

ALONE : SOLA GRATIA

In this fourth study on Reformation fundamentals, we look at the idea of 'Grace Alone' or *Sola Gratia*. Below is a summary of this, from the website *Compelling Truth*:

"Why is it essential to believe and teach that salvation is provided by grace alone (*sola gratia*)? First, Scripture is clear that no person seeks God of his or her own initiative: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Rom 3:10-11). Instead, God must reach out to sinful humanity (Rom 3:23). Christ died for us while we were still ungodly (Rom 5:8). Further, Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Lk 19:10). He actively pursues sinners, calling us to faith in His name.

When a person does accept Christ by grace through faith, Jesus is the One who gives eternal life (Jn 3:16) and makes us a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Once we have become a believer in Christ, God's Spirit provides the power to live for Him and keeps us in the love of God (Rom 8:37-39). Ultimately, Christ also gives us assurance of eternal life. (1 Jn 5:13)

Salvation is by God's grace alone because He is the One who created us, provided a way of salvation for us, seeks us, gives us faith, changes us when we do believe in Him, empowers us to live for Him, keeps us in His love, and will take us to be with Him for eternity. At no point do our good works provide salvation. This is why *sola gratia* was not only an important belief during the Protestant Reformation, but remains essential to Christian faith and living today"¹

READ: EPHESIANS 2:1-10

🗨️ What things stood out for you, from the sermon this week?

🗨️ In this passage, there are a number of opposites and comparisons drawn. What do you think Paul was doing, when he was making a comparison between these things? Are these verses saying that living and enjoying life as human beings, is somehow inherently bad and sinful?

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| • Living in transgressions and sins | vs | living in good works prepared by God |
| • This world | vs | the heavenly realms |
| • Death | vs | life |
| • Sinful nature ('flesh') | vs | union with Christ |
| • Wrath | vs | mercy and salvation |
| • Under / following the 'ruler' | vs | seated with Christ |
| • By nature | vs | by grace |
| • Not from works | vs | through faith. ² |

🗨️ One of the reformers, John Calvin, wrote about the doctrine of 'Total Depravity': "This doctrine teaches there is no part of our human nature which has not been affected by the taint of sin. Our intellect, emotions, will, and even physical bodies, have been corrupted by the Fall."³ What do we learn, from Eph 2:1-3, about the depths of our depravity?

🗨️ Snodgrass, though, makes the following observation: "This text speaks of the universality of sin, but it *does not reject the value of humanity*. It points to *pervasive depravity*, a depravity that extends to all human thought and action, but it does not suggest *total depravity* in the sense of absolute worthlessness. All humans - whether believers or not - are created in the image of God and have enormous value and capability. Despite depravity, God finds something worth loving."⁴ What is it, do you think, that God sees as 'worth loving' in us, even though we were so sinful?

🗨️ In Eph 2, Paul stresses the character and actions of God towards us. Reflect on these verses for a moment. What acts and characteristics of God stand out in these verses? As human beings, we are created in the image of God, so we have capacity to reflect some of these qualities. What are some of the ways that you have seen human beings act in these ways to each other? Why are the acts of God, so much superior to anything we can ever do?

- "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us" (v4),
- "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (v7),
- "it is the gift of God" (v8).

¹ <https://www.compellingtruth.org/sola-gratia.html>

² Snodgrass, K. (1996). *Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. p93.

³ <http://apologeticjunkie.blogspot.com/2009/09/john-calvin-on-total-depravity.html>

⁴ Snodgrass, K. (1996). *Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. p99.

❗ Our resurrection is directly connected with the resurrection of Christ: “Almost as if he cannot believe the depth of God’s love, in 2:5 Paul repeats the statement from 2:1: “even when we were dead in transgressions.” The two verbs in 2:6 (“raised us up with Christ and seated us with him”) provide a commentary on “made us alive with Christ” in 2:5. These expressions do not refer to future resurrection, but to our being raised with Christ in the past, to being “co-resurrected” with Christ. Paul’s theology asserts that Christians were included in the redemptive events of Christ’s death and resurrection. The threefold repetition of “with” is significant and underscores the Pauline emphasis on participation with Christ. To enjoy salvation requires being joined to the Savior (cf. Rom. 7:4.) The gift cannot be separated from the Giver.”⁵

💬 Many of us probably understand the idea of being ‘raised from the dead’ after we physically die. But why does Paul see this as being, essentially, something that happened in the past?

💬 Surviving a life-threatening situation can change our perspective on life. Paul has written that our ‘sin-sickness’ had a terminal prognosis. But now, we have been (spiritually) raised from the dead, made alive with Christ, and are now seated with Christ in the heavenly places. We are like people who have a second chance of life. How does that perspective change your view of life? What hopes and dreams do you have about living this new life “in Christ” and sharing this life with others?

💬 These verses mention three dimensions of time: “We were” (past) ... “we are” (present) ... “in the ages to come” (future). There is a direct connection between the actions and plans of God in the past, with what God expects us to be doing in the present. In Eph 2:10 we read: For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” In Eph 2:9, Paul had written that we are not saved “by works”, but in the next breath, he says that we are saved, and pre-ordained, to do “good works”. What is the difference?

❗ In his sermon, Steve used a quote from the NIV Application Commentary on this passage.

“The church’s failure with faith (2:8–10). A colossal problem exists in moving from faith as used in this text to faith as understood in the modern world. What pernicious and devious force has so subverted the meaning of the word “faith?” As pointed out above, Paul’s understanding of “faith” includes attachment, union, and solidarity with Christ, whereas in much of the church - including the evangelical church - “faith” means assent, decision, or the teachings one affirms. Whereas in Paul’s thought “faith” is life-changing and productive of good deeds, for much of the church change is desirable with faith, but not necessary, and “not by works” means one does not have to do anything. A decision, the right prayer prayed, is enough to go to heaven. How did faith in Christ get perverted into thought about Christ? How did all the focus get placed on getting into heaven? How did anyone read the New Testament and conclude we do not have to do anything?

Many Christians have reacted against the idea that salvation is some transaction with God to ensure going to heaven. Martin Luther and the Reformers, of course, reacted against the excesses of indulgences and the thought that people could gain their access to God by what they did. Much of Paul’s thought, including this passage, is designed to prevent any such idea. But we distort the very idea of faith when we fail to see that it joins us to Christ and affects the whole reality of our lives. The faith that many people profess is nothing more than a false and *groundless* hope of escaping judgment. We do nothing to gain our salvation and life with God, *but such a joining to God does everything to us*. To build a bridge from the text to our situation we must recover and proclaim a biblical faith, one that involves us with Christ, effects a new creation in us, and propels us into doing the good things God expects. Faithfulness in Christian living is not an optional part of the faith.”⁶

💬 In James 2:14-26, we read that faith without works is dead. What is your response to this quote?

APPLICATION: In 1 John 3:1-3, we read: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” Some people think that they are ‘good enough’ to be accepted by God – and can’t accept that their sin will be judged by God. Others find it hard to believe, that God would ever forgive us, let alone accept us, because we are so sinful – and find it hard to accept the love and grace of God. In her song, “You Say”, Lauren Daigle, notes we find our identity, as we bathe in the love and grace of God. Remind each other how much God loves you, and showed that, by sending Jesus.

I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough; Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up; Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low? Remind me once again just who I am, because I need to know; The only thing that matters now is everything You think of me; In You I find my worth, in You I find my identity:

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing; You say I am strong when I think I am weak; And You say I am held when I am falling short; And when I don't belong, oh, You say I am Yours ...⁷

⁵ Snodgrass, K. (1996). *Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. p100-101.

⁶ Snodgrass, K. (1996). *Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. p114-115.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slaT8Jl2zpl>