



# Life by Drowning

Enlightenment through Law and Gospel

Bo Giertz

This pamphlet is a gift from:

**THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF ENGLAND**

28 Huntingdon Road  
Cambridge  
CB3 0HH  
[www.lutheran.co.uk](http://www.lutheran.co.uk)

**LUTHERAN HERITAGE FOUNDATION**

51474 Romeo Plank  
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Excerpt from Bo Giertz, *Kyrkofromhet* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, 1939). Translated and annotated by Eric R. Andræ from pages 15–40 of the 7th edition (1962). Published by permission.

*Translator's note:*

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**Printed by Target Print Ltd.  
Cottenham, Cambridgeshire  
2008**

How does man find his way to God?

First of all, we must understand that it is not man who finds the way to God by eventually working his way to Him. No, rather, it is God who finds His way to man's heart.

God begins early, already in baptism. We can never think highly enough of our baptism. In baptism I became a Christian, because in that moment I was met by God's election. In the same way that God once chose Israel, in the same way that he again and again intervened in its history at definitive points with a decisive message, in the same way that He came down to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to go to the lost and once again establish the covenant with them - in the same way God has also in baptism broken into my life's story, given me a share in the life of Christ, made a covenant with me, and said that He has chosen me for participation in His kingdom.

When Lennart Torstenson<sup>1</sup> was on his death bed, he spoke of his baptism "and reminded himself of the promise and covenant made with God in baptism, and that he thus wants to bear the cross of Christ in the midst of this difficult sickness with patience as a faithful witness and a battling soldier under the banner of Christ". He knew of what he spoke. During years of military duty in the midst of a horribly painful sickness he had learned what it is to trust in one's baptism and know oneself to be elected by God to be "a faithful witness and a battling soldier under the banner of Christ".

That baptism truly can be the foundation for a person's deepest personal faith—this is rarely seen when one looks out into the world. Rather, the vast majority break their baptismal covenant. It can occur through wilful defiance of God's commandments or disregard of God himself, which most clearly manifests itself in that one never prays and never seeks His church. More or less intentionally, man has for his part ended the covenant with God. But he is not capable of destroying it. I certainly cannot nullify God's promises; I cannot wipe out the heading which he has written over my life. It follows me as an accusation—but also as a promise. I have an inheritance, which, it is true, I can scorn, but which nonetheless is preserved with God and is waiting for me. Even more so: I have a home. I can leave this home and become a prodigal son. But I cannot wipe out the fact that I have a home and a Father

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<sup>1</sup>Count Lennart Torstenson (1603–1651) was a Swedish soldier and military engineer.

who has not forgotten His child and never ceases to yearn for it. I also cannot prevent Him from seeking me and sending offers to me.

And this is exactly what God does. So this is how “man finds the way to God”.

## The Call

Just as sure as it is that countless baptised people forget their God, it is just as sure that God does not forget a single one of them.<sup>2</sup> For people, God’s great call, which establishes the entrance gate to their lives, can be viewed as something completely insignificant. For God it is—just as completely—something eternally important, a manifesto from which He never turns, a promise which sets its mark on a man, even in his deepest humiliation. And so something strange happens: A person thinks that God has disappeared into an unknown distance, while he, day after day, actually lives from his Father’s gifts and day after day is the subject of His merciful care and His fatherly love’s constantly repeated attempts to find a way to his heart. God’s nearness and His constantly repeated call are perhaps only felt by man himself as weak breaths of wind out of the great Unknown. These breaths of wind nonetheless cause a strange tremble in his soul. This tremble is at one and the same time a feeling of longing and pain that his existence must be something greater, life more meaningful, and heaven higher, than it is for him at the present. Often God avails himself of nature, of the sermon of the boundless hills or the summer night’s beauty. His call can also reach me through the conscience or a friend’s example. But all of this is only the preparatory work: God’s wind has slowly and unnoticeably begun to blow through the

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<sup>2</sup>It is helpful to note that Giertz writes originally to a Swedish audience. At that time, even more so than today, almost all Swedes were members of the Church of Sweden, a Lutheran state church. As such, they were indeed baptised and confirmed, but were becoming increasingly secularised and distant from the Church. As such, it was, and still is, very common for the baptised Swede to fall away from the faith of baptism, thus necessitating a later experience of conversion or God’s call, and a reintroduction of a faithful, pious church life. Giertz himself, baptised as an infant but later an avowed atheist, experienced such a call from God during his student years at Uppsala. However, the Order of Grace and its call retains its pertinence for others, as such an experience is also a daily necessity for any Christian, which the Small Catechism makes clear in its confession of Holy Baptism. (Small Catechism IV).

soul. God's call does not become a truly personal appeal until I hear the message from God himself, the clear call to His kingdom as it comes through the Word, in proclamation, this herald's shout of God, which places me before a tremendous invitation and a decision of eternal importance. This call of God, which long ago has gone out to me, has now—perhaps suddenly and surprisingly—become personally applicable. I understand that God lives, that Christianity is something that has to do with me, and that life is both bigger and more wonderful than I had ever imagined. When the great perspective of faith opens before one's eyes, it usually means a uncommonly uplifting experience of peace or exultation and strength. Our forefathers had a special name for this feeling (or movement of grace, as they better said): the calling grace. It is this which, in this situation, can make it so easy to say one's "Yes" to God, especially if one is young or has always lived an upright life, more or less untouched by burdens or grave lapses. Even if the soul's big "Yes" to God's call does not entail a sharp break with one's past, it usually means an inner revolution, an unforgettable experience of the reality of God. Even months later, there can still be a new light over one's life. Old sins, which one long ago battled against to no avail, have receded; temptations have lost their former power; and it can seem as if everything has become new. Man, who has perhaps heard that one should convert, believes that he already is converted. Perhaps he even gives witness thereof.

Nonetheless, so often everything comes to nothing. The "conversion" lasted a few months or half a year. The whole thing became an isolated experience of the reality of God, great and wonderful, as long as it lasted, but without results for the future. What was the reason?

Here one can with benefit listen to the old *Seelsorgers*<sup>3</sup>, who knew in and out the heart's many evasions and wrong turns and difficulties. They say to us: When a person is called, he shall, above all, make disciplined use of God's Word and pray.

They are right. If the living God has entered into a relationship with me and allowed me to understand that He exists, it is because He desires that I shall enter anew that covenant which He has already established with me. But the same baptism, which entails His call and His royal word that I may be his child, also entails my consecration to membership in His Church.

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<sup>3</sup>*Själasörjare*: literally, one who attends to the soul.

This means that I am engrafted as a member of the living organism in which the forces of eternal life pulsate. It is now for me to open myself to these forces, to allow them freely to flow into my heart in order to do their work. Christ's Church awaits with open doors. She does not suspiciously ask if I am worthy or ready, and she does not give an entrance exam on the articles of faith. Rather, the Church offers to me, at God's command, all the riches of her inheritance and the entirety and warmth of life in the fellowship of the Body of Christ. First and foremost she offers to me the Word. God has revealed everything that I need to know. I cannot and may not demand that he shall reveal all of this anew for me privately. I do not need to wait for events and experiences or clarity. God invites me to come in and listen, to dig deeply into the Word's treasures, to hear the proclamation of the Church and to read personally the Bible. God also offers me a share in that prayer-life which, for centuries, He has fostered in his Church. I cannot and may not demand that the high art of prayer will fall down upon my head as a ripe fruit. At God's call, I may enter into the praying Church, participate in the confession and praise of the divine service; I may begin to pray in my own chamber and have the right to continue in the trust that God will hear me, no matter how little I feel and how awkwardly I fumble with the words. It is not dependent upon the skill, but upon faithfulness.

If one errs here, then the call is wasted. And it is precisely here that one often errs. Sometimes one thinks that precisely this strong uplifting feeling, which usually follows the great realization that God is calling me, is the same as Christianity and the Christian life. And so one lives from one's feelings, perhaps one even counts it as meritorious that one now has a religiosity of "experiences". But since it is so great and important with the "experience", one only prays when one feels an inner movement to do so. Once in while one reads one's Bible, but stops at certain favourite passages and waits for the dear feelings to come once again during the reading. One tries to go to church in the hope of once again being touched and once again experiencing one's more or less blessed sensations.

All of this is more "enjoyment" of God than it is true fear of God. It will not last in the long run. The feelings cease. One has no new experiences to register. Perhaps one stays a while as a dissatisfied one-horse cart within Christianity's boundaries. At first one feels disappointed, then angry and

finally utterly sad at it all. Thus one has come just as far away from God as one was before, often a bit farther. One has become bitter. One is finished with Christianity. “It is all only fantasy and feelings,” one says. “I have tried.” The truth is that one has not tried. It is God who has tried. But the called man has never dared to try in earnest. He has considered God as a possibility for happiness and an increase in the account of life’s enjoyment, but he has never wanted to walk the way that He has directed for him.

When God allowed man to sense the calling grace, it was not His intention to make him a fastidious specialist on blessed feelings. Instead, it was given as a temporary help in order to overcome what our forefathers called the first obstacle to salvation.

The first obstacle to salvation consists of man’s natural aversion to prayer and the Word. It is salutary to read the old teachers and see how well they knew this obstacle. “Antipathy toward God’s Word” and lethargy in prayer are no new sicknesses. They have in all times been inborn in man. The one who thinks that it is difficult to pray and difficult to gain anything from Bible reading can comfort himself with the fact that such difficulties always have been present, but always have been able to be overcome. Every man of prayer and every Bible reader stands as living proof of this.

Through the calling grace man receives help to begin praying and reading the Bible. For a time the natural aversion is exchanged for an inner impulse. But here it is important to listen to the old *Seelsorgers* and truly conscientiously make use of the Word and prayer, so that I develop steadfast and sound habits regarding my daily devotional life and my church attendance: because when the feelings fail, it is only the habits and the will which will help me further. Therefore the classic advice to a called person is: Make sure that you make your election steadfast! This means: Make sure that you, completely regardless of all feelings, hold fast to prayer, Bible, and Divine Service. Do all of this in the certain intention of obeying God and of doing his will, as you know it. Hold the course steady, even if it costs something.

If man makes up his mind to do this and stands firm, then he has said “yes” to God in all seriousness. He has made right use of his call and become a disciple of Jesus. As soon man has come to this point, he should also make regular use of Holy Communion, because Communion is not the reward that a person receives when he has made it through the narrow gate, but rather

Communion is now, as that night when the Lord Jesus was betrayed, a help which the Master gives to his sinful disciples on their long and difficult road toward a true self-knowledge and a true faith. One is a disciple as soon as one begins to learn and receives one's Master's Word, whether it is in order to be converted or to be retained in the faith. In other words, even that man who has not yet come to the true faith is a true disciple, as long as he habitually uses God's Word and prays in honest desire that God will accomplish all that He wishes to accomplish in him. Faith is not for everyone; in a sense, it is not for anyone. In other words, one cannot take hold of it by oneself. But one can take hold of prayer. One can take hold of God's Word and read it. One can go to church in order to worship God and find guidance from the proclamation. The one who does this is a disciple of Jesus—and Communion is instituted precisely for the disciples of Jesus. It is one of the means through which Christ helps a man to faith. Without Christ's help no one will reach the narrow gate, much less get through it.

So, the call has gone out long before man comprehended it. It has worked on his heart long before he was aware of it. The sun shone, even when the soul lived in the dungeons of mammon and stressful haste. When the dungeon doors were finally blasted open and God's sunlight flooded in with dazzling brilliance, perhaps man thought that he experienced the beginning of a new day, and this experience became life's greatest occurrence for him. And yet, the experience was not the greatest, but rather the infinitely greatest was the sun itself, that which shone just as clearly long before man saw it. The great experience of the call, with its joy and strength, has in and of itself no decisive meaning. Some people need this help and receive it from God. Others do not need it. Regardless, the light finds its way to them. God does not require that anyone should be able to say when the sun first shone on his soul. It is enough that it shines. The attempt to try to divide people into "converted" and "unconverted", according to some pronounced experience of the call, is to turn the whole thing on its head. There are people whom God never needs to set in motion through the spiritual landslide which the calling grace can entail. There are people for whom everything has come naturally since childhood. They have always lived in God's sunlight. They have prayed as long as they can remember; they have always been in the habit of God's Word and always wanted to walk in the ways of God. Or the call has



come gradually, without any possibility of marking the precise day or hour. Such people need not for a second concern themselves regarding the inability to point to some specifically pronounced sensation of the calling grace or some exact moment when they said “Yes” to God. These experiences in and of themselves do not mean anything at all. Rather, it means a great deal if man makes faithful use of the means of grace in an honest desire that God may accomplish His work with him. Likewise, therefore, no one should delay their decision in anticipation of receiving a stronger experience of God’s calling grace. The call has already gone out in baptism. The call letter lies there at home in the visible form of your confirmation Bible. The soul can already today say its thankful “Yes” to God and enter his Church in order to go the way of the Word and prayer to Him.

On the other hand: Whatever great experiences I may have had to this point, they are no guarantees that my standing before God has changed. The only thing one can say about them with absolute certainty is that they bring with them increased responsibility. God has called majestically and powerfully, because He wants something. If what He wants has then happened—well, that depends on the daily faithfulness, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. No man shall therefore base his certainty of being a Christian on that which he once experienced. It is often a sign of spiritual shallowness when people again and again talk about how they at one time “came to faith”. What they are describing is most often nothing other than those events and experiences through which God called them, that is, the very beginnings of that work which God wants to perform in them. The one who, after his call, truly has let himself be moved further along on God’s way, must have discovered that it was not as complete with his conversion as he once thought. He must also have tested the truth of the words which Jesus once aimed at a disciple at the time of his call: “You will see greater things than these.” Therefore a true Christian usually does not speak much about his first encounter with God.<sup>4</sup> He knows that it is nothing upon which to build. If the work has not moved further along, then the call has been wasted, just as wasted as when a man, after a time of great emotion, sinks back anew to utter apathy.

A wasted call is always a serious matter. God can call anew. But one should not imagine that God is some sort of power of nature, an immovable

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<sup>4</sup>That is, his first encounter after baptism. See footnote 2.

reservoir of grace from which, at a future time suitable to me, I can get for myself that quantity of forgiveness that I do not want to receive today. God is the living God. He deals with us people, He intervenes, calls and commands. Every human soul has its hidden history with God, its own drama. This drama can come to a close, when man least expects it. No one knows when the last call will be given. It seems as if for every time man rejects the call, it will get harder and harder for him to make up his mind. He becomes spiritually hard of hearing and eventually totally deaf. He does not notice it himself. But if there is anyone near to him who feels an ounce of responsibility for his eternal fate, then he can be seized by the most horrible feeling which can ever seize the heart before a fellow man: Here it is already frozen solid, here God Himself has emptied His last possibilities. Therefore the word of advice which was already spoken in the ancient church and then confirmed by the experience of millennia is valid with penetrating seriousness: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts!”(Heb. 3:7)

## **Enlightenment through the Law**

A person has completely changed.

Before, he was perhaps totally indifferent toward God or perhaps even downright opposed to all that faith entails. Either way, God was of no consequence or reality for him. But now God’s call has reached him. He has met the alternative. Now he knows that he wants to be a Christian.

In this situation man often thinks that everything is decided between him and God. He has, after all, honestly “made his decision for God”; he has admitted that there were things in his life that were not as they should have been; he can pray anew; he participates in the life of worship; maybe he has become active in some Christian group, and has for the first time in a long time gone to Communion. He feels happy; life is immeasurably fuller than before. Then he very well must be a Christian, right?

Actually, he has just come in on that way that *can* lead him forward to a true Christianity. The first act of the drama—the call—happily has been surmounted. The first obstacle to salvation has now been removed. Now God can really begin to work. Now comes the second act: the enlightenment, which is perhaps the most difficult part on the way to God.

It is called the enlightenment because man now first slowly begins to understand what salvation in Christ actually entails. Otherwise, if one asks him, for example, about the atonement, he has very little to say or only memorised answers. That which is really greatest and most meaningful, that upon which all his interest focuses, is this: God has become a reality for him. His faith has its natural foundation in the first article regarding God as the Creator. But the Christian faith is much richer than this. And man will be enlightened regarding this, as he allows God to speak.

The enlightenment consists of two parts. In the first place it occurs through the law. The law teaches man how he should be and how he actually is. This is something he never before really understood, and never can understand, as long as he remains outside of the reach of the Word and only compares himself with people and their demands. But it occurs also through the gospel, which allows a new light to be cast upon the Saviour's work, which man before had perhaps assented to with the mouth but never truly understood with the heart.

It can be perceived as a bit ridiculous, when one says that the enlightenment first occurs through the law and then through the gospel. Of course, one may not understand it in such a manner as if the one ended on a precise day, after which the other begins. Rather, these are interwoven. Nevertheless, also here the experience of the old teachers agrees very well with that which again and again is verified among highly modern people. It is actually true that the one who has recently taken the decisive step usually has a pronounced moralistic and legalistic view of Christianity. It is as though he could only accept God's commands and requirements. He has much more interest in what *we* should do for God than in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. In his Bible, he first and foremost marks the simple, wise everyday rules. He understands the letter to the Romans the best when he has arrived at the 12th chapter, where the good apostle begins his exhortation for everyday life. He wants to hear sermons with the tone of steel and frank demands. He wants bold calls to battle against evil and denial. He wants to go out and change the whole world. He prefers to sing most of all, "Arise, Christian, arise to battle and struggle" and "Come now again to battle for God. . ." <sup>5</sup> He also fights with resolve against sin in his own life.

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<sup>5</sup>Quotations from two Swedish hymns.

In the beginning this struggle is often crowned with great success. As long as the calling grace lasts, it is easy to achieve one victory after another. Of course, this usually applies to simple, outward things. The decided one cleans up his language, has a new purity in his thoughts. He reconciles with old enemies and makes up for past wrongs. He handles his work in a new way and says a clear “No!” to questionable pleasures. Not least among boys can this initial time of enthusiasm be something of the most beautiful one can behold. It is a battle-happy, morally upright, and victorious Christianity. It can have its risks. The battle-joy can turn into an attitude of judgment. Especially if, as a result of false doctrine, the person thinks that this happy and active faith is the same as complete and whole Christianity, then he is inclined to view everything else as illusion and hypocrisy and easily becomes stuck in self-security and spiritual arrogance. But rightly appropriated, this time is as much a wholesome as it is a necessary discipline from God’s own hand.

At this time God slowly breaks down the second obstacle to salvation: the love of sin. There are improvements in man’s life that are rather obvious, rather tangible. To the same extent that one immerses oneself in one’s Bible, one receives fresh light onto new areas of one’s everyday life, and begins to be careful regarding many things where before one had looked the other way. The Word awakens repentance. True repentance consists, according to the catechism’s striking description, of three things: that we from the heart confess our sins, sorrow over them, and desire to be freed of them.

The first is to *confess* them. It can take quite a while before God gets me to confess a certain, specific sin. For the longest time I seek to excuse it or hide it behind the back of others. But in the end, this cannot continue. I must give in to conscience and the Word. If I refuse to do this, my whole spiritual life withers away. Here it is very important to be alert and honest in one’s Bible reading.

The second is to have *sorrow* over sin. It will not do to come with a courteous excuse before Our Lord. Repentance is always a real sorrow because of having gone against God. Meanwhile, it is important to remember that this sorrow over sin is very different with different people. It will only lead to artificiality and dishonesty if one tries to force a certain measure of sorrow. Likewise, one should also be very careful of the type of spiritual guide

that tests the authenticity of the repentance according to the measure of emotional agitation or even the tears which a person can successfully present. It is not at all certain that one will be converted because one has successfully cried rivers in the battle. The inclination to lament one's sin can, in addition, become a dangerous form of spiritual boasting. One coquets with one's wretchedness instead of resolutely fighting against it.

The surest sight of a sincere repentance is never the sorrow over sin but rather my *desire to be freed* from it. A repentant person not only avoids the sin itself but also that which our forefathers, in their striking language, called "sin-opportunities", i.e., everything which can become a temptation at those points where I know, from experience, that I have my weaknesses: certain acquaintances, certain reading matter, certain leisure activities or jobs. Here one should not come with talk that one has missionary responsibility and must be out among the people. This is because one cannot evangelise in this kind of situation without having that faith which overcomes the world—and that faith one does not have yet.

If it now usually occurs that man, in the eyes of those around him, actually becomes better, more honest, and more willing to serve, he does not become this in his own eyes. Rather, during his sincere attempts to become completely free from sin he makes the humbling discovery that he is actually much worse off than he ever imagined.

It goes well enough with the tangible outer sins. Those I can, at least to some extent, free myself from. But behind them I discover something else, which I am unable to get rid of, and this is what our forefathers called the inherent sinful depravity and corruption, which is firmly rooted to my own nature

I want to be clean, absolutely pure, but I discover that there is an unclean spirit in my innermost being, which mocks me and tortures me and which I am unable to drive out. In my life's most solemn moments, even in the church itself, he can bring forth the most repulsive filthy rags out of his dirty supply and throw them in among my thoughts. He frustrates all my efforts when I want to chase him away. He is a part of my own being; that is the awful truth.

Or maybe my besetting sin is another. I want to become completely true and honest—and I find in my being a gruesome power, which makes

me completely dishonest and false. In all situations, it drives me to present myself just a shade better than I am. I even make my confession of sins either deeper and “more Christian” or more careful and more lenient than it should have been.

Or I want to be totally unselfish and loving. After all, it is not I who shall live any longer, but rather Christ shall live in me. But I find that I am actually completely steeped in selfishness and pride. If I have done something good in secret, I still sneak about and hope that it nonetheless, in some way, will become known and discussed. Perhaps one day I receive news that some relative is dying, and in the middle of the sorrow I think of checking and working out how much I might inherit. Pride follows me all the way to the prayer chamber. I appraise my own prayer; perhaps I admire myself for my warmth or for my fitting, humble, and beautiful words before Our Lord!

To all this can also be added a new inertia in prayer and a new attack of temptations, which I thought had long ago been overcome. The initial joy has been entirely lost. I feel just as dry and reluctant and worldly as ever. If I am honest with myself, I would have to admit that I would often rather read the newspaper than the Bible and rather spend an hour in empty talk with an indifferent person than a quarter of an hour in prayer to God.

In this situation man begins to understand the whole terrible truth of Romans 7: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. . . . For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

Now there is a serious crisis in man’s life of faith. It will now take real self-mastery in order to read the Bible. After all, one seems only to find new proof that one is not worthy to be a Christian. One is almost ashamed to pray to God. One has asked for forgiveness and strength for victory so many times that one can hardly imagine oneself capable of doing it again. At the same time, the Tempter sows a hidden resentment against God because He does not help me to victory, even though I want to live the straight and narrow. In

the soul there sprouts the beginning of a mistrust of God, a murmuring doubt that He truly exists and wants to intervene in a person's life.

At this very point many seeking people have given up. Usually, first one stays away from the Lord's Table—if one ever was a faithful guest to begin with—and then there is carelessness and neglect regarding one's Bible reading and prayer life. Then, when the situation has been thus undermined, the soul's enemy sets a trap, and before one even realises how it has happened, one has become entangled in manifest sin, e.g., in the sexual realm. In this way one has landed in comprehensive darkness, and discards Christianity in full doubt or in defiant bitterness. The many relapses to pure renunciation or anti-religious radicalism which are commonly a risk a few months or a year or so after an awakening—whether of old-fashioned or ultra-modern type—are typical examples of this. As arguments against Christianity they are nothing to be afraid of: they only confirm what our forefathers already observed. More serious is that judgment they pronounce against the type of proclamation which has been most prominent: it can hardly have made the grade in the essential matters. These arguments, these positions, are most serious for those people who in this way go lost. They maintain that they have made an honest attempt at Christianity, and it is not easy to make them see that what they have attempted is not Christianity, but rather works' false way of salvation, which for every honest man must end where it ended for Paul: with the cry of distress from the seventh chapter of Romans.

Others, despite everything, have not been able to break free from God. They know they are totally hopeless, but, at the same time, they know that Christ is totally right in his demands. Somehow they manage to get along with their wounded conscience. They feel it is dishonest to bear the name Christian, but, nonetheless, they cannot discard it. One *wants* to be a Christian, but *cannot*. That is the soul's torture.

To all such people it must now be said clearly and sincerely: Remember that even this is God's work. What you are now going through, all truly converted Christians before you had to go through. Our forefathers called it the awakening, and they knew exactly what a difficult time it is. It is difficult—and even so you have reason to rejoice, and here a *Seelsorger* can say with joy and emphasis: God bless you! This which has happened with you proves that God has been and is working on you; He has carried His

work onward and forward. That the joy and uplifting and power that you felt in the beginning has now yielded and given way to the humbling experience of your own weakness, this is not a step backward in your Christianity but rather a great step forward. It is because you have really listened to the call and really been connected to God that you have been permitted to experience this. Now you have learned what you otherwise never would have learned to understand, namely what it is to be enslaved by sin. Now, slowly, perhaps you begin to realise that it truly *is* the case that we must be saved, because we cannot save ourselves. As such, you have actually arrived at the gates of the kingdom of heaven. Now it remains for you to go in through them. When God has now humbled you and permitted you to see how little you are capable of yourself, it is so that you will finally begin to find out what God has done for us, which, in the end, is much more important than everything we could do for God. Continue now to pray and make use of the Word, but read now not only the last chapters of Paul and listen not only to the demands in the sermon, but immerse yourself at last in all seriousness in the message regarding the atonement, because, ultimately, for us everything depends on that message. Determine to go through the whole New Testament in order to see and meditate upon what it means that God gave his Son for atonement of sin, sin which we cannot make payment for ourselves or eradicate. If you have now come this far that you understand the seventh chapter of Romans, then there is good reason to hope that you will, in a while, understand the whole blessedness of that message contained in the fifth and eighth chapters. At last it is clear also to you that the foundation for our Christian faith, for that covenant which the living God made with us in baptism, truly is not our righteousness or our repentance or our fulfilment of his holy requirements, but rather God's incredible mercy, his undeserved grace and our Lord Jesus Christ's atoning work on Golgotha.

While awaiting this light there is one thing which the soul must focus on above all things: never, under any circumstances, to abandon Christ's Church. During the awakening's deepest distress, one can nevertheless always hold on to this fact: the gates of the church stand constantly open. No matter how unworthy I may feel, nevertheless Christ will not drive me out. No matter how hopeless it seems that I would ever become a true Christian, nevertheless the hope remains as long as I see that God sees value in



preaching to me and inviting me to communion, just as He once saw value in baptizing me. As a picture of God's expectations and God's promises, the church stands there and holds an open place for me, both in the pew and at the altar rail.

And if God does not tire, then you must not either. At least do not give up before you have exhausted that message which the Church proclaims and tried all the means she administers unto our salvation. If one has not before asked for private confession, then it is time to make use of it during the awakening. The whole collective experience of the Church exhorts us at least to discard our shy anxiety and resolutely seek a *Seelsorger* and ask for a private conversation. There are difficulties in the walk of faith that are so personal that they can never be treated thoroughly from the pulpit. There are conflicts that are so intimate and at the same time so devastating that they require both a more radical and a more merciful treatment than the public proclamation can ever give. Therefore, the Church invites troubled souls to seek advice and help and absolution in confession. Even here she is the merciful mother, who has a heart for her children's troubles, both the smallest and the largest. Even here our distress is so often because of our attempt to make do with just a small bit of the rich inheritance that we have been given. The one who takes God at His word and in humility stays in his place in His Church, prepared to let God speak and work toward wherever He wishes to lead, he will also one day get to experience that the awakening's difficult time of learning, during which everything seems to have stalled and stands hopelessly stagnant, was one of the greatest times of God's activity in his life, one of those holy times when God's seed sprouted and grew to new heights, even though the soul knew not how (Mark 4:27).

## **Enlightenment through the Gospel**

“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” (Rom. 3:19)

This is how Paul summarises, in a well-known text, those experiences at which every honest Christian arrives during his fruitless efforts to become irreprouchable before God. And he adds: Through the law comes knowledge of sin.

There can be reason to remember this when one is struggling during the hard battle of awakening. It is not *only* a defeat when I do not keep God's commandments. It is also a part of God's own merciful work. He allows this in order to cure me of my pride and to give me something better than the glorious self-righteousness of the Pharisee.

By nature we are all Pharisees. We apprehend the law as the natural way to God: the one who obeys God's commandments, he is a Christian. "Morality is the main thing," as they say. "The essential in Christianity is the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount," says an ill-fated but typical misunderstanding, which has even left its footprint in our catechesis. A person will painfully experience just how ill-fated this misunderstanding is if he truly honestly tries to fulfil all of God's requirements without any compromises. Ultimately, he will stand on the edge of a chasm which separates him from holy God. No matter what he does, he is not able to become so pure and unselfish and loving that he can lay a bridge over this chasm.

"Through the law comes knowledge of sin." In our mutual relationships there can very well be much else that also comes through the law: civil order, honesty and diligence and justice. But in my relation to God it does not, in the end, accomplish victory, or peace of conscience, or holiness, but rather a deep and serious knowledge of sin.

But, Paul now continues (Rom. 3:21ff.)—and upon this *but* depends, as a matter of fact, our whole right to call ourselves Christian—now a righteousness of God apart from the law has been revealed.

What does Paul mean? Is there actually a completely other righteousness than the one that I myself achieve through *making myself* righteous?

Yes, says Scripture:

a righteousness from God—in other words, a righteousness which descends upon me as a gift from heaven, a righteousness which is not created upon earth, but rather springs forth out of God's own holy being and is a part of heaven's own contents—the exact opposite, in other words, of that righteousness which I myself have tried to achieve when I have built a staircase of virtues and perfection, of repentance and recompense, upon which I can finally climb up to the gates of heaven and make myself qualified for God's kingdom. Again, the exact opposite: a gift from God

through faith in Jesus Christ. Through *faith*. God permits me to receive into the child's hands of faith this gift from heaven, which I could never earn or get myself. I *receive*—on account of the Saviour.

Is this really possible? Can this be valid also for me, despite all the hopeless shortcomings I have in my life, despite all the sin which rests in my own nature and in my innermost will?

Yes, says Scripture:

for all who believe. "For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All of us wretched people stand under the same condemnation, in the same hopeless bondage to the law of sin which lives in our members. Even the greatest saints, whom we have perhaps read about and admired, are our brothers in this misfortune. All have gone through the same awful experience of their own inability and found themselves standing on the edge of that chasm which separates the sinner from God. But, continues Scripture,

they were "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood".

Here we perhaps begin to understand the meaning of the bloodstained cross. If we could have improved ourselves, then God's law would have been enough. If God had tempered His holiness and accepted sin, then Christ never would have needed to die for us. But since we cannot save ourselves, since we cannot make payment for or atone for that guilt which separates us from God and His holiness, God in His mercy sent His son down to us sinners. He became just like one of us, yet without sin. He did not come to condemn us. He came to reach out with that hand which alone can lift us over the chasm. The name of that hand is undeserved grace, given freely in the forgiveness of sins. He came to make atonement for that which we have broken. He travelled the appointed path patiently unto the end. When we rejected and mocked and tortured Him, He let it happen. We raised the cross—and God let it happen. *That* became God's means of atonement. God did not condemn the world, which had deserved it thousandfold and still deserves it. When its evil raised itself up in rebellion against God's own Son, when the darkness raged in order to destroy Him—not even then did God wish to condemn. He allowed the consequences of all our evil to befall the only innocent one. Willingly, He took it all upon Himself. Like a black

wave our evil crashed and struck His head. But out of the froth and foam of this abyss, the cross was raised as God's atoning sign, "as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith".

Behold the cross! If God has done this, then there is nothing else which is impossible, not even in regard to your "hopeless" salvation. Here you can learn what real grace speaks. It is strange with us people, that we always want to earn or deserve grace. First we do the manual labor, as it were. We discover our sin, we confess it, we make amends, we intend to change our course permanently. Then we come before God, not without a certain satisfaction with ourselves, and say, "Lord, forgive." And we think: We are only waiting for God to forgive; that is all that remains. After all, I have given this over to God, confessed it and determined that I will repent and change.

This can work for a while. But one day God leads me so far that it does not work any longer. It can happen very early, but can also take years before I come so far in the awakening that I learn what real guilt is: guilt for which, I see only too clearly, I cannot make payment. It can be because I can no longer promise God that it will never happen again. Then I can no longer produce a polite excuse with faith in my own good intentions. It may also be that the sin which burns my conscience is so serious that I know that, as far as it depends on me, I am now helplessly struck from the list of Jesus' disciples.

Then there are only two possibilities: despair or faith. Despair, that was the way of Judas. Many after him have gone that way—to bodily or spiritual suicide. Without fail, man will slip into that way if, during the awakening, he cuts his ties with Christ's Church and loses prayer and the Word. For in such need, the only thing that can help us is enlightenment through the gospel itself, that message from God which, contrary to all human reason, tells me that God loves me even in the midst of my sin, that my guilt is atoned for by my Lord Christ and that I am allowed to believe in His completely undeserved love. This is the message regarding the Saviour's faithfulness which is not moved one hair despite all my unfaithfulness. I base my salvation on Jesus alone, and on nothing else.

Now, if I could only believe this!

Here a totally new and unexpected difficulty often reveals itself. While before it seemed the most obvious thing of all that God forgives, now the greatest difficulty becomes believing that this really applies to *me*. A spiritually superficial person is only all too prone to believe that God is love and “will certainly forgive my sins”. He becomes what our forefathers called a “grace-thief”, and it is revealed only all too clearly that he has a dead faith which by no means is active in love. With a truly repentant person it is often the exact opposite: there is nothing in the world which he has as hard a time believing as this: that it really is of pure undeserved grace that God forgives him and even covers his inborn corruption with the righteousness of Christ. He never thinks that he is serious enough in his repentance or in the intention to improve. He never thinks that he believes enough in his Saviour. So great is this difficulty that the old teachers, with good reason, included unbelief, in other words, my inability to believe that ultimately all depends on Jesus Christ, as the third great obstacle to salvation. Because, you see, here I will get no peace with God as long as I look upon myself and want to take along at least some little rag of my own righteousness. Neither remorse, confession, repentance nor faith ever become what I think they should be. The result of all my efforts to be pious or at least humble or contrite is irrevocably the same: I feel destitute of all that could be called genuine Christianity.

Here only one thing helps: to look upon Christ, over and over again to hold before one’s eyes what He has done, to immerse oneself in His love, who “*while we were still sinners. . .*, died for us,” (Rom. 5:8) and so demonstrated that it is not due to our remorse or repentance but out of sheer inconceivable mercy that God wants to deal with us.

When Peter stood in the courtyard of the high priest after having cursed, perjured himself and denied his Master, and the Saviour’s pained look rested upon him for a brief moment, then he realised what he had done. He was a scoundrel, exposed in all his weakness, unworthy ever again to be named among Jesus’ faithful. And yet, he was loved without limits. This undeserved love was what gave him the possibility of rehabilitation, despite all that he himself had done. This undeserved grace, revealed in the suffering of Jesus for our sake, is that to which the true faith directs itself and seizes—despite all that we see in ourselves. This undeserved mercy is also that to which a repentant person shall flee and seize when he, during his use of the

Word, seeks clarity regarding his salvation. Then he sees the light of the gospel slowly begin to shine. Because he is enlightened regarding his sin, he also receives clearer and clearer glimpses of God's grace. They can give him a foretaste of what it is to be a Christian living under grace. But one should not rush and immediately think that all is now finished and ready. The important thing is not that I arrive at peace straight away, but rather that God may complete the work that he has begun my heart.

Therefore, one should calmly and faithfully receive and keep all that which God gives in his Church, cherishing the Word and being persistent in prayer in the desire for getting deeper into God's wonderful mercy. One shall pray about and wait for God's gift to the heart of all the riches of the kingdom. Above all, one should not let oneself be hindered by the embarrassing experiences of sin's ineradicable permanence but, instead, constantly, time and again, flee to God in prayer for forgiveness and wait for the light. It is God who decides the time when He wishes to give to me a greater measure of spiritual insight and certainty into the forgiveness of sins, but for every person who is in the habit of the Word, prayer, and Communion with the honest purpose of coming closer to God, the promise holds true: He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it. (1 Thess. 5:24)

God fulfils this work when, upon the ruins of all our own reservations and all our self-reliance, He establishes faith in Jesus alone. When the "gospel enlightenment" is fulfilled, so that man believes in his Saviour precisely as Saviour and Atoner, then conversion has also been accomplished. His relation to both God and man is transformed. The implication and meaning of this transformation is captured by the old *Seelsorger* in two words: justification and rebirth. These do not involve any stages or steps in the process of grace, nothing which chronologically comes after the enlightenment which the gospel gives to man regarding the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake. One must be careful not to make the Order of Grace a staircase on which one gradually moves up to God. Likewise, it is not a school with definitively separate classes, where one takes one course at a time, one after the other, in order then to graduate and be moved up to the next level. It is rather a descent, a process of impoverishment, in which God takes away from man one after the other his false grounds of comfort. At its heart it is a description of how God's love overcomes the obstacles and breaks down the dams

which prevent the divine grace from freely pouring itself over a life. These obstacles are usually in a certain context and group themselves in a complementary order. Therefore, grace also has its order. But this order is not to be forced and is never allowed to be made into a law. God's grace works everywhere it is given the opportunity. Therefore everything becomes intertwined in the work of conversion. Already within the call there can be a deep insight into the mystery of the Cross. Every encounter with the law and every new confession of sin usually carries with it a new revelation of grace. And when finally faith victoriously breaks through, then "justification" and "rebirth" is already the reality.

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**No. 1**

ISBN 978-0-902388-03-1