

Grace Through Faith

Besides the saints of the Old and New Testaments, there are many heroes of the Faith. These include such people as John and Charles Wesley, Francis Asbury, Phillip William Otterbein, Peter Cartwright, and Martin Luther. 503 years ago, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church. Today we celebrate that event as Reformation Sunday.

Luther, a devout Augustinian monk, agonized many long hours and sleepless nights over the questions of his relationship with God and his eternal destiny. A faithful Catholic, he had diligently practiced everything his Church prescribed for him to do, but he continually struggled for the assurance that he had made peace with God. A sense of divine forgiveness eluded him while his soul was continually tormented by guilt and condemnation.

In 1515 Luther gave a series of lectures at Wittenberg University on the Epistle to the Romans; it was then he had a spiritual break through, as the Holy spirit brought the message of Romans 1:16-17 home to him. His life was changed, and his relationship with God became personal and real:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Martin Luther experienced the true meaning of salvation for the first time when he finally realized that one is saved by faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross and not by individual effort, penance or good works. He came to accept God’s free gifts of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love.

Although a loyal Catholic since his birth in November of 1483, Luther, along with many others, had come to recognize the dishonesty that plagued the Roman Catholic Church for sixteenth century. Popes, cardinals, bishops, and many parish clergy were corrupt. Noblemen of Europe would often purchase the office of a cardinal or bishop for their own sons. Even when forbidden to marry, Roman clergy kept mistresses and fathered illegitimate children. Although devout clergy were to be found in the rank and file, many priests were not true Christians and often did not believe in Jesus, the Bible, or the orthodox doctrines of the Church.

Grace Through Faith

The Catholic Church had become known for the practice of selling indulgences, in which a monetary payment was made to the church in return for the absolving of one's sins and/or a supposed release from purgatory after death. This practice outraged Luther and many other faithful Christians. The Roman Church taught that when people sinned, they had to confess their sins to a priest.

However, they could not be totally forgiven until they performed an act of penance, a voluntary self-punishment inflicted as an outward expression of repentance. The priest would give the confessor homework to do in order before receiving forgiveness, prayers to pray or a good deed to perform, but the requirement of doing penance could often be cancelled if the confessor would buy an indulgence, which would abolish the need for penance. Indulgences could also be purchased to free your deceased relatives from suffering in purgatory. In other words, the Church taught that divine forgiveness could be bought and sold.

The act of penance can be dated back to the Old Testament practice of donning sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning or repentance. Not only was this act physically enduring but was also emotionally taxing as David experienced in Psalms 69:10-11: "When I weep and fast, I must endure scorn; when I put on sackcloth, people make sport of me."

But as we read in Psalm 51:17, what God truly desires for our repentance is a broken spirit, that we come humbly before God acknowledging our sin and proclaiming God's goodness: "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise."

His study of the Epistle to the Romans brought Martin Luther to saving faith and assured him of his salvation. In his personal testimony Luther wrote: "My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement 'the just shall live by faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning. . . .This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven."

Grace Through Faith

Coming to that divine moment was the result of agonizing spiritual warfare. Thankfully, Luther had a mentor and spiritual father in John von Staupitz, the vicar-general of the Augustinian order.

Luther would often unburden his soul to his friend, confessing his fear of eternal damnation, his endless attempts to make himself pleasing to God, and his hopeless sense of not being able to justify himself before God and earn the assurance of his salvation. Staupitz encouraged his young friend, “Look not on your own imaginary sins, but look at Christ crucified, where your real sins are forgiven, and hold with deep courage to God.” It was Staupitz that led Luther to trust the crucifixion of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Today many of us face the same spiritual struggles that Luther faced 500 years ago. God’s plan of salvation is so simple, but we make it something so complicated. We are programmed through our consumer nature to pay for everything we receive and are naturally skeptical about anything that is advertised as being free. But while the retail price of our salvation is a free gift to us received by faith, the wholesale price was paid by Jesus – at a very high cost.

Prior to his spiritual awakening, Luther attempted to win his salvation and God’s approval. He would fast for days, pray all night, perform acts of penance hour after hour. He came to the point that he hated God, as he realized everything he did to justify himself in God’s eyes was insufficient. Luther found himself on a fruitless journey in which the harder he strived, the longer the path became.

Like Luther we are prone to feel we must work our way to heaven, but “The just or the righteous, the two words are the same in the Greek, still live by faith.” We are all sinners as we read in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Salvation is by grace; it is something we cannot earn and do not deserve. Paul’s words to Titus in Titus 3:4-7 are the only way anyone can find peace with God:

“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

Grace Through Faith

Living by faith means we are saved by God's mercy, not because of righteous deeds we have done, for God and God alone is righteous. The Bible continually confirms that not one of us is righteous. Look at Isaiah 64:6: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away."

We also read in Romans 10:10-11: "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, 'Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.'"

Living by faith means to stop depending upon our own ability to achieve salvation, We must acknowledge that no act of piety, no moral goodness, nothing else can save us. We must place complete trust in what Jesus has done in His death on the cross to save us and give us eternal life.

As a reminder, we can look at the word 'Faith' as an acronym:

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When we come to that place of total surrender to the Lordship of Jesus, He justifies us. To justify means "Just as if I Had Never Sinned." John Wesley includes the doctrine of "Justification by Faith Alone" in his Articles of Religion: "We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works of deservings; wherefore, that we are justified by faith only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort."

When Martin Luther accepted the simple Biblical truth and looked to Christ crucified and His finished work for us all on the cross, it became to him a gate to heaven. Has it had that same impact on you? If not, it can right this very moment. Start looking and trusting only in Christ crucified as your salvation.