

Reformation Observed / October 27, 2024

Ephesians 2:8

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

Salvation by grace received through faith in Christ Jesus

Unless October 31<sup>st</sup> falls on a Sunday, we observe Reformation Day the last Sunday of October. On October 31<sup>st</sup> All Hallows Eve, Martin Luther, then an Augustinian Monk and Doctor of Sacred Scripture at the University of Wittenberg, posted 95 theses or points of discussion on the door of the Cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. As a doctor of sacred scripture, Martin Luther had a privilege accorded to few people, access to the bible. He was trained in the Latin of the church and the Hebrew and Greek of the bible. He was called and commissioned by the Roman Church to teach the theology of the church and the scriptures at the University of Wittenberg. In the course of his studies, he came to the realization that some of the teachings of the church were at variance with the teachings of the scriptures. Most importantly the teaching of salvation and how we sinful humans receive forgiveness and are made righteous in the sight of God.

He had been taught by the church since childhood that we are saved from sin, the devil and the condemnation of eternal death by a combination of grace from God and good works on our part. Grace was important as the starting point, but good works were essential for completing the course, receiving the crown of life and ending up in heaven. He became a monk, because he was taught and believed that this was the surest way of guaranteeing his salvation. As a monk he would be removed from the temptations of the world and be able to devote himself more fully to prayer, fasting and the disciplining of his flesh. He prayed for hours. Fasted for days. Confessed constantly, so much that his confessor grew weary and told him to come back when he had actual sins to confess. He lay prostrate on cold floors as penance for his sins. As a student of the bible and doctor of sacred scriptures, he found a different teaching in the bible. Not salvation by grace and works, but rather salvation by God’s grace in Christ Jesus, received through simple faith in Him as God and Saviour. Paul writes, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”* Today we remember the faith taught by the scriptures that salvation is the gift of God’s grace, received through faith in Christ Jesus.

Salvation refers to our spiritual and physical need to be delivered from the consequences of our sin, which is suffering in time and death in eternity. The man and woman sinned against God in the garden. The Lord said, *“The ground is cursed because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life...By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* The world as they knew it was gone. They had broken their perfect relationship with their Creator, their relationship with each other and with the creation. Their lives which would have extended indefinitely, would end in death; as would the lives of their offspring, conceived and born into a world of sin and death. They would be as Paul wrote in our text, *“children of wrath.”* They would have been without God and without hope in the world, had God not promised salvation through a seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent who deceived them. God promised salvation through an offspring of the woman, whom the scriptures show us to be Christ our Saviour.

God promised salvation from sin, the devil and death through an offspring of the woman, saying to the serpent, *“He will crush your head. You will crush His heel.”* The offspring of the woman is Jesus, God’s Son from eternity, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary in time that He might crush the head of the serpent on His cross through the bruising of His death, taking away the sin of the world and the power of death over those who believe. Salvation is to be released from the power of sin, the control of the devil and the condemnation of eternal death. Speaking to the promise of salvation, Isaiah wrote of the coming of the Christ and His sacrifice, saying, *“He was wounded for our transgressions: He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with His stripes we are healed.”* God gives salvation, the forgiveness of sin and healing in our relationship with Him, as a gift of grace to all who believe for the sake of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Every religion in some way recognizes the problem of sin, manifested in hatred, suffering and death. Humans naturally suppose we caused the problem and that since we caused the problem, we also can and must provide the solution. People since time immemorial have sought to appease the wrath of the gods with sacrifices, self chosen works and offerings. In the scriptures God reveals Himself as the solution to the problem of sin. God provides the sacrifice for sin through the giving of His Son Jesus into death on the cross. Christ’s death has appeased His wrath at sin and healed the human relationship with Him broken by sin. St. John

writes of Christ and the sacrifice of His body on the cross saying, *"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."* God does this out of love, as an act of grace.

Grace means that God works our salvation. Grace means that God works our salvation, not for the sake of our love, but for the sake of His incomparably great love. Grace means that God works our salvation before we even think of doing anything, in fact even before we realize there is a problem with sin. God worked our salvation two thousand years ago, by giving Jesus into the world to be its Saviour. God works our salvation by giving Jesus into our hearts as Saviour through the gift of faith. Grace is God's action of securing our salvation in Christ and giving it to us as a free gift received through faith. When Paul writes, *"It is by grace you have been saved,"* he means that our salvation from beginning to end, including the faith by which we receive it, is the gift and working of God in our lives. His grace towards us in Christ Jesus is truly amazing!

A key phrase or slogan of the Reformation was salvation by grace received through faith in Christ Jesus. Salvation is the action of God in Christ by which He atoned for the sin of the world. Salvation is the action of God, motivated purely by His love towards humans, by which He opens our hearts to receive Christ as our Saviour and have faith in His name. Faith is the means by which God, through the hearing of the word and the working of the Holy Spirit, enables us to receive the promises of salvation in Christ Jesus and live in hope of the fulfillment of faith in life everlasting. Salvation by grace received through faith in Christ Jesus means there is nothing we can or should do to bring God's love into our lives. God pours His love into our hearts in Christ Jesus. Salvation by grace received through faith in Christ Jesus means there is nothing hanging over heads to condemn us. God has cancelled the record of the debt that was against us, as Paul says in Colossians, *"nailing it to the cross."* Salvation by grace received through faith in Christ Jesus means that we now live in the glorious freedom of the children of God. It means God is for us and nothing can stand against us. It means the devil can no longer condemn us and death can no longer appall us. Salvation by grace received through faith in Christ Jesus means that Christ is with us in all the trials and afflictions of life and that when our eyes of flesh close in death, our spiritual eyes will be opened to see the light of the love of God shining in the face of Jesus.

The Sunday of the Reformation is a day to remember God's grace in Christ Jesus, celebrate our salvation, give thanks for the gift of faith, the word of God, the promise of our baptism and the feast of Christ's victory, through which the Holy

Spirit continues to pour the love of God in Christ Jesus into our hearts. We are God's workmanship from beginning to end, from top to bottom, physically and spiritually. From the dust of the earth, He created the first man and from His flesh the first woman. He breathed into them the breath of life and through them and their offspring He continues to give life to every human soul. When the first people turned away through sin and brought death into the world He promised a Redeemer, Jesus Christ our Lord. In Him and through the sacrifice of His cross He redeemed the sin of every human soul and now offers the salvation of forgiveness and eternal life for all to receive. He both offers us the gift to receive through faith and by the working of His Spirit breathes into us the very faith by which we believe. We are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus, saved by grace received through faith. God grant this to us all and bring it to fulfillment in the light of the resurrection to everlasting life. In Jesus' Name. Amen