

By Grace Alone – Ephesians 2:1-10

- 1) We need God's grace
- 2) He freely gives it to us

October 31st, 1517 is a day for the history books. It was the day when sleepy Wittenberg got noticed on the map of Germany. It was the day when a rediscovered focus on the Bible would rock the religious world just as the Renaissance had shaped the western world. And it's all because of one man and the 95 discussion starters – what we call theses – that he nailed to the door of the Castle Church. Who would have known that all this would happen from a publication beginning with **“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance”**? The man who posted that document and ignited a religious firestorm in the western world is called Martin Luther. As an intelligent and conscience-stricken monk, Luther would bring everyone to refocus on the Bible's own authority. This may not seem such a radical concept for us today. But in the 1500s, Bibles were few and far between and written in Latin. Everyone relied on the local priest to tell them what God's Word said. Yet as Luther and others began to see what the Bible said for itself, they would discover marvelous truths. These truths are what we are going to be looking at this summer at Grace Lutheran in our summer sermon series entitled – *Our Great Heritage*. We'll look back at the time of Luther and the Reformation, rediscover the hidden gems in Scripture, and see how it matters for us today 500 years later. And it all starts now with one of the famous slogans of the reformation – we are saved by grace alone.

This was a foreign idea in Luther's time. To the common Catholic in Luther's time and in today's time, God's forgiveness was not free. It was linked to how well you did the 3 steps of penance. First there is contrition where you're sorry for your sins. Ideally out of love for God and how you've sinned against him, but it was enough to be sorry because of the impending punishment. After contrition comes confession where you go to the priest since only he can forgive your sins. You confess everything you can remember. Then the priest tells you that at least you won't suffer in hell! But there's still the temporal punishment where you need to repair your relationship with your neighbor and with God. This is the third step of penance called satisfaction. Depending on the severity of your sins and where you stand in society, the priest prescribes X amount of good works to lessen your temporal punishment. But if you want to make sure you don't have to be painfully

purged of your temporal punishment in Purgatory, you can buy an indulgence – a certificate of forgiveness. (Catechism of the Catholic Church Part 2, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 4)

Living under the Catholic Church's teaching of forgiveness leaves you hanging it leaves you behind with uncertainty about how saved you really are. How much have you sinned since your last confession? No matter how many good works you did or how many indulgences you bought, you could never be sure if you had done enough to stay out of Purgatory. Because why did you do those good works? Was it with a noble motive – out of love for God? Or was it because you had to? But this constant feeling of uncertainty doesn't only happen to Catholics. Once we look at how we live and fail to live up to God's demand for perfection, we can all doubt how saved we really are. Nowhere does the Bible better explain who we are before Christ than in Ephesians 2:1-3. **“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”**

There are three ways that the Apostle Paul describes how we used to before believing. First that we were spiritually dead in our sins and could do nothing about it. There is no spark of goodness within us that we can act on to bring us towards. Just as a dead body can't get out of its grave, neither could we get out of our sins. Second that we followed the devil and his sinful ways of the world. That is when we go along with the crowd because, well, everyone else is doing it. When we stay silent about those who are daily living in a life of sin rather than warn them about God's anger for such things. When we think it's okay to live your life however you want, as long as you don't hurt anyone else regardless of what God says in his Word. Third in that gratify our sinful nature and indulge its deadly desires. As a dog goes back to its vomit, so we continually go back to the same sins that make a mess of our lives.

No amount of good works or money will ever cover up our sins or console our guilty consciences. Because God only has one opinion about sin. He hates it. And he will not tolerate it. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil back in the Garden of Eden, God didn't say to them *“Alright guys, that was your first strike. But it was an accident so it's not a big deal. You can*

keep living here in perfection.” No, they broke the perfect world God created for them. So God banished them from the Garden of Eden and allowed their sinful nature to be passed down to the following generations. The people of Luther’s time understood how desperate their sinful situation was. That’s why they kept going back to the process of penance in a vain attempt to bring peace. Today we need only look at our lives to know this – we need help. We’re dead in our transgressions and sins. We follow Satan and his sinful ways of the world. We gratify our sinful nature and indulge its deadly desires. And where does that leave us? As the Apostle Paul tells us – **“Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath”** (Ephesians 2:3b).

But there’s more to God than wrath. He is also rich in mercy who has great love for us. And he shows us that love in a little word we call grace. If you look in the blue Catechism that many of you used here, grace is defined as **“God’s undeserved love that provides free forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation for all people”** (page 332). We don’t deserve this love. By nature we are objects of God’s wrath. While we were still living it up in our sins, God gave us the benefits that Christ has won for us. That perfect life he lived where he never once followed Satan and his ways. That innocent death he endured on the cross was the punishment God required for our sins. The wrath that once consumed God was poured out in full on his own Son so that we may receive his grace and have the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Does that sound too good to be true? Well not only is it true, it’s free! Like how you receive a gift from a loved one. Nothing is demanded of you in return. That’s what makes it a gift. So God’s grace is his gift for us. There’s nothing you need to do to receive this grace because it flows from God’s love for you and me. That’s right, sinners like you and me. That’s why Paul says twice in these verses from Ephesians **“It is by grace you have been saved”** (Ephesians 2:5b, 8a). Not because of what we’ve done, but because of what Christ has done. By grace and grace alone.

But God isn’t content to leave it at that. No as Paul tells us, God **“made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms”** (Ephesians 2:5a-6). Although born spiritually dead, we are now spiritually alive. How? Not because of us. It’s by grace and grace alone. God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him as his friends, not his servants. So we can approach God and know that our salvation is secure. It is given to us in spite of ourselves. And when we come to

God in repentance, we have certainty. **“It is by grace you have been saved”**
(Ephesians 2:5b, 8a).

No longer did Martin Luther and the believers of the 1500s have to wonder if they were really saved from all their sins. God’s forgiveness doesn’t depend if we do the prescribed good works or if buy enough indulgences. It’s depends on God’s grace which is already given to you with no strings attached. And the same is true for us. It is by grace that we have been saved. It’s a gift from God given to us while we were still enemies. And if God showed such grace to us while we wanted nothing to do with him then, then how much all the more will God continue to shower us with his grace when we come to him in repentance?

As long as we live in this world, we’ll need to repent. Those sins and transgressions that once defined us still tempt us. There will be many moments when we’ll gratify our sinful desires and follow the devil. When we’ll go along with the ways of this sinful although we know better. But when we do, we have God’s certainty. When we confess our sins, they’re really forgiven. Whether you confess your sins in church, to another Christian, or in prayer, he will hear you. And you’ll get to experience his grace all over again as he assures you that God calls you holy and declares you not guilty. Don’t hesitate to go to him in repentance. Be sorry for your sins and confess how you’ve sinned against God. And trust in God’s grace to forgive you.

That’s the life Martin Luther talked about when he wrote in his first thesis – **“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”** Such a repentant life is only possible because of God’s grace. There’s no way we can boast and put ourselves above others. None of us can claim any credit for our salvation. For we are all sinners in need of a Savior. It’s by grace alone that God promised a Savior. It’s by grace alone that we have gone from objects of wrath to objects of love. And it’s by grace alone that God renews his forgiveness when we come to him in repentance. Stand firm in this grace. Treasure it always. And tell others about that grace which alone saves us. Amen.