



Ephesians 2:1-10

Grace-Benson/Vail, AZ

Our Great Heritage 1

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June 18, 2017

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. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Stop me if you've heard this one before...

The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God. (Luther's 95 Theses, number 62)

No? How about this one:

To say that the cross emblazoned with the papal coat of arms, and set up by the indulgence preachers is equal in worth to the cross of Christ is blasphemy. (Luther's 95 Theses, number 79)

Not that one either. Ok, Let's try one more:

Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death and hell. (Luther's 95 Theses, number 94)

All right, I'm not giving up on you yet! Just one more:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. (Luther's 95 Theses, number 1)

Some of you may have recognized that last one and perhaps even recalled that it is the very first of Martin Luther's 95 Theses, or statements for debate, which he posted on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, back on October 31, 1517. That event is credited with sparking what is known as the Reformation of the Church or the Lutheran Reformation. That action and the resulting events over the next years led to the establishment of other Christian Churches besides the one catholic (or "universal") church. This includes the formation of the Lutheran Church, even though Martin Luther did not approve of his name being used and desperately wanted God's people to be known simply as Christians rather than Lutherans. The Lutheran name then and today, however, has been used to indicate a particular understanding of the Bible's teaching.

As we celebrate this year the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, one of the things we have planned is a worship series for the summer. It is designed for us to consider what it means to be a Lutheran Christian. The biblical subjects we will cover are not all *necessarily* unique to Lutheran churches, but are Christian doctrines which may be found in other denominations. When seen as a whole, however, they do comprise main biblical teachings of the Lutheran Church. Each Sunday, we will consider a slice of Reformation history in light of Scripture and find practical application for us today.

Honestly, those 95 Theses are not all that well-known or remembered, even by faithful Lutherans. They are not exactly complete explanations of the Christian faith, like a creed or a confession. They were really intended to spark discussion among theologians and correct some false teachings in the church at the time, not to spark the uproar in the Church that did ultimately result from them!

The content is centered on repentance, forgiveness and how the practice of indulgences fit in. This necessarily included the subject of purgatory, which remains today the belief of the Catholic Church and very few others. Purgatory, they say, is a place the soul goes after death. A place where their souls are purified, where their sins are worked off or paid for by people on earth in some way. A way to relieve one's suffering after death in purgatory is still taught today and one of those ways is through indulgences.

According to the Catholic Church, an indulgence can be given to a person if they first confess their sin and then *do* something. That might include saying certain prayers or doing certain good things. A priest at confession will advise a person on what exactly they are to do. At the time of Luther, the church was also *selling* Indulgences—selling the forgiveness of sins for money. Luther strongly opposed this practice and the idea of selling Christ's forgiveness, when our Savior gives it freely because of his full payment for sins on the cross.

Indulgences have never left the Catholic Church. For instance through November 26 of this year, a Catholic person can make a pilgrimage to Portugal to a particular shrine and join in a celebration or prayer to Mary...or they don't have to travel, but instead pray before a particular statue of Mary. As Twitter became ever more popular over the last several years, the Pope has even granted indulgences to those who would follow him on Twitter. Time off of suffering in purgatory and a faster track to heaven (hopefully!) for using social media.

If that all doesn't sound right to you, you may very well find yourself aligned with Martin Luther but, more importantly, with God and his Word. Those teachings and practices were around at Luther's time (500 years ago) and, obviously, are still in the forefront of Catholic doctrine today. They teach salvation by works, things we do, and NOT salvation by God's grace alone.

So let's look at a portion of the Bible that is particularly helpful when it comes to repentance and forgiveness. Ephesians chapter 2 is one of the very best portions of God's Word to help solidify in our minds what the grace of God is and settle in our hearts how *certain* God's grace is. Scripture declares that our forgiveness and our salvation are not secured by things we do, but by God's GRACE ALONE!

Our natural condition (v. 1-3)

You will hear people say that people are basically good—and perhaps you have believed that yourself. In one sense, it is hard to believe that any of us might feel that way because the more awareness you have of the atrocities committed by people—murder, rape, theft, abandonment of spouses and families, disrespect of others, selfishness, dishonesty and on and on—the more awareness you have of all the evil in the world and the imperfections of every person, the more you see that if there are any people we would consider “good,” it seems like a tiny percentage. I'm sure you'd admit that this would be a subjective argument on our parts too. One person may think the number of “good” people is much smaller than the next person.

But there is a rock-solid, inarguable truth about the “goodness” of people. God speaks of it all over in the Bible and I could give you lots of passages about the total corruption of every person, but let's just stick with the first words of our lesson: **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 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. 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.**

All people, because they are sinful, are objects of God's wrath! God is pure, holy, divine, righteous! He cannot and will not tolerate and live eternally with anyone who is not all of those things. Therefore, every person, by nature, has eternal death awaiting them, God says. That eternal death is solidified when every person follows the ways of the sinful world and the leading of Satan, who is that **ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient**. To be clear, you don't have to sacrifice goats and hang crosses upside down to follow Satan! You and I and everyone else are following his lead whenever we are disobedient in any way to the holy God. If everything stayed just like this, then there would be no comfort for anyone during their lives and certainly no hope for life after death. That's what we and all people were facing.

The undeserved love of God (v. 4-6)

Not everyone is a sports fan, but I think we can all picture this: your baseball team is down by one run in the bottom of the ninth and there are two outs. Even though there is a runner on first, your team's chances aren't looking good. You're down to your last out and your last strike on your absolute worst batter. The pitcher sets and pitches...and the batter takes a huge swing, sending the ball over the fence for a game-winning, walk-off home run! You sit there with your mouth hanging open because you can't believe what you just saw! Shock and happiness and rejoicing follow!

Obviously, what we're talking about today is infinitely more important than a baseball game, but God has done something that ought to leave our mouths hanging open, leave us shocked at what we've just heard, but also filled with happiness and rejoicing! God is here today to proclaim his grace—his undeserved love—which eliminates our fear and unease over our sin and changes our situation from hopeless to hopeful! God's trustworthy Word tells us: **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.**

Even though our sin caused us to look disgusting to God and made him want to never look at us again for all eternity, his heart opened up to us with a love that was so undeserved, yet so enormous, that he did the only thing that could make a payment big enough to do away with all that sin in us and in the world: He sent his Son, Jesus, to live the perfect life before the Father that we cannot live. He sent him so that he could offer up his perfect life on the cross as a sacrifice that paid the demanded price for sin.

We could not be saved without the Father's love which sent his Son. We could not be saved without Jesus' work of redemption. And we could not be saved without the Holy Spirit actually giving us the faith to believe in Jesus! Sinners who are called by God spiritually blind, spiritually dead, and spiritual enemies of his could do nothing to come to God and wouldn't want to! If you and I understand how dire and desperate and hopeless our situation was, then we appreciate how great the love of God is. And that God would do this for an entire world of sinners is incredible. What amazing love!

Why did God do this? (v. 7-9)

Why did God do this? Why did he show this Grace, this undeserved love? The answer is, as we just said, that there was no other way for us to live with him eternally. Sin ruined that. But there is another reason. He did it...**in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.**

Why did God do this? He WANTED to. He wanted to show love beyond compare! That's who God is; he is the loving God! The expression of God's love is his Son, Jesus. God didn't have to send him, he WANTED to send him! No one and nothing forced his hand; this is who God is. He is the God of incomparably rich grace—a love so undeserved and unexpected.

It's one thing to consider the tremendous grace of God shown to the whole world. It is quite another to see that undeserved love of God sent directly to you! But God had this written for you: **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.**

The whole lesson from Ephesians continually points out that God made your forgiveness and faith and salvation happen, but this part is so clear! Pick it apart with me:

- it is **by grace**—that is God's undeserved love; you had nothing to do with that.
- **you have been saved**—catch the tense of the verb; this happened *to* you and *for* you, NOT by you!
- **through faith**—just trusting in what God has done, not DOING anything.
- **and this not from yourselves**—again, you had nothing to do with it.
- **it is the gift of God**—gifts are not earned, are they? They are simply received.
- **not by works**—once again, you didn't DO anything to get this love from God.
- **so that no one can boast**—you can't brag about your relationship with God because you didn't make it happen: *you* didn't atone for your sins, you didn't choose to believe in God, it is ALL by God's grace!

The proper role of good works in our lives (v. 10)

You can see how out of place it is to promise God that you'll make up for something bad you did. Jesus already made up for your sins! You can see how terrible a thing it is to listen to someone who says that you have to do this or that to really be forgiven and to maybe get into heaven! You can see how arrogant it would be to take credit for something God has done for you, like saying that *you* chose Jesus.

But it is *not* out of place for us to do good things for God. Our lesson for today tells us, **For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

This changes our perspective! God does indeed want us to do good things. The proper role of good works in our lives is that they are done as a response to God's grace! Good things we do are not to earn God's favor; we already have his love simply because he's an awesome God! Good things are not done to get us into heaven; we're already going there because of Jesus!

Good things like prayers or helping out another person or serving at church or assisting your pastor or telling someone about Jesus or giving generous offerings or any of the other many things God instructs us to do as his children—all of them are done simply to say "Thank You" to God for the undeserved love he has shown to you.

It is not just a Lutheran thing to understand grace. You can see it there in these words, plain as day. It is there for every Christian to see and for every person to come to know. But sinful natures get in the way of simply accepting God's grace as all that is necessary for salvation. And so we may be confused from time to time and there are plenty of churches that end up hiding God's grace by introducing some aspect of doing good works in order to be forgiven. We ought to never tolerate those thoughts in our own hearts, but repent of them and find forgiveness in Jesus. And we ought never tolerate those false teachings which undo the grace of God and hide our Savior's complete atonement for sin.

May the Lord bless us so that we always treasure his grace, finding comfort there and the certainty of eternal life. And as loving Lutheran Christians, let us search out those who live without that hope and share it with them. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.