

How do we define salvation? Many people will say that by being saved they expect to spend eternity with God in Heaven. But that is not how we, as Catholics define salvation.

To understand the true meaning of salvation we need to look more closely at the Book of Genesis. Because if we do not understand what happens at the beginning of the story, then nothing that follows will make any sense.

When an artist develops a unique style, his work can be immediately identified because it bears the mark of that style. In the same way, all of creation bear God's mark. God created a perfect world. And He made the world to teach us about Himself. After He created the earth and filled it plants and animals, He then created a home for us within this world. He created a special place of joy and pleasure, a garden where He could live with man. God made man with the grace that would allow him to share in God's divine life, and in Eden, God came down to live among us.

But the work of the devil, corrupted the work of God. The devil caused our first parents to turn away from God. They trusted in their own understanding, and their own decisions. They lost the grace that God gave them, and fell into the darkness of sin and death.

We have all heard the story about the Tree of Knowledge, but there was also, in the garden, the Tree of Life. Whoever ate the fruit from that tree would enjoy eternal life. If man had eaten of the Tree of Life in his fallen state, he would have lived forever in an existence that was less than what God wanted for him.

So as an act of mercy, God placed man and woman outside of the garden to wait for God to fulfill His promise.

The promise of God was a savior, who would come and restore all things to God's original plan. And because man was created to live with God, God allowed sin and evil to spread throughout humanity so that when the Savior finally came He would come to save the entire human family, and have mercy on all.

This is the meaning of our salvation, this is what Jesus came to do. Our salvation will be achieved when we are once again in complete union with God and living in a new Earth with a new Heaven, our souls reunited to glorified bodies.

Jesus is the new Adam, not simply because He reversed the mistakes of the first Adam, but because He is man finally and completely in union with God.

Jesus came to undo the work of the devil.

God wants everyone to be saved and reach the full knowledge of the truth. The start of our salvation began with the birth of Jesus, and will be complete at the end of this age when all things have been made new.

In today's Gospel Jesus seems to give in to the Canaanite woman's pleading and heal her daughter. Some people see this incident as proof that prayer can change God's mind. But God is immutable, He cannot change. It is much more likely that Jesus was always ready to help the woman's daughter as He had done so many times with pagans and gentiles.

Why then does He refuse her at first? You have to remember that because of our fallen humanity, our hearts have been hardened. Jesus uses the Canaanite woman to show those around Him the value of faith, humility, and persistence. Our prayer cannot change God, but it can change us. Through persistent prayer, offered with faith and humility, we form ourselves to God's will. We soften our hardened hearts. Remember Jesus' own prayer in the garden, "Father if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me, but thy will be done, not mine."

Jesus came to do God's work, to set God's plan for our salvation into motion. He came to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies. By saving the daughter of the Canaanite woman Jesus reveals that He truly has come to save us all. He is here for the salvation of souls.

All peoples, Jews and Gentiles, can now hope for eternal life in the household of God, the house of prayer for all peoples. But our hard heartedness still plagues us, and we are free to reject that hope by rejecting God's plan for how we are to live our lives.

That is why there is the reality of Hell. God wants all of us to be saved but He will not force us to be saved. It is our freedom that makes us human and if God were to take that away and force us into salvation, we would not be the people He created us to be.

God also gave the angels the freedom to choose. Some of them chose to use their freedom to reject God's friendship and set up their own ideas of right and wrong.

The fallen angels, Satan and his demons, refused God's fellowship and as a result they now exist in a permanent state of exile. They are separated from God.

Imagine being in a place where you know with absolute certainty that God does not hear your prayers, does not know you, and is not even aware of your existence, that is Hell.

Human beings are given the gift of free will. We can choose to obey the laws of God's household and thereby enjoy the glory of His friendship, or we can give in to the devil's lies and follow him, as we did at places such as the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The difference between us and the fallen angels is that angels were created with perfect understanding of God and His plans. Their rejection of Him was absolute and irrevocable. Humans on the other hand have imperfect understanding and so long as we draw breath on this world, we have the opportunity to repent of our stubbornness, ask for God's forgiveness, and once again enjoy the promise of salvation.

Father Gabriel Amorth, who died almost a year ago, was the exorcist for the diocese of Rome. If you want a truer understanding of the work of the devil, then read his book "An Exorcist Tells His Story."

In the book Fr. Gabriel recounts an experience he had while training under his mentor, Fr. Candide Amantini. Father Amantini was finishing up an exorcism one day and he said to the demon, "Now go back to Hell which God has made for you."

The demon, always looking for an opportunity to insult God's clergy, answered him. "You know nothing," it said, "He didn't make Hell, we did."

As followers of Christ we are called to follow His example. We yearn for salvation, and our work is to bring as many others with us as we can. God's laws, given to us through His Church, have one purpose, to lead us to Christian wisdom and maturity.

God teaches us that abortion is wrong because it directly kills an innocent life. He teaches us that artificial contraception is wrong because it poisons the relationship between husband and wife. God created the sexual act to be unifying, and procreative, contraception and homosexual activity, destroy that relationship.

God teaches us that our true happiness is not in pleasure, possessions, or popularity. Our true happiness lies in accepting the responsibility to invest in the gifts He has given us for the good of ourselves and our neighbors.

God does not teach us these things to take away our fun or to complicate our lives.

God wills the salvation of all people. His heart yearns for us to discover life as He meant it to be lived. That's why He is constantly pointing out the false paths and dead end roads of comfort, self-indulgence, and willfulness that contemporary culture celebrates, praises, and makes look so inviting. Roads that will lead us away from Him and away from salvation.

Jesus reminds us today that He came for all of us. But He demands great things of us because He loves us so greatly.

God comes to all of us, but on His terms, not ours.