

## Sola Fide: Clues to Milton's Path to Salvation in Sonnet 19

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**Abstract** Scholars and pseudo-scholars have analyzed Milton's Sonnet 19 for 350 years, and most have gotten it wrong. Taken in the context of open, sometimes even violent hostilities between Catholics and Protestants, the poem might be read as a statement of Milton's position on salvation, which is essentially sola fide, justification by faith alone, as formulated in the sixteenth century by Martin Luther and John Calvin. The essence of the sonnet is, we conclude, not Milton's blindness, neither physical nor spiritual, but an affirmation of his belief that mankind is saved by faith, not works. The study uses close reading of the fourteen lines of the sonnet and finds, as many have seen, two distinct parts. First, an octet of self-pity complains that the Maker who endowed the narrator with the gift of poetry may chastise him for not using that gift to serve the needs of that Maker. The Parable of the Talents is clearly the reference. Second, a sestet of accommodation relieves the narrator (and the reader) of the angst of the dreaded outcome mentioned in the Parable. It is the fourteenth line, however, that tells the tale. "They also serve who only stand and wait." This is the affirmation of sola fide.

*Keywords:* Milton, On his blindness, salvation, Sonnet 19, They also serve, When I consider

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### Introduction

Milton's Sonnet 19 is often referred to as "On his blindness." A close reading of the poem suggests that the subject is not the narrator's sightlessness but an affirmation of faith. Composed in a time of virulent hatred between Protestants and Catholics, the poem poses the question of how humankind, under a sentence of death brought about by original sin, the disobedience of Adam and Eve, can be saved from the eternal punishment of a vengeful God. In simple terms, Catholic theology embraces the approach of good works as the process of earning a place in Heaven, while the Protestant understanding of salvation is that faith alone, sola fide, is the path to Paradise.

Sonnet 19 is most often described as a lamentation by Milton that his blindness will be an impediment to the employment of his talent as a writer, especially as a poet. Analyses typically conclude with an assertion that God does not need anything from the narrator. While that may be

within the scope of Milton's religious beliefs, there are other conclusions. One such alternative is that "blindness" is not the loss of physical eyesight but has more to do with spiritual enlightenment. This study comes to yet another conclusion, one that does not appear in the literature.

By comparing and contrasting the first and last lines of the sonnet, we find that the sonnet provides a clue to Milton's understanding of the path to salvation. The evidence in the text itself suggests that Milton accepts the reasoning of Luther and Calvin that it is faith that opens the door to God's saving grace and that good works are the fruit of faith. In short, faith leads to works, but works do not lead to faith.

### The Research Question

This study searches John Milton's Sonnet 19, "When I consider how my light is spent," popularly called "On his blindness," for clues to his understanding of mankind's path to salvation. In the Christian era, dualist theologians have generally

disputed the journey of the soul from the land of the living to heaven, most prominently, whether one can earn one's place in heaven by doing good works or whether faith alone, *sola fide*, is sufficient for salvation. To what extent might we find evidence of where Milton comes down on this controversy?

### Methods

We employ multiple methods of inquiry, the premise being that several methods can improve the validity of the analysis and evaluation of our understanding of Milton's text. This implies a certain "triangulation," employing a variety of tools and perspectives. In post-Soviet Georgia, we may broadly identify these groups of approaches as either "traditional" or "modern," with the former having its roots in an authoritarian, socially and legally constricted environment and the latter being associated with a greater degree of freedom of scope for the researcher using the methods of scientific inquiry informed by the principles of critical thinking and creative problem solving consistent with the model of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Sosniak, 1994).

### The Traditional Method

The traditional method of foreign language learning in Georgia follows the Soviet top-down command model. If there is a foreign language center, its charter tends to be prescriptive rather than supportive, more an instrument of central control than one of service. Foreign language teaching tends to rely heavily on workbooks rather than works of literature in the target language. Curricula tend to be highly compartmentalized, with courses such as grammar, phonetics, lexicology, discourse, comparative typology, linguistic theory, and problems in morphology and syntax research, little of which relates to the real world for which graduates are presumed to be prepared. Surveys of prospective employers in the region indicate that graduates of programs with these kinds of esoteric course offerings are not able to function independently in an English-speaking environment.

Adherents of the traditional method draw a sharp line between language and literature. They

maintain that foreign language teaching and learning demands compartments. They reject the idea that one can learn a foreign language by reading good literature. This is how they learned, and this is how they teach (Giger & Sloboda, 2008).

### Modern Methods

Foremost among modern methods of literary research is close reading (Burke, 2020), with a particular focus on a word or phrase, observing in the process facts and details about the text (Kain, 1998). Related to close reading are both post-structuralist literary analysis and cultural criticism. Close reading helps the researcher to focus on those words and phrases that inform the research question, words like *antinomian*, *faith*, *grace*, and *justification*, and phrases like "When I consider," "my light is spent," and "They also serve." A post-structuralist perspective (Richter, 1994) encourages the researcher to entertain a variety of meanings from the text, while cultural criticism (Poovey, 1990) asks whether and to what extent decisions made in an earlier century may be evaluated using modern standards of intellectual inquiry.

Consistent with the principles of modern methods, the study will start with the words and phrases used by Milton and by scholars of Milton's prose and poetry that may be seen as relevant to the research question. By necessity, these must, by the nature of the inquiry, involve matters of theology, particularly the language surrounding the questions of salvation. The critical thinker, whether theologian or philologist, will be compelled to ask questions and to seek a common understanding of the language of justification and salvation, being aware that new questions will arise in the course of the research.

### Results

If one is to engage Milton on his terms, one is obliged to define words and phrases that may be more familiar to students of theology than to students of language and literature. To that end, we used the authoritative Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2023) with a few minor edits. Following are

the terms that might easily confuse the non-theologian, with the caution that a definition only scratches the surface of meaning as it may have been intended by Milton or as the reader might infer from the term.

In this study, we cannot assume a sophisticated knowledge or understanding on the parts of readers of what might be considered theological jargon in the domain of seminarians or even clerics, much less the student of English language and literature in higher education. We found that it is, therefore, imperative that the study accomplish two objectives, first, to find the clues that will help to explain Milton's path to salvation, and second, to convey to the reader both the results of the research and the importance of that finding for a more thorough understanding of Milton's Sonnet 19, as well as others of his poetry and prose. We begin by defining those essential words and phrases implied in Sonnet 19.

### Definitions

**antinomian.** One who takes the principle of salvation by faith and divine grace to the point of asserting that the saved are not bound to follow the moral law contained in the Ten Commandments. Antinomians believe that faith alone guarantees eternal security in heaven, regardless of one's actions.

**Arminian.** Of, relating to, characteristic of, or following the doctrines of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), a Dutch Protestant theologian, who rejected the Calvinist doctrine of predestination.

**covenant.** An engagement entered into by a Divine Being with some other being or persons.

**faith.** Belief in and acceptance of the doctrines of a religion, typically involving belief in a god or gods and in the authenticity of divine revelation.

**good works.** Morally commendable or virtuous acts; acts of kindness, goodwill, or charity; esp. (in religious and theological contexts) acts of piety, regarded as carried out in obedience to the commandments, or as products of faith or grace.

**grace.** As a quality of God: benevolence towards humanity bestowed freely and without regard to merit, and which manifests in the giving of blessings and granting of salvation.

**justification.** The action whereby human beings are freed from the penalty of sin and accounted or made righteous by God; the fact or condition of being justified in the eyes of God.

**parable.** A story or narrative told to convey a moral or spiritual lesson or insight; especially one told by Jesus in the Gospels.

**perdition.** The state of final spiritual ruin or damnation; the consignment of the unredeemed or wicked and impenitent soul to hell; the fate of those in hell; eternal death.

**salvation.** The saving of the soul; the deliverance from sin and its consequences, and admission to eternal bliss, wrought for man by the atonement of Christ.

**service.** The action of serving God or a god by obedience, piety, and charitable works; religious devotion.

**sola fide.** (Latin: by faith alone.) Believers are by faith alone made right of their transgressions of the law of God rather than on the basis of good works. No works by man can earn salvation.

**sola gratia.** (Latin: by grace alone.) Salvation is a gift based only on God's love.

**sola scriptura.** (Latin: by scripture alone.) A Christian theological doctrine held by most Protestant Christian denominations, in particular the Lutheran and Reformed traditions of Protestantism, that posits the Bible as the sole infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practice.

**soteriology.** The doctrine of salvation.

**yoke.** Figurative uses denoting a burden, restraint, or bond.

### **Sonnet 19, When I consider how my light is spent**

Sonnet 19, numbered 16 when it was first published (Kelley, 1956) is, we find, too often and,

in our judgment, improperly called, “On his blindness.” Our reading suggests, perhaps surprisingly, that the poem is, indeed, not about Milton’s blindness. Rather, we find the blindness to be both incidental and contextually transitional. We know that Milton was blind when he wrote the poem, because that is his complaint in the octave, the first eight lines of the sonnet. The condition of blindness, the loss of the physical sense of sight, does not rise to the level of complexity, nor plumb the depths of angst, to which a great poet must aspire. This is not to say that Milton’s blindness is irrelevant. It is not. Rather, it is, in a sense, a “teaching moment” that he can use to make a more profound argument.

By tradition, sonnets start with an argument, often in the form of a question, and proceed line by line toward a resolution, an answer to the question, or a release of the tension precipitated by the opening lines. In this sonnet, the resolution has nothing to do with blindness. It is arguably about Milton’s understanding of the means of humanity’s salvation, and it clearly opposes the theology of works. The last line crashes into one’s consciousness with the improbable refutation of that theology, that one does not enter heaven by what one does but by faith alone, *sola fide*. It is not by any kindness, generosity, or good works that one receives the grace of God; grace is a gift, *sola gratia*. We are reminded of the distinction: Justice is when you get what you deserve. Mercy is when you don’t get what you deserve. Grace is when you get what you don’t deserve.

In preparing for the analysis that a close reading may reveal, we begin by reading the entire sonnet (Orgel & Goldberg, 2008, p. 81).

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one Talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide;

“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”

I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent

That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need

Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best

Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state

Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed

And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest:

They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Critical thinking invites the reader—or listener—to compare and contrast the first line and the last line. In the first line, the narrator begins the poem by reflecting on (considering) his plight. The first word, “When,” implies that this reflection is periodic, episodic, not constant. He has other things on his mind than what we will learn is his fear of not being able to use his “one Talent” to serve his Master. Before we get to the last line, we are subjected to a labored expression of grief based on that fear. Indeed, the entire octet may be seen to be eight lines of self-pity and anxiety. Both the first and last lines have in common an articulation of a feeling, but while the first line is an utterance of panic in the face of the unknown, the last line unveils the hope of salvation based on the certainty of faith, *sola fide*.

### The Parable of the Talents

As early as line three of Sonnet 19, the narrator, now blind and unable to see what he writes, expresses the fear that his “Maker,” as in Jesus’ parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30, KJV, 2021), will condemn him as a “wicked and slothful servant” and be cast “into outer darkness” for not using the talent endowed to him by his “Maker.” The irony here, of course, is that the narrator has literally already been cast into darkness. Milton, nevertheless, certainly was able to make the distinction between the darkness of physical blindness and the spiritual, metaphorical, darkness caused by a lack of faith. If the last line, “They also serve who only stand and wait,” is to have any meaning, it must confirm Milton’s choice of faith alone, *sola fide*, over works.

Hackenbracht (2015) writes that Sonnet 19 “famously evinces [Milton’s] fascination with the biblical parable of the talents and his skillful ability to recreate it within his own historical moment” (p. 71). Milton will have known, at the time of his writing the sonnet, that many of his critics will have concluded that his blindness was his punishment for his embrace of regicide or his foray into the matter of divorce or both. With his inability to see his writing, the narrator “lays down a terrible penalty for hiding one’s ability or not realizing one’s potential” (Flanagan, 1998, p. 256).

### Faith vs. Works

Baker (1985) notes that in the late seventeenth century, “the very idea of justification sola fide, sola gratia was in bad repute. Luther’s doctrine of justification was upheld by only a few high Calvinists, dissenting Baptists and Independents” (p. 115). Earlier, however, sometime between 1652 and 1655 (Beer, 2008, p. 253), when Milton wrote his Sonnet 19, “the English church still held to [Luther’s] distinctive doctrine of justification by faith through God’s grace alone” (p. 115). While such matters as predestination divided the church, the doctrine of sola fide served to distance the protestants from Catholicism.

It would be a mistake to conclude from any of Milton’s poetry or prose that he aligned himself with the extreme antinominalists, those who believed that faith in Christ relieved them of the duty to obey Mosaic law (Donato, 2011). Rather, Milton, in the poem’s octave, reveals that he is dedicated to the task of “working some noble service for humanity” (Cheek, 1965, p. 131).

Similarly, we cannot see in the last line of Sonnet 19, a resignation or mandate to remain idle. While the path to salvation is not by “works alone,” true faith will compel the believer to do good works: Luther wrote, “Works are a certain sign, like a seal on a letter, which makes me sure that my faith is genuine” (Baker, 1985, p. 125). Calvin, in his “Antidote to the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent,” wrote of “the necessity of exhorting believers to good works, and even stimulating them by holding forth a reward” (Belting, 1962, p. 202).

The question, then, is, what is the reward? It is not, according to Calvin, Luther, or Milton, the “eternal life” that cannot be earned, that is the gift of God’s grace to the faithful. Perhaps it is the comfort of knowing that one is using one’s talents in the service to one’s “Maker.”

In the sestet, “Patience” does not imply idleness but uses the verb “stand,” as in stand up, get ready, your time will come. “Milton is required both to accept the necessity for stillness and to stand firm” (Beer, 2008, p. 254). For Calvin, “true Christianity...is a faith that is lively and full of vigour, so that it spares no labour, when assistance is to be given to one’s neighbours...(Belting, 1962, p. 203). There remains among theologians even today the question of, “Who is justified by faith?” Milton certainly knew of Paul’s letter to the Galatians (3:26-28): “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” All. Or, as Calvin wrote, “God invites all indiscriminately to salvation” (Belting, 1962, p. 205).

With all the theological argumentation, how can we know where Milton comes out? Where is the dispositive evidence of his understanding of the path to salvation? At the close of *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s Michael teaches Adam,

Of Conscience, which the Law by  
Ceremonies

Cannot appease, nor Man the moral part  
Perform, and not performing cannot live”  
(XII, 297-299).

There we have it, Milton’s understanding of humankind’s path to salvation. There is not a thing we can do to earn salvation, God’s promise of everlasting life, yet “faith without works is dead” (James 2:20, KJV, 2021).

### Discussion

Tons of ink has been spilled by scholars—and pseudo-scholars—variously defending or attacking the myriad theories of salvation, and everlasting life, each contending that mankind is inherently sinful and, therefore, incapable of joining the perfect godhead in some postulated Paradise.

Professing a belief in an omnipotent, omnibeneficent, omniscient, and omni-present deity made manifest in the person of the New Testament Jesus of Nazareth, John Milton, both as Puritan and as poet, was compelled to work out the details of the theological arguments and to put his rationales on paper, sometimes in prose, but more famously in poetry.

While his works in prose, particularly his *De Doctrina Christiana*, offer in detail the results of Milton's careful thinking about these matters, it is, perhaps, in his poetry where we can find deeper meanings commingled with his more passionate feelings.

*Paradise Lost* is foremost in a catalog of Milton's expression of his personal theology. That epic poem is a rich mine of ore to be examined for his beliefs, as it has been for some 350 years. But Sonnet 19 offers in miniature the essence of those beliefs if we are able to push past the easy conclusion that the poem is "on his blindness." In fourteen lines, we come to know that Milton, in the tradition of Luther and Calvin, adheres to sola fide as the path to salvation but with the caveat that true faith manifests itself in good works, even when one is standing and waiting.

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