

**Ephesians 2:1-9  
By Grace I'm Saved  
God's Gift of Faith**

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**As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.**

This past month we've started an examination of the chief teachings of the Bible, the teachings upon which the Lutheran church has stood for 500 years. What we've looked at so far are the biblical doctrines of Original Sin, God's Plan for Salvation, and the Proof of Our Salvation. I think all of those teachings are rather nicely summed up for us in the opening verses of our text from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus.

**As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> 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.**

God promised to send a Savior. God sent His Son as the Savior. His Son Jesus lived a holy life in our place and in the place of all people and died to pay for all of our sins and the sins of all people. He rose from the dead to prove it. Our justification—God declaring the world innocent of all sin and righteous for Jesus' sake—has been accomplished. It is finished!

So why have any more sermons in this series? For that matter, why have church at all? Everything should be hunky-dory and everyone should be going to heaven because God has already justified them on Good Friday, right?

This is where we once again need to return to the doctrine of original sin. The Bible teaches that by nature we are hostile to God, or as Paul puts it here in Ephesians 2, dead in transgressions and sins and objects of God's wrath. We heard a couple weeks ago that Christ

died for us while we were still sinners. He didn't die for us because we were eagerly waiting to be saved. He died for us in spite of the fact that we wanted nothing to do with Him.

Jesus won our salvation on Good Friday, but we are born with hearts that reject that gift like an ungrateful child who opens a present at Christmas, throws it on the floor and says, "I don't want that!" That's what our human nature's reaction is to God's gift of salvation which is why we also need His gift of faith. We need to have something in us that accepts Jesus' work and God's justification, instead of rejecting it. Because while Jesus has paid our debts to God and credited His righteousness to us, we will continue to be just as doomed and condemned as we were before if we don't personally have the confidence that that is what He has done for us. That confidence is called faith. We saw a notable example of it in that woman in our Gospel lesson today who said to herself, "If I only touch Jesus' cloak, I will be healed."

As it was in her case, the confidence of saving faith always has to be personal. Jesus says that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal life. He does not say that whoever associates or has close personal ties with someone who believes in him will have eternal life. Theologians in the early church used to call this the "coal miner's faith." Perhaps that was a little unfair, because certainly there were coal miners who had saving faith. But the experience of those theologians was that when coal miners were asked what they believed, they would respond, "I believe what the church believes." That isn't saving faith. If someone were to ask you, "What do you believe?" and you could honestly give that person no better answer than, "I believe what my church believes," or, "I believe what Pastor Krueger teaches," or, "I'm a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran," then it's time to do some serious reevaluation, because that isn't really saving faith.

To put it in perspective, we can use the example of ice. There isn't a whole lot of ice fishing that takes place here in Virginia, but in places where it gets a little colder during the winters it's a fairly common way to spend a winter day. In order to go ice fishing though, you have to go out on the ice. Now, it's one thing to know that the ice on the lake is thick, because you hear about it on television or read it in the newspapers. It is another thing to accept that the ice on the lake is thick, because you have seen from your window a large number of people with shacks and vehicles fishing on the lake for several weeks, and none of them have fallen through. But faith that the ice is thick, in the biblical sense of faith, is the personal confidence that you could set foot on the ice yourself.

You know that the Bible says that Jesus has taken your sins away. You may accept that this is what our congregation teaches and what our church body believes, but true faith means trusting in that gospel message to the point that you are willing to lean on it one hundred percent for your salvation.

But if we are born spiritually dead, then where does that faith come from? We're going to look at that even more closely over the next three weeks as we talk about the means through which God brings His grace to us. But we need to cover it briefly today, because there is a lot of misunderstanding in the visible Christian church about where saving faith comes from.

At the Apple Blossom parade this year I was handed a pamphlet that talked about Jesus, that concluded by inviting the reader to pray the prayer printed there on the pamphlet asking Jesus to come into their heart. But that's not how faith works. Faith isn't born through our

invitation to Jesus to come into our hearts. We didn't invite or accept Jesus into our lives. We did not choose to be believers. We heard Jesus say so explicitly in His Word in the Verse of the Day for today, from John 15:16: **You did not choose me, but I chose you.** And it's as clear as day right here in our verse from Ephesians 2:8, **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this—namely grace, salvation, faith—this all is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** Faith does not come from ourselves. It is God's gift.

In fact, it is impossible for faith to come from ourselves. We cannot choose God. We heard Paul say that until we came to faith, we were dead in transgressions and sins. What is a dead person able to do? Nothing. In 2 Corinthians, Paul compares God bringing us to faith to His creation of light in the beginning (2 Corinthians 4:6). There was nothing but darkness, and then God called light into existence. The darkness did not bring the light into being; it did not choose to accept the light. The presence of light was God's doing alone. So is the presence of faith.

We have free will in a lot of matters pertaining to earthly affairs. But we do not have the free will to choose God or to come to faith. God alone must convert us through His Word; He must and does make unwilling people into willing ones and then dwells in the willing, all in one and the same act.

Finally, we need to ask: What is faith's object? In other words, what is saving faith *in*? It isn't uncommon to hear something like: "You just gotta believe," "just have a little faith," "I believe." But often, the object of such faith is nothing more than a vague, optimistic feeling that things are going to get better and whatever higher power there might be is eventually going to be won over to some person's side if that person just keeps on keeping on. That is not saving faith.

What does Jesus say? He says, **if you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples** (John 8:31), and **The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent** (John 6:26). Or to go back to John 3:16: **God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.**

So the object of saving faith is, first and foremost, the good news about Jesus and God's promise of forgiveness and eternal life in Him, the very thing that creates saving faith in the first place. Faith is only as good as its object. If you believe that you can jump into the arms of a 4-year-old girl and she will catch you, you will hurt yourself (and probably her too), because the object of your faith is not strong enough and so your faith is incorrect and misplaced. In the same way, if you believe that you are going to heaven because you are a good person, that is not saving faith, because the object is incorrect and false. Because apart from Jesus Christ and His work on our behalf, you and I are not good people. Apart from Jesus, we are objects of God's wrath, we're dead men walking. But if you believe that you are going to heaven because Jesus has graciously paid for your sins and given you His righteousness, that is saving faith, because the object of your faith is correct and true.

But the object of faith, secondarily, is all of God's Word, because all of it has been put there to testify about Christ. To say, "All that matters is that you believe in Jesus," is a little misleading, because Jesus Himself commanded His disciples to teach all nations to obey everything He had commanded them. We don't want to fall into the trap of saying, "We can just

cut out a few select passages like John 3:16 and Ephesians 2:8-9 and throw away the rest.” God didn’t give us the rest of His Word by mistake. Faith always wants more of God’s word to hang on to and to digest.

If it’s true that it’s the strength of the object of faith that counts, then it’s also true that the strength of the faith itself does not matter. To go back to the ice illustration, if you get down on all fours when you go out on the ice, because a large part of you is scared that the ice is going to give way, even though you creep and tremble the whole way out, you will still make it out there or across the ice, because the object of your faith is good; the ice is thick enough to hold you. In the same way, even though the woman from our Gospel lesson tried to sneak in unnoticed to touch Jesus’ robe, and later came trembling before him, Jesus still told her, “Your faith has made you well.” It wasn’t the strength of her faith that saved her, but the strength of the object in which she placed her faith. In other words, it was Jesus Himself, not the woman’s strong faith, which brought God’s blessings to her.

That doesn’t mean that Jesus wants us to be content with a weak faith. If we are content with weak faith, our weak faith will eventually disintegrate. Rather, Jesus wants us to pray as the father of the demon-possessed boy did, **Lord, I do believe; help my unbelief** (Matthew 9:24), and to grow in faith through increased hearing and study of His Word.

Last week we saw the biblical teaching of objective, historical justification—that on Good Friday Jesus paid for the sins of the entire world and on Easter Sunday God declared that justification to be finished by raising Jesus to life. But it is just as important to talk about subjective justification—how the Good Friday declaration of innocence is personally applied to us personally God’s gift of faith. Saving faith, faith that trusts in Jesus as our Savior from sin and leans completely on His grace as the source of our salvation, is a gift which we are given by God. And what an incredible gift it is! What an amazing blessing that just as God spoke on day one and light was created, He has also created faith in our hearts to scatter the darkness of unbelief. And we pray that He will continually increase our faith as we walk the road to heaven. If He gives us time, we’ll continue over the next three weeks to look at the means God uses to give us saving faith and to strengthen that faith within us: His holy Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion. For now, may God Almighty—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—keep you in that one true faith and in your Baptismal grace until life everlasting. Amen.