

In the Reformation, that recovery of Biblical truth, no teaching was more central than that of justification: that we are saved, declared righteous, by grace through faith in Christ alone. Luther himself said that on justification “stands all that we teach and practice.” It was said to be the article of faith on which the Church stands or falls.

If you don’t get how you are saved correct, then everything else falls apart or becomes meaningless. But when, by God’s grace, you do understand it rightly, then many other blessings flow out of it.

It is this key teaching that the Holy Spirit speaks of so clearly through St. Paul in our Epistle lesson. There, we hear about (1) our condition before God saves us, (2) how and why God saves – justifies – us, and (3) what it is to live as someone justified by God in Christ Jesus. So let’s look closely at this wonderful portion of Scripture, both that the Spirit would strengthen our faith against the attacks of the devil and also that we would be better equipped to share this Good News with the world.

In order to understand what a great gift salvation is, you have to understand what you are without it. This is why St. Paul starts off this section as he does. “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.” Talk about jarring language!

Before God comes to you, you’re spiritually dead. Not sick. Not weak. Not lost. Not confused. Not indifferent. Dead. Just as bodily death is the unnatural separation of body and soul, spiritual death is the separation from God and His life and goodness.

And just like dead people in the cemetery can’t dig their way out of their graves, you can’t dig yourself out of the trespasses and sins under which you’re buried. On your own, you can’t do anything about them, because dead people can’t do anything...because that’s what being dead means. Apart from Christ, you can’t try harder, you can’t do a good enough job, nothing.

Being dead means that you absolutely need God. Life doesn’t come about on its own, regardless of what evolutionary atheists might claim. Life only comes from God. God alone has life in Himself. All other living beings receive their life from Him. So by saying that you’re dead, the Scriptures are teaching both that you can’t do anything about your sins and also that only God can save you from them.

As if being dead wasn’t bad enough, St. Paul continues to describe the terrible state of humanity without God. He speaks of the trespasses and sins “in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.”

This comes as a hammer blow to a popular idea, popular even among some Christians, namely that all people are truly good at heart, or at least have some good buried deep down somewhere. Yet what does the word of God say here? Men walk in trespasses and sins because they are following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit at work in the sons of disobedience.

Who is this prince, this spirit? Satan! The devil! Until the Holy Spirit drives him out, it is the devil and his demons who steer the hearts of men. He may not openly possess them in an obvious,

visible way, but he's still there, leading men to rebel against the God who created them. It's what he's been doing from the beginning. This is why the old Baptismal rites would contain an exorcism, to drive out this evil foe by the power of God's word, that the Holy Spirit, would come to dwell in the person's heart.

Maybe we'd think that, well then, people are actually good, they're just enslaved to the devils, committing trespasses and sins grudgingly. This idea too is demolished by the next verse: "among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind."

We once dwelt among these sons of disobedience, and we didn't do this against our will. Rather, we were gladly following the passions, the lusts, the urges, of our flesh. And these passions go right along with the spirits of wickedness. We carry out the desires of both body and mind, and these both align with the evil one.

The prince of this world sat ruling in our hearts, and he didn't have to overcome our desires, but rather had those desires already in tune with him. Thus, as St. Paul says at the end of verse 3, we "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." Our very nature is poisoned by sin.

In three short verses, the Scriptures make it clear that, apart from God, all men are spiritually dead, enslaved to evil spirits, and guided by sinful desires.

It would be totally hopeless, but then we get to two incredible words: "But God." These two little words mark the turning point, the shift in the story. Man is dead, controlled by wickedness, unable to change himself. But there is God, who comes to the aid of man. The Creator comes to His broken creation. Man cannot do anything, so God, the Almighty, does everything.

And this God is not an angry one, one who comes in wrath and fury. Nor is He indifferent, a god who would remain aloof from this pitiful world. No, this God, the true and only God, is a God who is rich in mercy, a God full of great love. This is who God is.

He is merciful, sparing those who deserve His just punishment. He is loving, and loving in the correct sense. His love is not a warm fuzzy feeling, or a brief flash of passion, but rather a deep sense of desiring the good of the other before His own good. This divine love is sacrificial, not selfish.

And this love isn't just an abstract idea, floating around in the mind of God. No, this great love is directed toward us. God's love is directed toward each and every one of you – no exceptions!

God is fully aware of our situation. He knows that apart from Him we are ruled by forces opposed to Him. But He still loves us. We read, "...He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses." He didn't look at you and I and decide that we were too far gone. And dead is as far gone as you can get! No, He saw that we were spiritually dead, and He loved us anyways!

Furthermore, His love causes Him to act. Even though we were dead in sin, He loved us with a great love that caused Him to make us alive with Christ. He did what only God can do – bring the dead to life.

He came to us, buried six feet under all our trespasses and wickedness, and He pulled us out of that grave with His mighty arm.

Our souls were rotting, sinking down toward final destruction in hell, but the loving and merciful God came and brought us to life once more.

We were guided by the spirits of destruction who were leading us to the abyss, but He came and drove the demons out and put His Spirit in their place. God the Holy Spirit then enables us both to will and to do good, rather than pursuing our sinful desires. We were dead, but God... and now we are alive!

How does our loving God do this? St. Paul writes that God “made us alive together with Christ.” Christ Jesus – the Son of God – He is the means of salvation. It isn’t our lives that we are given. We are given the life of Christ. As Paul would write to the Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

Jesus had declared that, “as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will.” The Son brings us new life from heaven. Now, for Him to give His life to us, He had to give it up on the cross. All those sins and trespasses in which we were dead had to be paid for. And so Christ came and through the cross atoned for them. We were buried under sin, but Jesus came and with His cross dug us out, taking our place in the grave.

Because Jesus was totally righteous, having no sin of His own, the grave could not hold Him. As Paul writes in the previous chapter of Ephesians, the Father, through the working of His great might, “raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.”

From this place of exaltation, Christ then shares with us the spoils of His victory. The Father takes and washes away our sins in Holy Baptism and places His name on us, marking us as His beloved children. He puts His Spirit in our hearts and clothes us with His Son’s righteousness.

And we have all this right now! St. Paul says that the Father “has raised us up with Him and seated us in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Note that it doesn’t say that we will be raised up or will be seated. It’s something that’s already happened. Right now, we are raised up! Right now, we are seated in the heavenly places!

It may not look like it, but right now you are in the Kingdom of God. You have been joined to Christ, and so as Christ lives and has been raised up, so you too are alive, raised with Christ.

You can have confidence as you face the trials of this life and the attacks of the evil one that you have nothing to fear from them, because you have been brought into the heavenly realms by the King of Heaven Himself and they cannot pull you down from there. You will never die, but live forever, because it is the unending life of God that you’ve been given in Christ.

That life will continue even when this earthly life draws to a close, when you will get to witness “in the coming ages... the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” We have been raised up now, and in the eternal age to come we will get to witness the full glory and splendor of Christ as we dwell in His presence.

All of this – salvation, life, eternal peace – it all comes as a free gift. This is made abundantly clear in the familiar verses that follow. “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.”

Our loving and merciful God has done all this out of grace, meaning that He freely gave something we did not deserve. He gives us the gift of faith in our hearts, faith which clings to Christ and lets us trust in Him. And this is not our doing, not ours at all.

Remember, we were dead, living according to spirits and desires that were totally opposed to God. There is nothing in us that could or would choose to follow Christ. But God – to go back to those two key words – comes and through the Word and Baptism plants faith in our hearts. There’s no part of it that we’ve done, hence there’s nothing that we can boast about.

All of this – being raised to new life, being made a member of God’s family, being granted faith to believe it all – this is all entailed in that idea of justification we started with. We are justified – declared just or righteous – for the sake of Christ alone, because of the mercy, grace, and love of God.

Our reading wraps up with one last, big point. Having been justified, we Christians are different than we were before. God has transformed us. “We are God’s workmanship,” new creations in Christ.

What should we do with this new life? “Good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Note Paul’s repeating of the language of “walking.” Before being saved by God, our walk of life was one of trespasses and sins. We were being governed by evil forces and passions. Now that we have been set free from sins and given the Spirit of God to dwell in our hearts, will our walk of life look the same as before? No, of course not! We are joined to Christ, made alive in him, and so our life will reflect that.

He has brought us into the light, and we now are to reflect that light to the world around us. Our sinful flesh will try to draw us back into sin, and our sinful mind will try to justify sin by saying that since we are saved by Christ, we can live however we want. To do this, though, is to deny the great gift we’ve been given, to seek to bury ourselves again under our old sins. And that’s not God’s will for us.

No, His will is that we do those good works which He has prepared for us beforehand. Our Lord gives us many, many opportunities where we can show the love of Christ to our neighbors and tell them about the wonderful grace and mercy God has shown to us in Christ. These good works are ways in which God uses us to bring about His good and gracious will, even perhaps leading others to His kingdom.

Our God gives us a new walk of life that isn’t aimless wandering through life, but a purposeful journey toward the age to come.

As we walk that path, we do as justified, saved, redeemed people of God. We are joined to the Son of God, freed from demons and sinful passions, and raised from death to life eternal. There is nothing greater than this justification, as our Lutheran fathers attested. In justification, we have Christ. And Christ is everything.

In His holy name, amen.