

Many members. One body united in Christ.

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Ephesians 2:1-10

16 August, Anno Domini 2026

Redeemed of the Lord,

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

These words from St. Paul are extremely important to know if we are to have a right and true faith. Here the apostle teaches very clearly about conversion, about our condition before conversion, and how that condition is changed. And when we simply let the Holy Spirit speak without trying to explain it away, it is quite clear and quite simple how an individual is saved. More than that, a right understanding of conversion is a fountain of comfort and life for all who believe.

God the Holy Spirit, speaking through the apostle Paul, begins by making sure that we know our condition before conversion. We have to be careful not to confuse this with the condition of man in paradise before the fall into sin or the condition of the one who has been converted. This is absolutely crucial. Any failure to distinguish properly between the three or to try to soften the Holy Spirit's words about fallen man has devastating effects on all the other articles of faith.

In paradise, man's will was perfect. Adam and Eve had perfect knowledge of God. Their will was free. They knew their Creator's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and they had the ability and the freedom to either obey or disobey, to honor God or reject Him. Without this freedom, man couldn't actually love God. Love is not found at the end of coercion. Coercion produces only produces fear.

And you know how that story went. Our first parents used their freedom to rebel against God and reach out for what wasn't given to them. That changed things. It changed man. The question is how? And how you answer that question determines all the rest of your doctrine, all the rest of your understanding of salvation. And today, as we give thanks to God for the rich blessings which He has poured out upon this congregation since it was established and later chartered, the answer to that question tells us why and to what end the Lord brought forth Faith Lutheran Church.

Led by the Holy Spirit, the apostle answers the question quite unequivocally. He

says “you were dead in your trespasses and your sins...”. Man was alive. Sin made him dead. Not wounded. Not dinged up a bit. Dead. When you’re dead you can do absolutely nothing. You can’t make a start of anything. You can’t make any choices or decisions. You can’t try. You’re dead. The only way anything about you changes is if some outside force acts upon you. This is exactly what God warned Adam would happen if Adam disobeyed God’s Word - “in the day that you eat of [the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you will surely die.” And they did. They cut themselves off from God. And when you are cut off from God, you are cut off from life. You are dead. There isn’t a little spark of life still burning in you. God is the source of life. No God. No life. Period. The apostle says “[we] were by nature children of wrath.” The active rebellion against God so corrupted our nature that our wills were taken captive to sin and death. Paul writes to the Galatian Christians “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit.” And then he goes on to point out some of those desires and works, saying “And the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.” (Galatians 5:17a, 19) To give yourself to such works is to jump back into death.

Freedom was lost in Eden. After the fall and before conversion, all men are now in slavery “following the prince of the power of the air...liv[ing] in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.” (Ephesians 2:2) Our nature can’t, won’t, and doesn’t want to do anything else but sin. It hates God. It hates His will and strives against it with every fiber of its being. All our will wants is sin. There is absolutely no part of our will, according to God, that wants even the tiniest shred of good. God said it this way in Genesis “Every intention of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only sin from his youth.” (Genesis 6:5)

But this is not what all teach. And it is so important that we recognize those who teach falsely about this because the consequences for the conscience are devastating. Salvation is very different depending on what happened to us because of the fall. Many teach in Christ’s name, either explicitly or implicitly, that though the image of God in man suffered damage at the fall, not all was lost. They falsely teach that a spark of good remains within our fallen nature and that spark is able and required, on its own, apart from the Holy Spirit, to at least begin to love God rightly and to keep the commandments, to not be like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, tax collectors. In this scenario, you are responsible for making a start of your salvation, doing as much as is in you in order to move God to reach down and help you to finish your salvation.

Our confessions sometimes call this semi-Pelagianism after the heretic Pelagius who taught that man's nature wasn't corrupted and we are completely able by our own powers to love God and our neighbor according to the Law. But semi-Pelagianism is really just full-on Pelagianism in disguise. If even a part of your salvation depends upon you, even if it is 0.1%, then you have no hope of salvation. What certainty do you have that you have accomplished that 0.1% as perfectly as God demands? Can anyone honestly say to God that they have done everything they can to obey His commands with their whole heart? That 0.1% may as well be 100% because, according to this false teaching, Christ didn't do enough and now it's up to you.

Other denominations will go even a step further and just embrace full Pelagianism like an old friend. They will put the words "Free Will" in the names of their churches. And even if they don't put it in their name, the theology remains the same. It is, so they teach, completely within the power of sinners and it is required of them to choose to believe in God, to decide to follow Christ, to make Him their Lord and Savior without any working of the Holy Spirit. What they are saying is that sinful man can keep the First Commandment. Of course, Jesus did die, but that doesn't matter a hill of beans until you do Him the great honor of accepting Him, giving Him your heart (that oh so beautiful and pristine treasure) and then, using all your innate power and goodness, to serve God and show Him what a good Christian you are (and desperately try to convince yourself). Thus they prevent little children from being received by Jesus in Holy Baptism because a) they are supposedly not yet really sinners because they haven't yet developed a sinful will and b) because they are not old enough and wise enough to choose to follow Jesus. These poor little ones are left either to an ambiguous grace of God which is never spoken of or promised by God in the Bible or they somehow ride into heaven on the strength of their parents' faith and good intentions, something which God explicitly rejects ("Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life" Psalm 49:7).

The problem is that these kinds of false doctrine are exactly what the sinful flesh wants to hear. It wants to hear about how good it can be and how capable it is. It is why such teaching is so popular. It robs God of His glory and deludes man into thinking that he can retain some glory for himself. It leads people to believe that they can actually fear, love, and trust in God above all things, i.e. be good people. And this, in turn, either leads to the hypocrisy of the Pharisee or the despair of Judas.

These teachings are blasphemous and aren't to be tolerated by God's children for

even a moment out of both a love of God and a love for fellows sinners who are being robbed of God's great mercy! God Himself will not tolerate those who teach or those who believe such things, who trust in themselves that they are righteous, because such teaching and faith rob people of the true salvation which our Lord Jesus Christ shed His precious Blood to win for us. These teachings create proud Pharisees rather than penitent tax collectors. They must be clearly and plainly be pointed out and rejected in love and gentleness.

The words of St. Paul in Ephesians thunder against both versions of this false doctrine. "You were dead." Dead people don't make a beginning or end of anything. They don't make decisions to accept or reject things. They're dead. And they are stuck in that death as the Word of God declares. If the dead are to live again, someone else must make them alive.

And that is the good news! That is the true and only Gospel which God has been declaring in this place for the past 24 years! Let these words of St. Paul ring in your ears and settle deep within your heart - "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, **made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.**" God saved you when you were in the midst of death. Start to finish. He begins your salvation. He carries it along. He brings it to completion on the Last Day. This is exactly what we confess in the Third Article of the creeds. This is the sanctifying work of God the Holy Spirit whereby He graciously makes and keeps us alive through the means of grace until the day of our Lord's reappearing. God made you alive! You who were once dead, you who once walked according to the flesh with its desires, you whose Old Adam has been drowned and died in the baptismal waters - you have been made alive by the same Word joined to those same waters. You didn't ask. You didn't earn. God did it all for you because He is merciful. You were God's enemy and God made you His child. You were dead, separated from God, drowning in sin, serving the will of the devil, fighting God tooth and nail. But now, by grace, you have been saved. God has set you free. God has opened your grave. God has spoken, declaring you 100% forgiven because of Jesus' death for you. Jesus is alive and His life is now yours. He is risen. So are you. He, the Son of Mary, is now seated in the heavenly places. In Him, so are you and you will one day join Him there along with the multitude of other sinners whose trust is only in Christ Jesus - not in the good they tried to do, not in the good they started to do. Only the good that Jesus did.

This is conversion. The dead being made alive by God. Conversion is completely the work of God. He causes the good news of Jesus to be proclaimed to you. He brings you to repentance, to see your sin and be terrified by it, to cry out “Lord, have mercy on me, make atonement for me, the sinner”. He speaks the word of absolution to you through your pastor. He raises you up out of eternal death by baptizing you into the atoning death of Jesus so that just as Christ is risen from the dead through the glory of the Father, you too might walk in the newness of life - Jesus’ own life which He imparts to you as true food and drink in the Holy Communion. And now, as He sits at the right hand of God in the heavenly places you are with Him. He is your life. All the glory of your salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb. None of this is of your own doing because you couldn’t do it, not even the smallest bit of it. But that is what makes it so certain and a cause for unimaginable joy! The one who trusts only in Christ can say with all boldness and confidence “I am saved because God saved me.” The baptized can say “My sins are forgiven because God forgives me.”

Your salvation is entirely the work and free gift of God. There is nothing for you to boast in of yourself. You have done no work deserving of eternal life nor have you completed your salvation by your better life. You are the workmanship of God who is abundantly rich in mercy and desires your salvation. Then, once you have been converted, a process which happens anew each day, each time you repent and receive the forgiveness of your sins, each time you draw on the promise of Holy Baptism, then the Holy Spirit begins to turn and reshape your will to desire the things of God. He causes you to begin to delight in keeping the Commandments, though it will remain a constant battle until your sinful flesh is purified in the resurrection. Having received the gift of the Holy Spirit you begin to walk in the way of love for God and your neighbor. But again, this is only after you have been converted. It is not a cause of your salvation or even the completing of your salvation. It is the fruit of your salvation.

And it is that this glorious Gospel may go forth with all clarity and purity in this little corner of the world, that God graciously planted this congregation and has blessed it and kept it. It is our great joy and privilege to proclaim boldly and confidently the full Word of God in the midst of this fallen world because it is precisely by that Word and in no other way, that God the Holy Spirit is at work to bring Pharisees and tax collectors to repentance and to place all their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ who atoned for the sins of the whole world. This congregation can give no greater gift to the world around us than to faithfully declare to all “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.” (Ephesians 2:8-10) This is

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what is to drive and animate everything we do as a congregation - to get this good news out, to seek and even create every opportunity we can in the course of our daily vocations to share this good news with everyone around us so that they too might no longer remain dead in their sin and their trespasses, falsely trusting in themselves that they are righteous. We want all to know the rich comfort and peace of the true doctrine of salvation.

That is especially true of the flock that the Lord has already gathered here, including the littlest ones in our midst. While we certainly desire with our Lord that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, we dare not forget the high duty and honor of filling our children with the God-appointed means of salvation. Having brought them in faith to the font so that God would save them and make them His children, it is imperative, commanded by God, to feed that faith every single day of their lives with the greatest zeal, just as we need to do for our own, so that they do not fall prey to the devil's false teachers and the world's lies. We dare not rest on good intentions or wait until they are older or until we have more time. The devil certainly doesn't.

And, so that parents and grandparents are better equipped to carry out this God-given task and thereby bring their children to hunger for and receive the Lord's Supper faithfully as soon as possible, we are restructuring the process whereby our children are brought from the life-giving waters of the font to the life-sustaining food of the Lord's Supper. Instead of waiting for an arbitrary age, by very intentionally filling our children's ears with God's Word every day, reciting together the primary texts of the Christian faith as we have been doing in Bible Class this summer, and praying together, we will let the Holy Spirit teach them and form their faith long before they can speak. Then, when the head of the household believes that they are able to confess the chief parts of the faith and examine themselves, they can invite the pastor and their Elder to come and examine their child so that they may begin receiving Holy Communion and by it be strengthened in faith toward God and in fervent love toward their neighbor. In this way, together as God's people gathered in this place, we will carry out His gracious work to feed the lambs entrusted to our care.

In this we also are seeking to make catechizing our children less a downloading of information and more a forming of a life of daily prayer and study of God's Word that endures long after they are no longer under our roof. These little ones need the gifts of God just as badly as we do and we need them, as members of this body, to help us remain steadfast in the true faith in these gray and latter days. It is our fer-

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vent prayer that the Lord would richly bless these efforts and strengthen our congregation through them that the bright beacon of His Word would shine ever brighter from this place to enlighten those who still live in darkness.

God grant to each of you the joy and comfort of knowing that it is God who has made you alive, who has made you His child, who has made you a Christian. May He continue to richly bless this congregation which He has so graciously gathered together by and around His Word and the precious Sacraments, that we would fervently guard the deposit of the true faith which has been entrusted to us. And with great joy and fervent zeal may we continue to confess the glorious truth of our salvation which is alone by grace through faith to the praise and honor of His Name.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.