

“By Grace Alone Through Faith Alone in Christ Alone”

Ephesians 2:1-10

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On this Reformation Sunday, it seems appropriate to tell the story again.

His name was Martin, he was only 37, a professor in the university, and a priest but he had been **sentenced to die**.

He lived in a country where the church and the state-government did each other's bidding.

And because he taught ideas contrary to the **church's** official doctrine, the **government** authorities found him guilty and condemned him to death.

There was striking irony in this because here was a man who had given everything to serve the church and now he stood condemned for that very pursuit.

How did he end up in that place?

Let me put young pastor's predicament in context for you.

To do that I want you to hear these words from the Bible.

Bear in mind, it is the **central truth** of this text that had Martin facing death.

Ephesians 2:1-10

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by

grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Who is the Apostle Paul describing when he says “you were dead in your... sins... when you followed the ways of this world... gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts?”

Is he describing an Adolph Hitler or a Mother Theresa?

Because of his own experience, Martin, had he known them, would have said Paul is describing a Mother Theresa as much as an Adolph Hitler.

Writing to the Christians in and around a city named Ephesus, Paul said you, and for that matter all of us, **were** (note the past tense) dead in your sins.

Nearly anyone quickly understands that Paul is not referring to being dead physically but being dead spiritually – that is, having no real relationship with God.

Then Paul describes, in several ways what that spiritual deadness looks like.

I mention only two of them:

1. We used to “follow the ways of the world.” (v2)
2. And we used to “gratify the cravings of our sinful nature, following its desires and thoughts.” (v3)

Martin knew that Paul was describing Martin’s life and, please understand, Martin’s life looked very much like Mother Theresa’s.

In young childhood he had been taught that there is a God – a belief held by most people even to this day.

But two influences converged to make him dreadfully fearful of God.

One was the inevitability of his own death.

Death was all around him.

In most families, children died.

Diseases, plagues, and what we would call the “early death” of many people made witnessing death a common experience even in a child’s life.

In such a time, what child wouldn't fear the death of his own parents or even his own death?

Martin greatly feared death.

But there was another influence - the church.

For some honorable and some dishonorable reasons, leaders in the church talked about and showed pictures of death to frighten people into the church.

Painted scenes of the final judgment were frightful and horrible depictions of God's wrath burning against sinners.

It didn't take much to convince young Martin that what Paul wrote in verse 3 was absolutely true – “we were by nature objects of wrath.”

Whether the methods of education that drove him to that conclusion were appropriate or not, is not the point – he knew the Bible declared that he, like all the rest, was under God's condemnation because of his sinfulness.

In that, his theology was correct for God has always declared that the wages of sin is death.

And that correct theology led him, in his teen years, into periods of deep fear and even depression.

And as I said earlier, it was not that he was more evil than his peers - for quite the contrary was true.

He did his best to do all he was supposed to do to be accepted by God.

The problem was that even **his best still had the look of Ephesians 2:**

“Following the ways of this world and... gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.”

When **we** look at that description of spiritual death, of life outside of a relationship with God, we tend to think of the worst examples.

We think, “Following the ways of the world,” must mean following the culture in greed and violence among other things.

When I first think of the “ways of the world” I think of what I see portrayed so powerfully on much television and many movies – those things that are the opposite of the virtues the Bible teaches.

And while those vices clearly are part of the “ways of the world”, the world’s ways are also much more subtle than that, as I will show you in a minute.

And when the Bible speaks of “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” is not just talking about indulging in drunkenness, sexual immorality and stepping on others on your way to the top.

And here was the most stunning issue of all: Martin came to realize that in his **very pursuit of religion** he was in fact “gratifying the cravings of his own sinful nature.”

In other words, the way he was pursuing religion was the clearest example of his greatest problem and his own sinfulness.

Let me tell you more of his story.

Because of his fear of death and God he did exactly what his church and culture said he should do.

As one of his biographers put it, “Like everyone else...he knew what to do about his plight. The Church taught that no sensible person would wait until his deathbed to (confess his sins) and plead for grace. From beginning to end the only secure course was to lay hold of every help the Church had to offer: sacraments, pilgrimages, indulgences and the intercession (prayers) of the saints. Yet foolish was the man who relied solely on the saints if he had done nothing to insure their favor.”

(Bainton [Here I Stand](#) 30)

So Martin set out to do exactly what his church said he should do.

And what better way to do his best to find favor with God, than to give his life to Christian ministry.

He was taught that surely God would give preferential treatment in the end to those who had given their lives for the church.

And during the first years of this commitment it seemed to work; he felt so close to God.

While he was studying to be a priest he loved every minute of it.

But the first time he stood before the people to serve communion he fell back into the same intense fear that drove him to become a priest in the first place.

As he served communion his childhood visions of a wrathful, vengeful God filled him with the same intense fear he had known for years.

Afterward he wrote of that experience:

As I served communion, I began to recite the right words saying, "We offer unto thee, the living, the true, the eternal God..." "At these words I was utterly...terror-stricken. I thought to myself, 'With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up my eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say, 'I want this, I ask for that'? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God."

(Bainton, 41)

Martin had given three years of his life in this pursuit of a right relationship with God and he was in a worse state than before.

Some say that all religions are man's attempt to find God.

But religion is **not** humanity's effort to find the true God, instead it is humanity's attempt to avoid the true God and make a god of its own.

Martin was following "the ways of the world;" for in terms of religion, it was a self-help program.

But even though it wasn't helping him, he was undeterred.

He committed himself to more and more disciplined ways of earning God's favor.

- He chose a mission that was the most difficult, that demanded the most from him.
- He fasted and prayed day after day, until he was emaciated.
- He would throw the blankets off his bed in winter, in an effort to suffer just a little more to prove his commitment.

"At times he was proud of his holiness and he would say, 'I have done nothing wrong today.'

Then he would wonder to himself, 'Have I fasted enough?' 'Have I suffered enough?' 'Have I done enough?'

He worked hard at keeping his thoughts under control.

But all of it gave him no peace.

He knew that he was a sinner and all his efforts couldn't compensate for the sins.

And so he added to his own efforts a hope that the saints would pray for him.

It was believed that the saints had access to the treasury of God's grace and if he prayed to them, they might reach into that treasury and apply some of the grace to his account.

And so he prayed but he always wondered if he prayed enough.

And then he added confession.

He would confess his sins every day and many times each day.

One time he spent six hours searching his memory for any sin he might have ever committed.

The issue for him was not how evil the sin was but whether he had confessed EVERY single sin.

And in the process he came to realize that the problem was not with the particular sins but the problem was with him.

He didn't just need to have his sins forgiven, he needed to be forgiven – he was the problem: corrupt at the core.

You might say, “Well he certainly had a dysfunctional religion.”

But his was not much different from the religion of most today.

In our country there is a folk-Christianity with mottos like:

- “God helps them who help themselves.”
- “I’m a good person, not perfect, but there are many worse than I am.”
- “God knows I’m not perfect, but I’m doing my best.”

(Hughes, Ephesians, 74)

Those ways of thinking are, at least in part, what it means to “follow the ways of the world”, even when it is a religion that prescribes it.

And “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature” is not, as I said earlier, about being as immoral as we can be.

It is much more about seeing ourselves as the answer to our own problem.

At root “gratifying of our sinful nature” is about “self-centeredness”.

Martin was convinced that he was the answer to his need – if only he would do enough, God would find his acceptable.

But in spite of all his efforts, he still knew that he was rightly the object of God’s wrath because while others saw “the committed clergyman” he knew his own heart.

He didn’t stand condemned to death by the government that day because he failed to do what the church had taught him, he stood condemned because of what he had learned four years earlier.

At age 29 Martin had been sent by his superior to study the Bible to become a professor of religion.

He started studying in the Psalms, then the book of Romans and then Galatians.

And what he encountered in his study is the same truth we find so succinctly stated in the text we read earlier:

Ephesians 2:4-9 “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we

were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. (again in verse 8) "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast."

When Martin came to Psalm 22 and read the words that Jesus repeated on the cross, he was captivated.

Psalm 22:1 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

All of the sudden Martin saw that Jesus had suffered the same thing he had been suffering – a desperate alienation from God.

But the question was "why?"

Why should the Christ go through that?

Alienation from God is because of sin, but Jesus was not a sinner.

The only possible conclusion was that Jesus went through that alienation, that separation from the Father, FOR US – in our place.

God the son became a man so that he could die for us.

And as Martin studied Romans he saw **another** truth that totally altered his earlier understanding of God the Father.

He had always seen God as the unapproving judge just waiting to shower his wrath on sinners.

But now with new eyes he saw a different God – oh, God was still a God of justice that must punish sin **but he was also a God of mercy** that determined a way to justly punish sin while at the same time fully pardoning us and giving us a father/child relationship with him forever.

Then the most startling truth of all fell open before his eyes when he read Romans 3

Romans 3:23-24,28: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; (but) they are now justified (put right with God) by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.... For we hold that a person is **justified by faith** apart from works

prescribed by the law.”

It is what we have already seen in Ephesians 2:8 “For it is by grace you have been saved, **through faith**--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works...”

Later Martin wrote of that epiphany, “Then I understood that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us **through faith**. Then I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into heaven... Whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with (fear) and hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love.” (In Bainton, 65)

All of the sudden he saw the lies in “the ways of the world, and he saw the deception of the self-centeredness of the sinful nature and he saw instead that it is all by grace through faith.

And in that moment he stopped trusting in all his efforts and trusted in Jesus alone.

Later he put his experience in the form of a poem to be sung:

In devil’s dungeon chained I lay
 The pangs of death swept o’er me,
 My sin devoured me night and day
 In which my mother bore me.
 My anguish ever grew more rife,
 I took no pleasure in my life
 And sin had made me crazy.

Then was the Father troubled sore
 To see me ever languish.
 The Everlasting Pity (God’s mercy) swore
 To save me from my anguish.
 He turned his father heart
 And chose himself a bitter part
 His Dearest (His Son) did it cost him.

Thus spoke the Son, “Hold on to me,
 From now on you will make it.
 I gave my very life for thee
 And for thee I will stake it.

For I am yours and you are mine,
 And where I am our lives entwine,
 The Old Fiend (Satan) cannot shake it.”
 (In Bainton, 67)

I know that you know the Martin I have been describing is Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation.

Just minutes before his death-sentence this question was put to him plainly:

“Do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors they contain?

Whereupon Luther responded, “I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen” (Bainton, 185)

Luther did not die that day nor for 25 more years.

He was hidden and protected by friends and then later the political climate in Germany made it impossible for the sentence to be carried out.

Yes, there still times Luther was tempted to doubt the grace of God.

He wrote, “It is beyond measure difficult for a person to believe that God is gracious to him for Christ’s sake although he is a great sinner. Ah, the heart of a man is too narrow to admit such a message or to be able to comprehend it.” (In Edward Plass, This is Luther, 95)

And every time he was tempted to doubt he would run to Scripture where he would hear again, “it is by **grace** you have been saved, through **faith**--and this not from yourselves, it is the **gift** of God--not by works...”

He preached the good news of salvation by grace through faith until his death in 1546.

As he lay dying, with eyes only half open he prayed, “Lord Jesus Christ, accept my soul. O heavenly Father, though I must leave this body and be torn from life, yet I know for sure that I shall abide eternally with you and no one can take me out of your hands. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. You have redeemed me; You are the faithful God.”

Moments later his own pastor leaned over him and asked, (Martin)
 “do you remain fixed in faith in Christ...?”

And Luther’s last word was simply “yes”. (from Plass, 382)

There’s so much more that can be said about the Reformation but I think we’ve captured the heart of it and of the central theme of the Bible.

Which is:

We are dead in our sins.

And even our best efforts leave us vulnerable to the justice of a holy God.

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works...”

The difference between death and life is faith.

Not just any faith, but faith in Jesus instead of faith in ourselves.

Based on the Bible, the Reformers said it and we must echo it:

We have an eternal relationship with God
 by GRACE alone,
 Through FAITH alone,
 In JESUS alone,
 As described in the Bible alone,
 To God’s glory alone!

You believe God exists.

What is your relationship with him?

Are you so foolish as to continue thinking that you’ll just do your best and hope God will find it acceptable?
 Or will you trust Jesus alone?