ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 25, 2026 – REFORMATION SUNDAY (observed) The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: *"Saved by Grace through Faith in Christ"*

Jeremiah 31:31-34	(God will write His laws on His people's hearts)
Psalm 46	(The Lord is our refuge and strength when in trouble)
Romans 3:19-28	(We are justified with God by faith apart from works)
St. John 8:31-36	(Jesus sets us free from being enslaved by sin)

The great 19th century novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky told a story about a woman who found herself in hell and felt she did not belong there. Unable to bear the suffering, she cried out in agony for the mercy of God. The Lord listened and was moved with pity: "If you can remember one good deed that you did in your lifetime, I will help you," He said. Wracking her brain, she remembered that once she had given a starving neighbor an onion. God produced the onion, complete with stem. The woman grabbed the onion, and God began to pull her up and out of hell.

But those who were damned along with her grabbed hold of the woman's skirts to be lifted out, too. The stem of the onion held and would have saved them all, but the woman began to kick and scream for them to let go. As she thrashed about, trying to dislodge her fellow denizens, the struggle was too much for the onion. Its stem snapped, plunging them all back into the depths of hell.[1]

Dostoyevsky told this story as a way of illustrating that our souls are not saved by our good works. If all we have are good works without faith, we *will* indeed end up in hell. However, Salvation through good works was being taught in the 15th- and 16th-century Church of Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, and Thomas Cranmer. From the time the Christian Church was formed in the early first through third centuries, it gradually layered over the Gospel truth with human principles, and had begun to replace the authority of Holy Scripture with the authority of the Church and its clergy.

In October 1517, Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic Monk, had a powerful epiphany about God's plan for our salvation, the remedy for our sinful human nature as evidenced in our thoughts, words, and deeds, which St. Paul nails perfectly in Romans 7 (18a-25 EHV): "I know that good does not live in me, that is, in my sinful flesh. The desire to do good is present with me, but I am not able to carry it out. So I fail to do the good I want to do. Instead, the evil I do not want to do, that is what I keep doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who am doing it, but it is sin living in me. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is present with me. I certainly delight in God's law according to my inner self, but I see a different law at work in my members, waging war against the law of my mind and taking me captive to the law of sin, which is present in my members. What a miserable wretch I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Luther's radical vision was purely biblical. The Church was not the instrument of our salvation. Rather, God had a plan to rescue us from ourselves, from eternal death, and hell, by sending His Son Jesus Christ to die an atoning death for our sins and wickedness. As St. Paul says in Romans 3:24-25 (NCV): "all need to be made right with God by his grace, which is a free gift. They need to be made free from sin through Jesus Christ. God sent him to die in our place to take away our sins. We receive forgiveness through faith in the blood of Jesus' death. This showed that God always does what is right and fair, as in the past when he was patient and did not punish people for their sins."

From these Scriptural truths, Luther insisted that we are saved by God's ***grace alone***—not through any work or merit of our own. Further, we are saved by ***faith alone*** in ***Christ alone***—and none other. Sounds great, but let's unpack these terms.

The English word "grace" is the usual translation for the Greek word *charis,* which carries the sense of "good will," "favor," and "loving-kindness." From this root, we have the word "charity."

Strong's Concordance of the Bible describes grace as "the merciful kindness by which God, exerting His holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles [in them] the exercise of the Christian virtues."[2]

So, it is God's grace *working in us* that brings us to faith in Christ. But what exactly is faith? In the Greek New Testament, the word for faith is *pistis*, also translated as "belief," with the added sense of "trust" and "confidence." In secular antiquity, *pistis* also referred to a "guarantee." So, we might say that to have faith is to believe in, or have confidence in, something or someone that can guarantee our trust. However, *Christian* faith is always a gift from God, and never something that can be produced by people. In short, for the believer in Christ, faith is 'God's divine persuasion—and therefore distinct from human belief or confidence,' even though it involves these.[3]

God's free gift of grace brings us to another free gift—that of faith. But faith in *Christ alone*—and specifically in His shed blood, suffering, and atoning death as payment for our sins. That third free gift—of Christ's saving blood—is like the blood in the following story:

A man lay on a cot in a Red Cross blood donation center, a pint of life flowing from his arm into a plastic pouch. Out the window he could see the six-story hospital where someone lay in desperate need of his unique blood type, a person he would never meet. For the hospital patient, the blood donor's gift was not possible to repay and had inestimable value. It would save his life! Just so, Jesus' death, sealed by His blood, is God's great gift to us, one we cannot repay, one that is not for sale, nor could be merited in any way.[4] And it is that gift which saves *our* lives for all eternity.

As Anglicans, we were strongly influenced by the faith and courage of Martin Luther's attempts to reform the Church and make it more biblical. Also, we have our own tradition of Anglican Reformers. Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), as the Archbishop of Canterbury preached and taught salvation by grace through faith in Christ. He defined faith as "nothing else but assured hope and confidence in Christ's mercy." Without grace and left on our own, we are hopeless. We are completely dependent on the redemption accomplished for us by Christ as our substitute in the payment for sin.[5]

We find in our *Book of Common Prayer*—of which Cranmer was the architect—a robust biblical view of the tragedy of our human condition and of God's gracious salvation. His reformed theology is particularly expressed in the Collects, such as that for the Third Sunday in Lent which begins: "Almighty God, You know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves."

In addition to returning the Church to a more Scriptural view of our salvation by **grace alone**, through **faith alone**, in **Christ alone**, the Anglican Reformers also sought to translate the Holy Bible into English. One such academic was John Wyclif (1330–1384), Master of Balliol College at Oxford. But at that time, making the Bible read or heard in the common language was actually a crime! "In 1401, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel fumed at Wyclif: "The pearl of the Gospel is scattered abroad and trodden underfoot by swine. This pestilent and wretched John Wyclif … that son of the old serpent!" Wyclif only escaped execution by dying in a timely manner. However, the rest of his Oxford colleagues were all burned alive.

A century later, in 1525, approximately 20 years before the first *Book of Common Prayer*, Henry VIII decided that by translating the Bible into English, William Tyndale had violated canon law: Latin alone was the accepted tongue for Scripture in translation. While Tyndale was perfecting his knowledge of Hebrew to bequeath to us the Old Testament, he was captured by Henry's troops, strangled, and burned at the stake. Tragically, Tyndale's death was decreed by the same king who would eventually legalize the translation of the Bible into vernacular English. Once Henry converted to Protestantism and established the Church of England, it became acceptable to translate Bible into English—as Luther did into vernacular German.[6]

It is on occasions such as Reformation Sunday that it is good for us to pause and give thanks for two things: First, our salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Second, that we are greatly blessed to have both the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer* in our own language—as do so many peoples and tongues around the globe, now in this 21st century.

Our salvation was bought with the blood of Christ. Both the Continental Reformation and the Church of England were bought with the blood of the martyrs. So I'd like to close with the Prayer Book's Collect titled "For a Martyr" (BCP 246–247):

"Almighty God, who gave to your servants boldness to confess the Name of our Savior Jesus Christ before the rulers of this world, and courage to die for this faith: Grant that we may always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us, and to suffer gladly for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*"

[1] Adapt. Tim Zingale, "Saved by Grace through Faith," 24 October 2001, SermonCentral.com <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/saved-by-grace-through-faith-tim-zingale-sermon-on-divinity-of-christ-40389?page=2&wc=800> 24 October 2020. Used with permission.
[2] "Charis," Strong's Lexicon, Blue Letter Bible, n.d. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5485/kjv/tr/0-1/> 24 October 2022. Used with permission.
[3] "Pistis," Strong's Concordance, BibleHub, n.d. <https://biblehub.com/greek/4102.htm> 24 October 2022. Used with permission.
[4] Adapt. Zingale, *op. cit.*
[5] Adapt. "Thomas Cranmer: God Must Intervene for Salvation," 11 October 2009, Facebook.com, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/resurgence/thomas-cranmer-god-must-intervene-for-salvation/176776377845/> 24 October 2022.
[6] Adapt. Willis Barnstone, "The Bloody History of Bible Translators," 11 November 2017. Los Angeles Review of Books, LARB, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-bloody-history-of-bible-translators/> 24 October 2022. Used with permission.