

## **“Effective Through Faith”**

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On June 23, 2018, twelve junior soccer players and their coach entered the Tham Luang Nang Non cave in the Chiang Rai Province of Thailand after football practice. What began as an exercise in childhood curiosity turned into an international obsession as heavy rains flooded the cave and blocked the team’s exit, trapping them in what appeared to be a hopeless situation. Their plight was highlighted regularly on news programs around the world, and some 24-hour news station ran hours-long programming on what seemed like an impossible rescue effort. Efforts to locate the group were hampered by rising water levels and strong currents, and no contact was made for more than a week. On July 2, after advancing through narrow passages and muddy waters, two British divers found the group alive on an elevated rock about four kilometers from the cave entrance. After days of preparation and planning, all twelve boys and their coach were rescued from the cave by an international team that involved over 10,000 people including divers, police, soldiers, and representative from over 100 governmental agencies. The world rejoice as the children were pulled from the cave and rescued from what had appeared to be a hopeless situation, being lost in the darkness with no way to rescue themselves.

Incidents such as the Thai cave rescue continue to have a fascinating hold on the general public, perhaps because one of our greatest fears is being trapped or lost with no way to rescue ourselves from such a dire fate. It may be the fear of being trapped in a deep cave, a backyard well, or a coal mine with nothing at our disposal to find an exit. It may be a fear of our car breaking down on a lonely road with no cell phone reception and the nearest town far away. It may be a fear that does not affect us physically but is nonetheless very real: fear of abandonment, fear of being forgotten, fear of being isolated and left alone. The fear of being helplessly and hopelessly lost can haunt us even when there are no real dangers facing us.

By all outward appearances, Martin Luther should have been a person who could be happy with his life and what he had accomplished. While he chose to enter the priesthood in defiance of his father’s wishes that he become a lawyer, Luther’s brilliance was noticed by his superiors, and he rose quickly through the academic ranks to a teaching position at the University of Wittenberg at a young age. Unlike many people of his time, Luther had received a good education and could read not only his native German but also Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He was a well-respected member of the Augustinian Order and a valued colleague among his faculty mates. By his early thirties, Luther had accomplished far more than most people in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Saxony.

But Martin Luther was a tortured soul; he suffered from depression for most of his adult life and was haunted by his own feelings of sinfulness and inadequacy before God. He believed that God was a vengeful deity, one who would severely punish as severe a sinner as Luther felt himself to be. He

felt completely inadequate to serve as a priest; it is said that when he said his first Mass that the chalice shook in his hands as he elevated the Blood of Christ. Luther would spend hours in the confession booth seeking to atone for his sins, and never felt that he could reconcile himself with God. Luther believed that he was in as deep a cave as those Thai children, with no means of escaping or seeing the light.

One day, Luther was reading the scriptures when he came upon the words of St. Paul in his first chapter of Romans, in which the apostle quotes a passage from the book of the prophet Habakkuk:

- “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” – Romans 1:16-17; Habakkuk 2:4.

These words – “the righteous will live by faith” – were completely transformational for Luther. He had striven to make himself right with God according to the teachings of the Church; he had believed that it was his responsibility to climb out of the hole that his sinfulness had dug. But these words spoke a completely different message: that our salvation is not something we can accomplish or even participate in, for salvation is solely the act of God through Jesus Christ that we receive through faith. As Luther would later describe it, these words changed everything for him – and would play a critical role in changing the way generations of Christians have understood being reconciled with God through Jesus Christ:

- “I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. 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. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.
- “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his 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, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.”

Luther now understood that salvation is not something for which we are responsible or in which we must participate; salvation is a gift of God “by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith.” This transformed not only Luther’s understanding of his own relationship with God but also his preaching that became centered on justification, on how we are made right with God. He continued to study Paul’s letter to the Romans, which he came to regard as *“the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest form.”* (Preface to Romans). He

also became increasingly disturbed by a fundraising campaign that was touring Saxony to raise funds for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome led by John Tetzel, who was selling indulgences that promised liberation for oneself or one's loved ones from the torments of Purgatory. Through his understanding of salvation as reconciliation as a free gift of God through Christ's death and resurrection, Luther responded to what he believed to be an appalling misunderstanding of forgiveness by publishing his *Disputation for Clarifying the Power of Indulgences*, which became known as *The Ninety-Five Theses*. As a teacher of the church, Luther possessed the right to hold disputations on any subject and to preside over the granting of degrees, for which a candidate had to defend these written by his teacher. The theses for such debates were to be posted on the doors of the churches in town; so on October 31, 1517, Luther posted his Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints Day masses on November 1. This seemingly insignificant event sparked a revolution that became known as the Reformation and the beginning of the Lutheran church whose teaching is rooted in Luther's theology that "*a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law*." (Romans 3:28).

- "Luther's chief concern and the heart of what one scholar has aptly named the 'unexpected Reformation' was the reform of preaching and what bad preaching does to the faithful ... The chief threat to the Christian church occurs when its leaders and preachers leave the people to their own devices for avoiding God's works of judgment and forgiveness. Luther was convinced that believers could not buy their way around the law and judgment of God. The point of Christian piety was not to escape 'mortification' by purchasing indulgences. Instead, only by putting to death the old creature does the new creature of faith in God's promises come to life." – Timothy Wengert.

As we celebrate our Lutheran heritage on this Reformation Sunday, it is most appropriate that we hear Paul's words from his Letter to the Romans, which he wrote as an introduction to his teaching in advance of his visit to the churches in the capital of the Empire. He begins the epistle by making a case for the futility of attempting to reconcile ourselves before God by our own efforts, since such attempts to return to the Lord by our own understandings or efforts are as futile as trying to climb out of a deep cavern by ourselves. He states that "*the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth*" (1:18) and quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah in building his case that "*there is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no understand who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God ... Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known.*" (3:10-11, 15-17; Psalm 14:1-2, Isaiah 59:7-8). Taking the role of a prosecuting attorney building a case against the accused, Paul boldly declares that "*we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.*" (3:19).

The case against the accused appears to be airtight and irrefutable. Since "*no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes knowledge of sin*," therefore "*there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (3:20, 23). Our fate appears to be hopeless; we have fallen into a pit of our own sinfulness from which we are powerless to escape.

- “Sin is the pit into which we have fallen, but it is too deep for us to escape … We are responsible for our sin, but having allowed it to enter our lives, we are powerless to evict it. Like a criminal we unwittingly allow to enter our house and then have no power to evict, sin, once in control, prevents us from removing it.” – Paul Achtemeier.

We might expect that such a strong accusation would immediately be followed by an equally strong sentence of guilt and condemnation – but this is exactly where the message centers on the gospel message that is at the heart of Paul’s teaching and our Christian faith: “*… they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.*” (3:24-25). At the moment when we are expecting the worst, we receive surprisingly good news that changes everything: that we have been justified – made right – with God and forgiven all of our sins and transgressions through the gracious gift of God’s love in Jesus Christ. The Word of God comes to us as both Law and Gospel: the Law convicts us of our sinfulness and reminds us that “*by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him*” (*Small Catechism*), and drives us to the Gospel that proclaims to us that we have been reconciled to God through Christ’s death and resurrection, so that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (6:5). We confess that we cannot find our way out of the pit we have dug through our own sinfulness and rebellion against God, and rejoice that God has rescued us from all the powers that our separate us from God, including “*sin, death, and the power of the devil,*” through Christ’s “*holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death … in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally, this is most certainly true.*” (*Small Catechism*).

- “Therefore we conclude that we are justified before God, reconciled to him, and reborn by a faith that penitently grasps the promise of grace, truly enlivens the fearful mind, and is convinced that God is reconciled and propitious to us because of Christ.” – *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*.

Our salvation, our ability to live and serve as God’s people, is solely due to God’s actions in reconciling us to God and to one another through Christ’s death and resurrection. We are liberated from the bondage that imprisoned us, brought out of the dark caverns in which we were hopelessly trapped, because our gracious God “*in his divine forbearance … had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.*” (3:25-26). Our redemption is not based on what we can do for God, but on what God has done for us in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

- “Justification, and therewith all of salvation, is given to men through faith alone, *sola fide*. For justification and salvation depend only on God’s mercy, and this can be received only in an act of faith. Man’s ethical activity and ‘works’ have no place here. They can neither cause nor preserve salvation for us. It is only through faith that we are preserved to eternal life.” – Paul Althaus.

On this Reformation Sunday, we celebrate the good news that has been at the heart of the Lutheran Church's teaching and theology for over 500 years, that "*we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*" (3:28). But if this gift of grace is only "*effective through faith,*" does that mean that there is something that we must do to receive this blessing? Is grace dependent on the strength of our faith, and that if our faith is not sufficient that we will be denied God's forgiveness? Is faith a precondition for the reception of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ?

Such confusion can be averted when we understand that every aspect of our redemption and reconciliation is a gift of God – both the basis of this gift and our ability to receive it. Faith is not a human attribute, something we can nurture on our own; faith is a gift that God bestows upon us through the Holy Spirit, the one who "*has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith*" (*Small Catechism*). As the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles at Pentecost to proclaim the gospel of Christ, so does the gift of the Holy Spirit that we receive in Holy Baptism give us the ability to have faith and trust in the good news of God's gracious love for us in our Lord and Saviour. Through the Holy Spirit we are blessed with God's gifts of "*the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in God's presence both now and forever.*" (Isaiah 11:2).

- "God does not condition his forgiveness upon the expectation of future fulfillment. And man is not put right with God by any achievement, whether present or foreseen. On man's side the one prerequisite is faith, which means belief that God was in Christ seeking to save, trust that God will keep his promises, and commitment to his will and way. Faith is not an achievement. It is a gift. Yet it comes only through hearing and study of the Word." – Roland Bainton.

The world rejoiced when the twelve Thai soccer players and their coach were brought out of the cave in which they could have been entombed; but their liberation cost of lives of two Navy SEAL divers who died during the rescue. As we rejoice in the gift of God's grace that liberates us from the hopeless pits of sinfulness and despair into which we had fallen, we remember that our salvation is one of costly grace, because it came at the price of our Saviour's life. It is a gift that we never take for granted, but always value and live in a manner that is appropriate for people who have been so graciously freed from such a quagmire. The gracious love of God in Jesus Christ is a love that is "*so amazing so divine [that it] demands my soul, my life, my all.*" (ELW Hymn 803). As we celebrate the good news that is at the heart of our life and teaching as Lutherans, may we live in a manner appropriate to our status as God's liberated people: "*For all this, I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.*" (*Small Catechism*).

Amen.