation of Saint Paul's epistle to the Romans.

THE TRIADIC FORM OF THE GOSPEL

Let us begin then with a general introduction to this triadic treatment of the Christian gospel.

In stage one, the gospel is directed to those outside the church as the announcement of salvation and the summons to repentance. In this context the gospel is what the epistle to the Hebrews (6:1) calls "the word of the beginning," (*ho logos tês archês*). This is the gospel as *kerygma*, or announcement, and it deals with such matters as the "foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the

doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment" (6:1-2).

The goal of the gospel here is rebirth. The process initiated in this stage of the gospel is the catechumenate, and its sacramental fulfillment is baptism, "for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). This first stage of the gospel is fulfilled when the evangelized person believes and is baptized into the church.

In the gospel's second stage, it is directed to those inside the church as *paraklêsis*, or exhortation, the summons to "increase and abound in love to one another and to all" (1 Thessalonians 3:12), to "abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence" (2 Corinthians 8:7), "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12).

This second stage of the gospel pertains to *theologia*, the knowledge of God from inside the house of salvation, the repeated extension of the believer's finger to know the place of the nails. The sacramental fulfillment of this proclamation is the Holy Eucharist, in which "we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

The transition from the first stage of the gospel to its second stage was very marked among the early Christians, finding expression in several ways, one of the most important being the *disciplina arcani*. According to that discipline, the *theologia* of the church, was never to be taught outside the church. It was the assertion of that discipline that the deeper mysteries of the Christian faith, such as the mystery of the Holy Trinity and the sacraments themselves, could not profitably or be correctly considered except from the inside.

In its third stage, the gospel is directed to those who are passing into glory at the completion of the Christian life. The gospel's final and definitive proclamation is "Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). This is the gospel in its utter fullness, "for now we see in a mirror dimly,

but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). And inasmuch as sacraments involve signs and representations, there is no sacramental mode to this final proclamation of the gospel. In this third stage of the gospel proclamation, the church gathers, without the medium of symbols, to chant unto the Lamb, "You were slain and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

Within the Scriptures we find all three stages of the gospel exemplified, sometimes with respect to exactly the same theme or image. Let us take, for instance, the image of the Good Shepherd.

In the gospel of Luke, the image of the Good Shepherd pertains to the first stage of the gospel, the conversion and return of the sinner. Thus we read:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:4-7 ESV).

Here, the Good Shepherd goes after the one lost sheep until he finds it, and when he has found it, he brings it home through repentance. The home is the church. Such was the gospel that Ananias preached to Paul: "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:1 NKJV).

We may find the gospel's first stage as a prophetic hope expressed by the Psalmist: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul" (Psalm 22 [23]:1-2 NKJV). The waters here are the baptismal waters.

In the gospel of John, on the other hand, the theme of the Good Shepherd pertains to the gospel's second stage: the knowledge of God *within* the flock, where "I know my sheep, and am known by my own. . . . My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give them eternal life" (John 10:14, 27-28 NKJV). This recognition of the Shepherd's voice, calling each of his sheep by name (10:3), is the grace given to Mary Magdalene. Only when the Shepherd addresses her by her own name does she then recognize his voice (20:16).

This experience describes the life in the church where believers daily attend to the modulations of the Shepherd's call. It is the second fulfillment of the prophetic hope expressed by the Psalmist: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Psalms 22 [23]:5-6 NKJV). The cup here is the eucharistic cup.

In the book of Revelation, finally, the image of the Good Shepherd pertains to the third stage of the gospel, the realm of eternal glory. Here the Good Shepherd is portrayed as one of the flock: "for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to the living fountains of water" (Revelation 7:17 NKJV).

This is the final fulfillment of the hope prophetically expressed by the Psalmist: "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalms 22 [23]:6 NKJV). The house of the Lord here is the tabernacle in the heavens, made without hands.

THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

I suggest that this threefold consideration of the gospel is helpful in the interpretation of the epistle to the Romans. That is to say, some parts of Romans seem to be concerned with the Christian proclamation addressed to outsiders, while some parts treat of the life in Christ itself—life inside the church, and yet other parts refer to the coming realm of eternal glory. This triadic division is obvious in Romans if we attend to Paul's use of verbal tenses in that epistle. A clear

example of this occurs in Romans 5:1–2: “Therefore, since *we have been justified* by faith, *we have peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him *we have also obtained access* by faith into this grace in which *we stand*, and *we rejoice in hope* of the glory of God” (ESV). Here we perceive all three tenses of the gospel: past justification, present peace, future glory.

A few verses later Paul situated the “now” of the Christian life between a past event and a future event: “Since, therefore, *we have now been justified* by his blood, much more *shall we be saved* by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies *we were reconciled* to God by the death of his Son, much more, *now that we are reconciled*, *shall we be saved* by his life” (5:9–10 ESV). Here we have justification and reconciliation in the past, salvation in the future.

These combinations of *have been*, *are*, and *shall be* correspond to what I have called the triadic proclamation of the gospel. We may summarize it as follows: justification in the past, sanctification in the present, and salvation in the future.

This triadic structure of the gospel is indicated again in Romans 13:11: “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us *now* than when we first believed.” Here Paul describes the Christian life as standing between two events: our justification through faith and our salvation yet to come.

THE GOSPEL TO THOSE OUTSIDE

In examining each of these three stages of the gospel in detail, we may start with the gospel as a proclamation addressed to those still outside of Christ, outside of the church. To these the gospel is addressed as the invitation of divine grace, the offer of justification in Christ.

This offer of grace-filled justification means, of course, that fallen man is in need of such a thing. We may begin, then, with the question, “What is the plight of those who have not yet heard in faith the good news in Christ?” And we may summarize their situation in three words, “All have sinned” (Romans 3:23).

Paul develops this theme early in Romans, treating the

failure of the Gentiles in chapter one and that of the Jews in chapter two, concluding of both groups that “they are all under sin” (3:9). And because all have sinned, “there is no difference” between Jew and Gentile with respect to the need for redemption.

Paul adopts the first person singular to speak on behalf of the human race, but more especially on behalf of the Jew, who found that the Law was of no avail against the force of sin and death:

Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, You shall not covet. But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:7–15 ESV).

Although the use of the first person singular “I” in these verses represents the human experience generally considered, and the Jew more specifically, it would be wrong to assume that Paul is not speaking from personal experience. Very wrong, in my opinion. In the depths of his conscience, Paul knew what it was to offend God. He had experienced the dilemma described in these verses. He was well aware what it meant to be a great sinner, even while meticulously observing the smallest parts of the Mosaic Law (Philippians 3:6; Galatians 1:13–14).

Indeed, it was Paul's own strict adherence to the Law that had led him to the most serious sin of his life, the only personal sin on which he ever comments—namely, the persecution of Christians. In his conversion he had been made aware, in a way that he would never forget, that his endeavor to achieve righteousness by the observance of the law had led him into his worst sin. It was in that experience of his conversion that he discerned "another law in my members, working against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (Romans 7:23 NKJV).

That is to say, it was Paul's very zeal for the Law of God that had occasioned his worst offense against God. He had not been doing what he had intended to do (Romans 7:15); sin had taken over his activities. He had been acting as a slave of sin. Thus, in his conversion, Paul learned the experience common to all the children of Adam—the radical inability to find justification before God without the reconciling grace of Christ.

To those outside of Christ, then, the gospel is proclaimed as the one and only way to justification and reconciliation with God. And to what does the gospel lead? To "conversion": "Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness leads you to repentance?" (Romans 2:3–4, author's translation). This divine "kindness" (*to chrêston*), "leads" man (*agei*, but see the critical apparatus on this verse), to repentance (*eis metanoian*).

This conversion, in turn, brings a man to baptism and to the confession of faith made at the time of baptism. These subjects are treated in Romans 6.

First, with respect to the baptismal confession of faith, Paul writes, "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of doctrine to which you were committed" (6:17, author's translation). This "standard of doctrine" (*tupon didachês*) is clearly a credal formula, undoubtedly constructed

around the twin affirmations essential to the Christian faith—namely, "Abba, Father" and "Jesus is Lord." The faith of baptism is, then, a confessional and doctrinal faith.

Even at the time of Romans, this doctrinal confession has already taken on a definite shape, a *tupos*, to which Paul can refer without danger of being misunderstood. It is significant to note here Paul had never been to Rome and had no hand in the conversion of the Romans. Nonetheless, he can confidently presume that these Christians are familiar with a definite "standard of doctrine," a specific *tupos didachês*. Paul refers here to the teaching contained in the Tradition (*paradosis*) that he himself had received in conjunction with his own baptism (16:17; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). Paul presumes that these Roman Christians had received the same foundational doctrine, in an established form (*tupos*), which he himself had received.

Second, Paul speaks of baptism itself:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3–4 ESV).

Baptism introduces the believer into communion with Christ in his death and resurrection:

For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. . . . Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him (6:5–6, 8).

It is clear in these verses that baptism is portrayed chiefly in terms of union with Christ, even in our very bodies. He is the sole person who has overcome the reign of death, who

could not be held by the clutches of death. As soon as death grabbed hold of him, it knew that it had met more than its match. The sin that reigned "in death" was thus vanquished, the death of Christ atoning for the sins of the whole world. Thus, the death that he died, "He died to sin" (Romans 6:10; 2 Corinthians 5:21). His death, embraced in obedience to the Father's will, reversed the disobedience of Adam and redeemed, for God, all of Adam's children. By his death, the sacrificial Lamb of God took away the sins of the whole world.

At their baptism in the faith of Christ, the Christians at Rome were plunged under the water in sacramental imitation of Jesus' burial, and their emergence from that water symbolizes in mystery Christ's rising from the tomb. Baptism, therefore, is regarded by Paul as the normative and essential foundation for the life in Christ (Romans 6:4-5, 8; Colossians 2:15; Ephesians 2:5-6; 1 Peter 4:1).

Once again, it is instructive to observe that Paul expects all Christians to know this, even those who have never met him or heard him preach; "Do you not know?" he asks them. He presumes this doctrine to pertain to the common deposit of the Christian faith that he himself received from the inherited apostolic teaching. Indeed, we know from Hebrews and the Acts of the Apostles that such explicit teaching about the significance of baptism was part of the pre-baptismal catechesis in which new believers learned the meaning of what they were about to do (see Hebrews 6:1-2; Acts 19:1-5).

THE GOSPEL TO THOSE INSIDE THE CHURCH

Now that the believer has, through baptism, entered into this "newness of life," we may turn to the present tense of the gospel, or what has been called "the eschatological now." This "now" pertains to the life in Christ, the life within the church, the life in which believers have already been justified.

This sense of "now" dominates the epistle to the Romans. Paul uses the word "now" in Romans fourteen times, twice as many times as in 2 Corinthians, which is the next closest epistle in frequency. "But *now* the righteousness of God has been

manifested apart from the law," Paul writes in Romans 3:21, and a few verses later (verse 26): "It was to show his righteousness *at the present time*" (*en tō nun kairō*, italics author's). This latter expression appears again in 8:18 and 11:5.

The "now" of Romans is chronological and doctrinal, not just rhetorical, because a new era has dawned in Christ, foretold by the Law and the Prophets. It is the era of the gospel which replaces the dispensation of the Law.

And how is this new life in Christ, the "now" life, described? Much of Romans is given over to its description: "But *now* that you have been *set free from sin* and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get *leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life*" (6:22 ESV, italics author's). And again in the following chapter, "But *now* we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (7:6 ESV). Likewise another chapter later, "There is therefore *now* no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (8:1 ESV). Similarly, we read in 5:11, "More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have *now* received reconciliation."

What must the Christian do during this long period called "now"? He must, first of all, strive to stay out of sin. He must not return to the reign of death:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (6:11-14 ESV).

All of this is to say that it is extremely important that the believing Christian not betray God's justification of him. He

must not return to a life of sin. On the contrary, he is obliged to strive for holiness:

For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (6:19–23 ESV).

Paul insists that God's gift of grace is free only in the sense that it cannot be earned. It is not free in the sense of excusing Christians from their stern moral and ascetical obligations; duty, that is to say, pertains to grace every bit as much as it did to law. Man under grace has no fewer responsibilities than man under the law. (Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount suggests that he has vastly more.) Speaking of "obedience to righteousness" (6:16), Paul clearly agrees with James' teaching about "works."

As so often in his epistles, Paul devotes the latter part of Romans to some treatment of man's moral responsibilities. Thus, he begins chapter twelve with the word, "therefore." Commencing with this chapter, he enunciates the moral and ascetical inferences to be drawn from the dogmatic premises elaborated in the first eleven chapters (compare, e.g., Ephesians 4:1; Philippians 2:1). Although the believer has been delivered from the works of the Mosaic Law, "the curse of the Law," he has by no means been freed from the works of the gospel. As the Sermon on the Mount repeatedly asserts, the works of the gospel are far more demanding than the works of the law (see Matthew 5:17–22, 27–28, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44, *passim*).

The believer assumes responsibility for these works of the

gospel at baptism, and if he refuses to take that responsibility seriously, he runs the risk of defection from the faith and being cut off from Christ. Paul had just given a warning on this point near the end of chapter eleven: "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off" (verse 22).

In listing the moral responsibilities of the baptized Christian in chapter twelve, Paul begins with the duty of cultivating bodily holiness, because the body itself is the bearer of the Holy Spirit, who will in due course raise it from the dead (8:11): "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (12:2). Paul is reviewing here the plea that he earlier made for bodily holiness in 6:12–13, 19–20. This ascetical effort he now describes in the imagery of sacrifice (see Philippians 4:18; 1 Peter 2:5).

This ascetical effort, because it stands directly at variance with the standards, interests, and aspirations of the world, will also require an adversarial attitude toward the world. To the world the Christian must not "conform" (12:2). The Greek word indicating worldly conformity here is *suschēmātizesthe*, within which the attentive reader will discern the root word, *schema*. The world, that is to say, tends to "schematize" human beings by imposing an outward pattern on them.

The believer, however, is not to adopt the "schemes" of the world: one is not to be "conformed," but rather "transformed" (*metamorphousthe*), this verb indicating an inner change of form (*morphê*). Outward conformity is replaced by inner renewal.

This transformation comes from what Paul calls a "newness of mind," implying a radical alteration of both the content and the processes of thought. The thought-life of the Christian mind (*nous*), precisely because it is "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16), will bear less and less resemblance to the ideas of the world as the believer is transformed by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). Such is the life in Christ, the gospel's second stage, the gospel life within the church.

THE FINAL FULLNESS OF THE GOSPEL

The goal of the gospel, we all will agree, is to "save" (*sôzein*). Thus Paul writes early in Romans, "For I am not ashamed of the *gospel*, for it is the power of God for *salvation* [*eis sôtêrian*] to everyone who believes" (1:16 ESV).

One of the interesting characteristics of the epistle to the Romans, however, is that the vocabulary of "salvation" (*sôtêria*) tends to be placed in the future tense. Salvation in Romans is generally something to which Christians are still looking forward with hope.

In the epistle to the Romans the vocabulary of "salvation" pertains in a special way to the definitive victory over death. The theme of death is introduced, in fact, very early in Romans: "Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them" (1:32 ESV). Death is a major preoccupation of Romans, where the noun *thanatos* is found twenty-two times and the adjective *nekros* sixteen.

Beginning in chapter four, Paul begins his long argument that man's justification has to do with Christ's victory over death. That is to say, man is justified by the power of Christ's resurrection that is unleashed into this world by the gospel. Thus he writes:

of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who *gives life to the dead* and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (Romans 4:16–19).

Abraham, exemplifying salvific faith, believed in the God who could make fruitful his own "dead" flesh and the "dead" womb of Sarah (4:19; Genesis 17:15–21). He compares this to God's calling all of creation out of nothingness. This is the promise of the resurrection, as Paul will make clear at the end

of chapter four: "But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his [Abraham's] sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (verses 23–25).

This ascription of righteousness to faith pertains not only to Abraham but also to us his children, if we live by that same faith. Concretely, this means faith in the God who raises the dead, symbolized in the "dead" bodies of Abraham and Sarah. The God who raises Jesus from the dead is the same God who called all things from nothingness into being.

Paul's parallelism, "delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification," does not imply a distinction as though Paul were speaking of two different things. Our justification is identical with the removal of our transgressions. There is more, however, because the death and resurrection of Christ are two phases of the same mystery of redemption. Sin, removed by Christ's death on the cross, is not simply the cause of guilt: it is the cause of death, which entered this world through sin. Our full and ultimate righteousness, then, has to do with victory over death, which was effected by the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Paul thus proclaims that Christ was raised for our justification. Christian redemption does not consist solely in the payment of the price of our sins, but in the definitive victory over the forces of death and corruption. This will occur on the day when our mortal bodies are raised in glory, and that day is still in the future. The grace of the coming resurrection is introduced very early in Romans when Paul writes that there is "eternal life to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and incorruptibility" (2:7).

This incorruptibility (*aphtharsia*) is to be contrasted with the corruption of death, introduced into the world by sin (5:12). The proper translation of *aphtharsia*, in context, is "incorruptibility" rather than "immortality." Jerome understood this, translating the word into Latin as *incorruptio*. The translation of *aphtharsia* as "immortality" (as in the KJV, NIV, RSV, ESV, and many others) is misleading because immortality

suggests something immaterial (as when we speak of "the immortality of the soul"). But in this context, *aphtharsia* refers instead to the spiritual transformation of matter, of which the formal and defining example is the resurrected body of Christ. "Incorruptibility" is a property of the risen flesh of the Christian (1 Corinthians 15:42, 50, 53, 54). Introduced into human experience by the resurrection of Christ, *aphtharsia* reverses the power of death. The resurrection of the body is the final act in man's salvation and the great object of his hope.

Our mortality is the fall that we sinners inherit from Adam. If apart from Christ sin does reign, it "reigns in death" (5:21). By reason of Adam's fall, man without Christ is under the dominion of death and corruption, because "the reign of death operates only in the corruption of the flesh" (Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 47).

In the death and resurrection of Christ, however, are unleashed the energies of life and incorruption. This is the foundation of Paul's antithetical comparison of Christ and Adam in Romans 5.

Paul goes to Genesis 3 to explain what he calls "the reign of death." "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses. . . . If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:14, 17). In the Bible, death is neither natural nor merely biological, and certainly it is not neutral. Apart from Christ, death represents man's final separation from God, because "sin reigned in death." The corruption of death is sin incarnate and rendered visible. When this "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:56) has finally been vanquished, then may we most correctly speak of "salvation."

The sole person who has overcome the reign of death is Jesus Christ, who could not be held by the clutches of death. As soon as death grabbed hold of him, it knew that it had met more than its match. The sin that reigned "in death" was thus vanquished, the death of Christ atoning for the sins of the whole world. Thus the death that he died, "he died to

sin" (Romans 6:10; 2 Corinthians 5:21). His death, embraced in obedience to the Father's will, reversed the disobedience of Adam, and redeemed for God all of Adam's children. By his death the sacrificial Lamb of God took away the sins of the whole world. By his rising again, likewise, Jesus Christ conquered and brought to an end the reign of death. "Death no longer has dominion over him" (Romans 6:9).

Finally, our bodies will rise from the dead because they are the temples of the Holy Spirit: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (8:11). When we die, our souls leave our bodies and go to God. The Holy Spirit, however, does not leave our bodies. Even in their humiliation, decay, and dissolution, these bodies remain the abiding place of the Holy Spirit, who will raise them up on the last day.

It was in man's body, after all, that sin "reigned in death." Mortality was the essence of Adam's legacy to us, the very embodiment of his sin. Salvation is not complete, therefore, until the final resurrection. Several years earlier Paul had argued that same thesis in 1 Corinthians 15. He returns to it several times in Romans. The final object of the Christian hope, for Paul, is not even the soul's departure to be with God in heaven. It is, rather, what Paul calls "the redemption of our body" (8:23), this very body laid low by death, but from which the Holy Spirit refuses to depart.

The ultimate Christian victory, then, is victory over death. This is the reason that the vocabulary of "salvation" in Romans is found chiefly in the future tense. Thus we read, "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more *shall we be saved* [*sôthêsometha*] by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, *shall we be saved* [*sôthêsometha*] by his life" (5:9-10). Or again, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved [*sôthêsê*]" (10:9). Likewise, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord *will be saved* [*sôthêsetai*]"

(10:13). Again, in 11:26, "And in this way all Israel *will be saved* [sôthêsetai]."

It is significant that in the one place in Romans where Paul does speak of salvation in a tense other than the future, he does so with a qualification that serves to make my point. He says in Romans 8:24, "For in this hope *we were saved* [esôthêmen]. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."¹

The final proclamation of the gospel, then, is that described in Paul's earliest epistle: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:6 ESV).

Author

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Notes

1. It is unfortunate that this use of tenses in the epistle to the Romans is sometimes neglected, thus distorting the proper sense of the Sacred Text. For example, this neglect is surely to be blamed for the misleading translation of Romans 11:11 in several versions, beginning with the King James Bible. For example, the English Standard Version reads, "So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation *has come* to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous." The words "has come" have been inserted into the text by the translators, and the insertion, if unwarranted by the demands of English, is not justified by Paul's usage elsewhere in Romans. In the Greek text (*hê sôtêria tois ethnesin*) there is no explicit verb, and if the sense requires that we insert a verb for clarity, we should insert the tense that corresponds to the usage elsewhere in Romans. Consequently, the correct sense of the expression seems to be something like "salvation is available to the Gentiles" or "the Gentiles have become the heirs of salvation."

