

A photograph of a wooden door set within a stone archway. A black lantern hangs above the door. The door has a central panel with a diamond-patterned glass insert and two side panels with similar glass inserts. A large black metal hinge is visible on the right side of the door.

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

THE REFORMATION

FOR TODAY

KURT SELLES, DIRECTOR BACK TO GOD MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL

The Reformation for Today

October 31, 2017, marks the 500th anniversary of the date when a little-known German monk is said to have nailed a list of ninety-five statements to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. His arguments sparked the Protestant Reformation of the church. Today that monk, Martin Luther, is one of the most well-known figures in history, and his pounding critique against the church of his day still echoes around the world.

The Protestant Reformation movement Luther set in motion had a profound impact in shaping the course of not only Western Civilization but much of the rest of the world as well. Much ink has been spilled explaining the Reformation's impact on the use of media, the formation of nation states, democratic institutions, economic systems, the relationship between church and state, among other things. It's truly impossible to imagine what the world would be like today without the influence of the Protestant Reformation.

Just as much has been written about how the Reformation changed the Christian faith. The Church of Luther's day held the keys to nearly every aspect of the Christian life. It controlled who participated in church leadership. It locked down access to the Bible and tightly gripped interpretation and teaching. It determined how and if a person's sins were forgiven, and, even, who went to heaven. But Luther and the Reformers who followed

his lead wrested the practice of daily faith from Rome's iron-grip. With the Reformation, matters of personal faith were passed back into the hands of individual believers. Each believer was allowed—even expected—to read the Bible in their native tongue. Individuals were empowered to let the Holy Spirit lead them into the truth and all believers were invited to participate in the life of the church.

The core of the Reformation's teaching is often referred to (in Latin) as the *five solae*: *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), *solus Christus* ("Christ alone"), *sola gratia* ("grace alone"), *sola fide* ("faith alone"), and *solī Deo gloria* ("glory to God alone"). Orbiting around the central truth that the glory of salvation belongs to *God alone*, the Reformers taught that *Scripture alone* has authority as God's Word to us, that *Christ alone* makes our salvation possible, and that sinners are made right with God by *grace alone* and through *faith alone*. These teachings remain as vital as ever for understanding the good news of salvation.

The following pages contain thirty-one daily devotional readings penned to help us recapture the significance of the Reformation for our personal faith. As we reflect on the Reformation's core principles, may we each experience renewal in understanding the depth of God's plan of salvation and his matchless love for us.



Kurt Selles

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The Reformation: Revive Us Again

Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?

PSALM 85:6

Five hundred years ago, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, it is said, nailed 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany, and set in motion a movement that rocked Europe. Though many other factors joined to launch the Protestant Reformation, God used a revival in Luther's heart to start a revival of Christianity in his time.

[Psalm 85](#) calls for a revival that begins with the Holy Spirit working in individual hearts, bringing a refreshing return to God with passion and zeal. Revival is not a random burst of energy and emotion, but is based on truth found in the Bible. For Luther and other Reformers of the 16th century, the revival that came to be called the Protestant Reformation was based on five enduring principles.

True Christian faith is based on *Scripture alone*, on salvation in *Christ alone*, by *grace alone* and through *faith alone*—and all of this is for *glory to God alone*. These five points summarize the key principles of the Reformation.

Are these five lasting principles at work in our lives? As we ponder these teachings that were rediscovered by the Reformers long ago, may their truth work in our hearts to strengthen and revive us, making us agents of revival wherever God has placed us.



Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the way you shape and discipline your church. As we reflect on your salvation this month, we pray with the psalmist: "Revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you." In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sola Scriptura: The Bible Alone

The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit...it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

HEBREWS 4:12

The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit...it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

The 19th-century English preacher Charles Spurgeon once said that the Reformation began when Martin Luther found a discarded Bible in his monastery. As he began to read it, God's Word grew like a seed in his heart, and the result was a world-transforming movement.

But this gentle image of a seed is not the way the power of God's Word is described in [Hebrews 4:12](#), one of the key verses that underpins the foundational idea of *sola Scriptura*, or Scripture alone. Here God's Word is described as a sharp, powerful, and precise blade, dividing truth from the rebellious lies we harbor in our hearts.

Only Scripture has this power—not the traditions of any church, nor the insights of any leader. As Luther said, "A simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest pope without it." Indeed, in speaking about the Reformation that he initiated, Luther said, "I did nothing. The Word did everything."

God's Word, the Bible, has a precision and power you will find nowhere else. Will you let it be active in you? Read it with an open heart. Let it form the words that come from your mouth. Let it shape the actions you take. Only by knowing and living in and through God's Word can we please him and serve him in our daily lives.



Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the living and powerful truth of your Word, which alone can penetrate the falsehoods in my heart. Let it drive out the darkness and plant seeds of truth in me today. Amen.

God's Divinely Inspired Word

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped.

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

The Bible is exceptional and unique because it is God's own project from beginning to end. This is the foundational teaching of the Reformation, for it is through *Scripture alone* that God reveals his salvation plan.

The difference between the Bible and other collections of wisdom across the ages and around the world is that those collections are inspired by human wisdom. The Bible, says the apostle Paul, is divinely inspired. The term that Paul uses to describe this inspiration can be simply and profoundly referred to as "God-breathed."

How the Bible is God-breathed is truly a mystery. God the Holy Spirit has spoken universal truth throughout history in all kinds of circumstances. Despite a vast array of personalities with all of their individual gifts, quirks, strengths, and shortcomings, the Holy Spirit has spoken in and through the many writers of the Bible to his people in the past as well as today.

Because the words of the Bible are "God-breathed," or inspired, they are wholly trustworthy, giving us all we need for faith and for living a life that pleases God.

Are you steeped in God's Word? If not, let it become the bedrock of your daily life, nourishing, challenging, and leading you in pleasing God and loving your neighbor.



Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for your inspired Word. As I read it each day, guide me to the truths that will equip me with all I need to live faithfully for you. Amen.

The Divine Authority of God's Word

The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.

PSALM 19:9

The word *authority* has two common meanings. An authority can be a person who has extensive expertise that can be relied on. Authority can also include the right to make a decision, to direct or control something. In the Protestant Reformation, the teaching about *Scripture alone* made a claim based on both of these meanings.

The Reformers claimed that since the Bible was "God-breathed," it was speaking God's message to the world. As such, it has God's authority for all humankind. Indeed, the Bible informs us that through the power of his Word, God made the heavens and the earth, all things visible and invisible. God is the King of his creation, and he has the right to demand our submission.

But the Bible's authority also operates in the sense of expertise. Through his Word of truth to us, God conveys his expertise as our Creator, Sustainer, and Savior. Who can know the creature better than its Creator? Who knows all that we need, what is best for us, and how we should live in relation to him, to others, and to his creation? God does, and he uses the Bible to teach us these things.

Psalm 19 describes the amazing value and qualities of God's Word. As you read this psalm, list the ways you can submit to the authority of God's Word in your life, and commit to pleasing God in all you do and say.



Prayer

You have the authority to command all I do and say, Lord. You are the expert on my deepest needs and truest aims. Help me to hear and follow your excellent Word. Amen.

The Clarity of God's Word

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

PSALM 119:105

After explaining something carefully to you, has someone ever asked, "Now, is that as clear as mud?" One wrinkle in the teaching of *Scripture alone* is the clarity and comprehensibility of the Bible's meaning for human readers.

The Reformers believed that the church of their day had wrongly guarded Scripture by forbidding that it be translated into the common languages of the people and by claiming that only the clergy could interpret its true meaning. Starting with Martin Luther, the Reformers taught that God's salvation plan in the Bible is clear to ordinary readers who put aside their own biases and depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps not everything in Scripture is perfectly clear, but the Bible is clear enough to give guidance for faith and life.

Today's verse in [Psalm 119](#) calls God's Word a lamp for our feet and a light on our path. If you have the time, read all of [Psalm 119](#). Using the Hebrew alphabet, this psalm lists from "A to Z" the weight, value, and clarity of God's Word.

Although you may not understand everything you read in the Bible, if you put aside your biases and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts and understanding, God's Word will speak clearly to your heart. Then give thanks for his Word and put it into practice to please and serve him, today and every day.



Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for your clear and excellent Word. By your Holy Spirit, guide my understanding as I read and listen so that I will find light for my path today. In Jesus, Amen.

The Power of God's Word

He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

PSALM 33:9

In their teaching about *Scripture alone*, the Reformers expressed confidence in the Bible's "efficacy." Because we seldom use this word in our conversations today, we can easily miss the Reformers' point. *Efficacy* means "the power or ability to produce the intended result."

About the power of the Bible, Martin Luther asked, "What appears to be more meaningless than a word?" Then he added, "Yet when God speaks a word, the thing that the word expresses immediately leaps to life." We see the power of God's Word in the act of creation, "For he spoke and it came to be." We see it in God's "sustaining all things by his powerful word" ([Hebrews 1:3](#)). And only God's Word has the resurrection power to bring all who are dead in their sins to life.

Have you heard God speaking to your heart through his Word, the Bible? If you have known God awhile, think about times when you read or heard God's Word and it sparked a change in you. Think about how God's Word produces beauty and life and blessing. Read God's Word, share it, study it, and ask him to plant it in your heart.

God spoke, and our world came into being. God still speaks through Scripture today, bringing us new life in him for his glory and for us to serve him in the world.



Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for your creative, life-giving Word. Plant it in my heart and help me to share it with the world you love, so that we may be transformed and blessed for your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Sufficiency of God's Word

"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."

ISAIAH 40:8

What's your favorite "desert island" book? In other words, if you were stranded on a desert island, what one book would you want to have with you? Martin Luther would no doubt have answered, "The Bible."

Among the reasons for choosing the Bible as their most important book, Luther and the other Reformers would have certainly mentioned the Good Book's sufficiency: the Bible—and only the Bible—is enough.

The Bible's sufficiency is the final quality included in the Reformation idea of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). In it, the Reformers declared that the Bible speaks on everything we need to understand for salvation and living God's way. Though it leaves us ignorant about astronomy (and many other aspects of the physical world), the Bible clearly reveals and declares that the earth, sun, moon, and stars were made by God and "declare the glory of God" ([Psalm 19:1](#)).

The Bible also helps us understand who we are. In short, the Bible tells us that because of our sin, we desperately need help. And the only One who can save us is Jesus Christ. Further, the Bible tells us how to live in obedience to God and how to love our neighbors and God's creation.

Hopefully you'll never need to choose a "desert island" book, but there is only one book sufficient to guide us into full life with God: his book. Read it. Meditate on it. Live by it.



Prayer

Lord, help me remember that your Word provides all I need to know about glorifying you and enjoying you forever. Amen.

Solus Christus: Christ Alone

"Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

LUKE 24:44

From the Reformers' commitment to *Scripture alone* flowed another core teaching: *Christ alone*.

In an age when the church hindered the people in the pews from reading and understanding the clear teaching of Scripture, Martin Luther wrote that "Jesus is the center and the circumference of the Bible." Today many of our children announce this truth before they can even read, when they sing, "Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so."

In our Scripture for today, Jesus says something similar. In effect, he says, "I am the meaning of the Scriptures."

What does the Bible tell us about *Christ alone*? Embedded in this teaching are four key ideas: (1) We need a savior. (2) Jesus was perfectly obedient and sinless. (3) He made a sacrifice to pay for our sin and rebellion against God. (4) Only through Jesus can we be made right with God.

And it's not just our Scripture for today that points to *Christ alone*. From start to finish—from Genesis 1:1 through Revelation 22:21—all of the scriptures point to Jesus. He is the main message of God's Word.

As you go through your day, keep these words in mind: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be in you, above you, beneath you, beside you." And then live abundantly in the truth of *Christ alone*.



Prayer

As you are the central focus of the Bible, Lord Jesus, may you also be the center and circumference of my life, today and every day. Amen.

We Need a Savior

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

ROMANS 3:23

Martin Luther had a deep sense of his own sinfulness. For years he was so tormented by his depravity that he came to hate God for his own painful inability to live up to God's standards.

Though perhaps few now have the same deep sense of depravity that tortured Luther, we are all aware of our shortcomings. Deep in our hearts, we know we miss the mark. We are sinners.

Our behavior seldom reveals our private reality. We know the rules, and we can usually play by them. But we have a secret awareness of the depth of our sinfulness. Only we know how hard it is to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

There's just no way to put a happy face on our moral condition. As the apostle Paul says so concisely and accurately: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

What in the world are we to do?

At perhaps the lowest point in his spiritual life, Luther came to a realization that shook him to his core: we can do *nothing* to save ourselves. Only in Christ is there freedom. Only in Jesus Christ are we made right with God.

Thanks be to God that being aware of our helplessness delivers us straight to Christ!



Prayer

Though I hide my sinfulness well, Lord Jesus, I know how totally unworthy I am. I know that I can do nothing to change myself. I need you and you alone. Amen.

The Perfect Savior

**You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins.
And in him is no sin.**

1 JOHN 3:5

First the bad news. We stand condemned before God. Our condemnation goes way back to the guilt we share with Adam and Eve ([Genesis 3](#)), as well as to our own rebellion against God. We can do absolutely *nothing* to make ourselves right with God. We are all worthy of eternal separation from God.

Now here's the good news. It's obvious that we desperately need help, but what kind of savior will do? The Reformers saw that *Christ alone* was qualified to be our Savior.

Why is Jesus the only possible Savior of humankind? God's moral law requires perfect obedience and demands punishment for anything less. From his birth to his death, only Jesus was perfectly obedient to God's law. Only in him can new life be found.

Scripture testifies that Jesus, the only perfect one, bore the results of our rebellion. While we were still dead in our sin, God provided the perfect Savior, who alone can make us right with God.

If you've known this good news for a while, savor it anew. Let it wash over you each day and prompt acts of loving service to God and your neighbor.

If you've only been uneasily aware of the bad news, but have not yet believed the good, may the Spirit of God move you to see and confess the name of the perfect Savior, Christ Jesus, today!



Prayer

Only you, Jesus, can be my perfect Savior. Thank you for saving me and guiding me today. Amen.

Christ's Death on the Cross

He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

HEBREWS 9:26

Like all ancient peoples, the Israelites practiced blood sacrifice. The Old Testament provides detailed instructions for a variety of animal sacrifices. Making those sacrifices was a strict requirement of the Old Testament law, in which God said, "It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" ([Leviticus 17:11](#)). In short, without blood sacrifice, there could be no forgiveness of sins.

Through the lens of the New Testament, we now know that Old Testament sacrifices were temporary and provisional. They pointed to the true and complete sacrifice provided by God himself. Hebrews 9 shows us that Jesus, unblemished by sin, was the perfect sacrifice. We know that the sacrifice of a lamb won't atone for our sins. Only the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, can do that. His sacrifice for us is "once for all." No other sacrifice is necessary.

Based on their reading of the Bible, the Reformers rediscovered the truth that Christ's sacrifice has been credited to sinners who could never save themselves. That includes you and me.

Now we are called to offer our lives daily, as the apostle Paul says in [Romans 12:1](#), as "a living sacrifice" to God, glorifying him and serving others.

What will you do today to show your gratitude for Jesus' sacrifice? How will you strive to please God and love those around you?



Prayer

Jesus, you alone made the perfect sacrifice for my sin. Help me, in all I do, to make a pleasing sacrifice of thanks to you. Amen.

Salvation in No Other Name

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven...by which we must be saved."

ACTS 4:12

In their rallying cry of *Christ alone* the Reformers spoke against the church's tendency in their time to add requirements for salvation. On the basis of Scripture alone the Reformers declared that the power to save comes from Christ alone—and not from anything else in addition to Jesus.

A single route to salvation may sound strange—if not arrogant—to many in our world today. The assertion *solus Christus*, Christ alone, can provoke resistance and even scorn. *That's just your opinion. How arrogant! How narrow-minded!*

But we who have new life in *Christ alone* know that arrogance plays no part in this declaration. It's all about humility, recognizing that we can do nothing to save ourselves. We depend totally on Christ for salvation.

We cannot prove to an unbeliever that salvation can be found in Jesus alone. But we can demonstrate the joy and humility that only salvation in Christ brings to our lives.

The foundational teaching of *Christ alone* is not about religious superiority but about our utter inability to solve our sin problem without Jesus. He is the only one by which humankind can be saved.

Though we can't argue others into receiving Jesus as their Savior, we can humbly witness with our words and our actions that only his love has saved us.



Prayer

Not my job or my money. Not my family or church. Not my intellect or education. Not my good works. Only you, Jesus, can save. Help me show the world today. Amen.

Prophet, Priest, and King

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

MATTHEW 28:19-20

The 16th-century Reformers weren't only interested in clearing up some muddled theology and challenging some questionable church practices. They were also eager to discern how followers of *Christ alone* should live out the truth of Scripture each day. So they asked, "How then shall we live?"

By declaring *Christ alone* as Savior, we find the answer to that question in him: we must look to Jesus' example. As the Heidelberg Catechism, a confession from the Reformation period, states, Jesus Christ is "our chief prophet...our only high priest... and our eternal king."

As Prophet, Jesus speaks the truth we need to know. As Priest, his sacrifice has accomplished our deliverance from sin and death, and he now intercedes for us always. As King, Jesus governs us through his Word and by the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus' followers, we are now his hands and feet in this world, called to continue his work on his behalf. As prophets, we speak God's truth to the world. As priests, we pray for the needs of our world. As ambassadors of the King, we point the way to him and work as citizens in building the kingdom of God.

Solus Christus: Christ alone. How will you speak, pray, and work like Jesus today?



Prayer

Be present in my life today, Lord Jesus. Help me to speak your truth, pray continually, and work to make this world more like your kingdom. Amen.

Sola Gratia: Salvation by Grace Alone

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

EPHESIANS 2:8-9

Perhaps the most familiar cry of the Reformation is that we are saved by *grace alone*. Opposing the position that we are saved by grace and good works, the Reformers firmly stated that our salvation comes only by God's grace.

Consider the darkness of the human heart. If our salvation depended on the good we do, *no one* would be saved. Our very best works are "like filthy rags," as Isaiah 64:6 puts it. The Reformers found Paul's words in Ephesians crystal clear: our salvation cannot be bought or earned by us; as a gift it comes by *grace alone*.

Grace means "free and unmerited favor." Salvation is God's gift to us. Anything I might try to do to earn it would be ridiculously inadequate and completely unnecessary. You can't earn a gift. As Frederick Buechner put it, "Grace is something you can never get but can only be given."

John Newton, who wrote the song "Amazing Grace," was a former slave-trader whose life God turned around. He learned that his salvation could only come by God's grace.

Where should this amazing grace put us? It should drive us to our knees in awe and praise that God loves us. It should shape our thoughts and actions as we strive to love the one who loved us first.



Prayer

You know, Lord, how much I like to pay my own way. Help me remember and be continually amazed that salvation is a gift from you. I could never earn it. Amen.

Grace of the Triune God

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:14

We hear the word *synergy* a lot today. It means "the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects." Whether we like the word or not, it captures an essential truth about salvation. For salvation comes to us through the grace of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul reveals the interconnected work of the Trinity in his closing blessing at the end of 2 Corinthians. This blessing, often spoken by ministers at the close of worship services, clearly describes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together with grace, love, and fellowship in perfect harmony, carrying out their grand plan of salvation.

The Father graciously conceives and initiates the plan of salvation and brings it to completion. Jesus, the Son, in perfect unity with the Father, provides salvation for us and gives us his righteousness to live by. The Holy Spirit, also in perfect unity with the Father and the Son, works in our hearts to help us receive God's grace with faith, sealing the promise of our salvation in Christ.

From start to finish, through the perfect working of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we see that salvation is by grace alone. May we all live and grow in this marvelous grace!



Prayer

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we worship you as one. We also give thanks for your grace and mercy, which join us to you and to all your children around the world. Amen.

The Lord Comes Looking For Us

"Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep."

LUKE 15:6

In business, a cost/benefit analysis involves weighing the overall costs of a commercial activity to achieve the highest profit. With all of the cost involved in retrieving his one lost sheep, shouldn't the shepherd in Jesus' parable have just cut his losses and moved on with the other ninety-nine?

Apparently cost/benefit analysis wasn't used in tending sheep. In those days every single sheep was precious to the shepherd. A good shepherd would leave the other 99 to make a desperate search for one missing sheep. And in rescuing that one pathetic sheep, the shepherd would joyfully sling it over his shoulders to carry it home, gathering family and friends to celebrate when he got there.

In this parable of the lost sheep, the Reformers rediscovered a deep spiritual truth: God doesn't cut his losses on those who have gone astray. No, he goes after the lost when they are wandering in their sins, heading straight down the path toward destruction.

Just like lost sheep who can't find their way home, neither can sinners. God comes looking for us because we are helpless and hopeless, and because he is full of grace and mercy.

How should we respond to such amazing love? By giving ourselves completely to the one who has rescued us from sin and death.



Prayer

Lord, you love me so much that you came looking for me. In the same way that your grace has found me, let me share your grace with those around me. Amen.

The Father's Love and Mercy

"This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

LUKE 15:24

Rembrandt's painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* often moves people to awe. Viewers crowd around the wall in the museum where this massive painting hangs, marveling at the solemn beauty of the father receiving his wayward son.

But as remarkable as Rembrandt's scene of reconciliation is, the father's reception of his son in the parable is even more striking. Even before the son reaches home, the father is watching and waiting. Then, when he sees his son approaching, the dignified head of the household gathers up his robes and dashes out to greet his missing child with hugs and kisses. For Jesus' audience, a father's tossing aside all dignity would have been shocking.

The parable of the lost son completes a series of three stories showing God's boundless love and mercy for sinners. The first tells about rescuing a lost sheep, and the second tells of finding a lost coin. And in this third parable we meet a father who with urgency and joy runs out to meet his wayward child, who was dead and is now alive, was lost and now is found.

Like the prodigal son, we have all rejected and dishonored our Father. We have squandered our inheritance of being made in his image. Foolishly, we would rather wallow in mud than revel in his embrace. But in grace and mercy the Father comes to us! So let's live with and for him from now on.



Prayer

When we were lost and dead in our sins, Father, you came to us. Now let us live for you, sharing your love and mercy in a desperate world. Amen.

Chosen From Before Creation

He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

EPHESIANS 1:4

Have you heard what the Calvinist said after tripping down the stairs? "Boy, I'm glad that's over with!" he muttered, nursing the bruise on his head.

Jokes such as this one take aim at the doctrine of predestination, or election: God's choosing of his people even before he made the world. According to critics, predestination quashes human freedom and free will. But somehow, mysteriously, the Bible shows that there is both election and free will.

God's sovereignty and our human responsibility may be difficult to explain logically, but in the Bible we see lots of examples of both at work. Just think of Paul's call on the road to Damascus ([Acts 9](#)).

In his letters to churches, Paul insists on election, but nowhere does he fully explain the mystery of God's choosing and how that works with our own will to receive him as Lord and be saved. Nonetheless, Paul describes election as a teaching of great comfort. In his amazing mercy and grace, God loved us even before he created the world!

What's more, God's choosing is also a calling. Out of his grace and mercy he has chosen us for acts of love and service so that we can be a part of bringing his love and mercy to the world.

By grace alone, take comfort today in God's great love and mercy, and glorify him in all you do.



Prayer

Our Father, through your grace alone you loved us even before you made the world. Help us to love you and glorify you in our lives today. Amen.

Grace Brings Justice and Mercy

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

JOHN 19:30

For many people, the term "ground zero" brings to mind a specific time and place that marks a beginning. For Christians, our ground zero was about 2,000 years ago on a hill outside Jerusalem.

Because he is holy, God had to punish sin. On the cross where Jesus died, God poured out his full wrath against human rebellion. There his justice was satisfied through a sacrifice. The cosmic paradox of the cross, however, is that in the moment of God's greatest anger against sin, we also see his supreme act of love and grace. At the cross, we see that the Father gave his only Son to save us, though we were the ones who deserved to die.

And the Father's sacrifice of his Son is only half of the grace we see at Calvary. Jesus wasn't forced to be a sacrifice for human sin; he freely chose to offer himself to pay the price for our sin. The death sentence he endured was ours, but he willingly died for us.

Not a single one of us could have endured God's wrath for our sin. Nor could any one of us have chosen to hang on the cross for all sinners. At Calvary, our ground zero, we see the immeasurable depths of salvation by grace alone.

May the love of God the Father and the grace of Jesus Christ shape all we do today.



Prayer

O Father, at the cross we see your wrath poured out against our sin. Thank you, Jesus, for taking our place. May we live for you in all we do, showing your grace and mercy and sharing your love and good news everywhere. Amen.

Grace for Sinners

"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

MARK 2:17

Most of us would rather be around people like ourselves. We feel most comfortable with those who look like us, think like us, talk like us, act like us, and more. We tend to avoid people who are different from us, especially if they have a questionable moral character.

So why would Jesus talk with Levi the tax collector (also called Matthew)? In that day, tax collectors were despised as traitors and thieves among their own people because they grew rich working for the Romans and their emperor. And as if talking to Levi wasn't enough, Jesus also ate at Levi's house with other tax collectors and sinners!

Didn't Jesus care about tainting himself by mingling with such people? He answered, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The truth is, "sinners" refers to everyone: Jesus' self-righteous accusers, the others at Levi's house, and each one of us as well. Here we see his grace vividly extended to everyone around him, grace that transforms lives and changes the world. Only Jesus' saving grace can do that.

Only by Jesus' saving grace can we come into right fellowship with God. And once his grace touches our lives, we too should let it flow to those around us, including "tax collectors and sinners."



Prayer

Dear Jesus, you offer your grace to sinners—and that includes us. Through your grace we are made right with the Father. Help us to extend your grace to everyone around us. In your name, Amen.

Given by the Holy Spirit

“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”

JOHN 3:5

God's grace doesn't just “happen” to come to us. It comes to us from God the Father through the obedience, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the saving work of Jesus comes to us through the Holy Spirit.

The Bible teaches that we all share the stain of Adam's sin. From the moment we are conceived in our mother's womb, we are in rebellion against God. Our rebellion, though rooted and connected to Adam's first sin, includes our own inescapable inclination to sin. Our hearts are hardened against God: we have plugs in our ears and blinders over our eyes. On our own, we are hopelessly lost.

But the Holy Spirit comes to us and changes our hearts.

The Holy Spirit's work in our hearts is sometimes overlooked or downplayed. Through the sometimes dramatic though often mundane events of our lives, the Spirit woos us, draws us to him, and moves us toward the love of our Father in heaven. And when—and *only* when—the Holy Spirit has softened our hearts, unstopping our ears and removing the blinders from our eyes, do we turn to God.

We are saved by grace alone through the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Be aware of the Spirit working in your life today, filling you with grace and flowing to those around you.



Prayer

Creator Spirit, you laid the world's foundations, and you set us free to live in God's love and mercy. Make us your sacred temples to live and serve and glorify our Father. Amen.

Sealed by the Holy Spirit

He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:21-22

Ancient seals were usually carved in stone or etched in metal, and the person using a seal pressed it into soft clay or wax to leave a symbol representing the seal's owner. Like a signature today, a document or other object with a seal conveyed authenticity, authority, and ownership.

In the reading from 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul uses the image of a seal to describe the Holy Spirit's guarantee that we belong to God. As a seal, the Holy Spirit assures us that we belong to God and that nothing will ever separate us from his love ([Romans 8:35-39](#)). The Holy Spirit's presence in our lives serves as God's mark on us, as well as a guarantee or deposit, showing that in belonging to God we will flourish and grow in our walk with Jesus.

Is this sealing work something that we do?

The short answer is an emphatic "No!" The Holy Spirit's work in our hearts proves that we are saved by *grace alone*.

The longer answer reminds us that once we have been saved by grace, our lives are transformed as we cooperate with the Spirit in reflecting God's grace in the world around us.

Sealed by the Holy Spirit, live in grace today and let grace flow to everyone around you.



Prayer

God, you have sealed our hearts with your Holy Spirit. In our fears and our doubts, let your Spirit speak to us and through us so that we may know and share the love of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Sola Fide: Faith, the Channel of Grace

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

EPHESIANS 2:8

The word *faith* can have several meanings. Sometimes it means simple assent to a fact or an idea as true. Sometimes it refers to a body of religious teaching. In the Bible it can sometimes refer to a special amount of faith, as in "a faith that can move mountains" ([1 Corinthians 13:2](#)). But the most common use of faith refers to an implicit trust or reliance on something or someone.

For Christians, that sense of trust or reliance points to saving faith in Jesus Christ. As [Ephesians 2:8](#) points out, we are saved by grace "through faith." In contrast to the church teaching of his time, Martin Luther rediscovered that salvation is by grace and is received through faith. Grace wrapped in faith is the gift of God.

Instead of seeing faith as something required in order to receive grace, Luther found that faith is a *channel* of God's grace. In other words, even the faith we need in order to acknowledge Jesus as Lord comes graciously from God through the power of the Holy Spirit. If it were any other way, we could boast: "I found Jesus!"

Paul emphasizes that no boasting is allowed. God finds us. Even the faith to accept Jesus comes through grace alone. Indeed, *grace alone* and *faith alone* are like two sides of the same coin.



Prayer

In your grace and mercy, O Father, you have provided us not only with a Savior but also with the faith to trust in him for our salvation and our lives. Thank you. Amen.

The Nature of Saving Faith

We maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

ROMANS 3:28

Faith in Jesus comes as a gracious gift from God. Through faith imparted by the Holy Spirit, we are made right with God. In Romans 3 we learn what happens when we are given the faith to believe.

Paul lays out a tight argument on the movement from guilt to grace. He reminds his readers that the law revealed to God's people since ancient times does not save. The law convicts us of our sin. And, he exclaims, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The good news, however, is that we can be made right with God (justified) through believing in Jesus Christ and being credited with his righteousness. Jesus stands in our place. His blood was shed for our sake, so when we believe (have faith) in him as the Savior, we are saved and made right with God.

Again Paul rejects any thoughts of bragging. We can't take any credit for becoming right with God. We only receive the saving power of Jesus' atoning sacrifice through God's grace, grace that extends even to the very act of believing and trusting (having faith) in Jesus.

God's astounding love and mercy bring us to our knees in awe and wonder. Paul himself exuberantly exclaims later, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" ([Romans 11:33](#)).



Prayer

O Father, your wisdom and knowledge are so far beyond us! We worship and praise you for the love you have shown us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Faith and Action

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

JAMES 2:17

How do faith and actions (good works, obedience) fit together? While recognizing that salvation is completely a gift from God, including the faith necessary for believing in Jesus as Savior, the Reformers were sometimes troubled by James' teaching about faith and actions.

For a while, Martin Luther was so adamant about justification through *faith alone* that he doubted the book of James even belonged in the Bible because of its emphasis on actions and faith. But other Reformers maintained that the importance of grateful actions as a demonstration of faith and a proof against hypocrisy show that James delivers a clear and authoritative word from God.

Perhaps it can help to say, as some have said, "Faith is the beginning of obedience, and obedience is the completion of faith." That resonates with Ephesians 2:10, where Paul, after teaching that we are saved by grace through faith, adds that we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works." In other words, a natural result of the Spirit's work to bring us to faith in the loving God is to respond by showing thanks to God and by sharing his love with others. So good works are a natural outcome of faith.

Thankful works *and* obedience can also be a helpful indicator of our growth as Christ followers. In what ways are you showing God's love lately?



Prayer

Father, you have provided for our salvation in Jesus. Please help us also to show your love and share your good news with others always. Amen.

Growing in Faith

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever!

2 PETER 3:18

God graciously gives us faith to believe in Jesus. And we want to keep going forward in faith and not become stagnant or slide backward.

But we have this assurance in God's Word: just as believing faith in Jesus comes to us as a gracious gift from God through the Holy Spirit, growing in faith also comes to us through God's grace and the Spirit's work.

Now, we can't *make* ourselves grow spiritually, but that doesn't mean we are totally passive either. Somehow we participate with the Holy Spirit in growing spiritually.

The apostle Peter urges his readers and us to make every effort to grow. The Spirit works in us to cultivate our faith when we listen to God's Word, through meditating on it and hearing it proclaimed in times of worship. The Spirit works in our hearts when we turn to our Lord and Savior in prayer for our needs and for the needs of our world. The Spirit also constantly works in us to respond to opportunities to show God's love and share our faith with others.

Encouragement to grow in faith can't be said any better than the Spirit has put it through Peter: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever!"



Prayer

Holy Spirit, we praise and thank you for your gift of grace. Please continue to soften our hearts and mold our wills to serve and glorify our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sharing Our Faith

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

MATTHEW 28:19

We can't leave the topic of faith alone without emphasizing that because we are saved graciously by faith in Jesus, we are also commissioned to share our faith with others.

We have received good news, and this is to be shared with the world. Keeping faith to ourselves would be like keeping everyone's mail and never delivering it through the postal service. Faith, like the mail, needs to be passed along. Unshared faith isn't pointless, but it's not vibrant faith either.

Sharing our faith should be a response of joy, but it's also a charge from Jesus. His commands aren't optional.

Does that mean we need to pass out tracts at the grocery store? Maybe. Does that mean we need to preach on street corners? Maybe. Perhaps those ways of sharing faith aren't for you. Then try something closer to home. Did you know that most people who become Christians do so through the witness of a personal acquaintance? Maybe the Holy Spirit even used a family member or a friend to speak to your heart.

Surely there's someone in your life who needs to hear about Jesus. Does the thought of sharing your faith make you tremble? If so, remember that Jesus has promised to be with us in sharing our faith—even "to the very end of the age."



Prayer

Jesus, by grace we have received faith to believe in you. Use us, we pray, to share our faith with others—for your glory. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria: To God Be the Glory!

From him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

ROMANS 11:36

In our reflections on the five solae of the Reformation, we have covered a lot of material about *Scripture alone*, *Christ alone*, *grace alone*, and *faith alone*. And now, as we focus for a few days on *glory to God alone*, it's important to note that this teaching is not in any way less significant because it comes last. Indeed, we might even say it is the most important of the five. Without a doubt, God's glory is at the heart of the five core teachings about the truth of our salvation.

Scripture alone glorifies God's unique revelation of himself and his plan for salvation. *Christ alone* glorifies God's wisdom and love in sending his only begotten Son. *Grace alone* glorifies God's mercy in reaching out to lost sinners. *Faith alone* glorifies God's gift of faith to channel his love and mercy. So all four of these key principles point to *God's glory alone*. No one else can claim any credit.

The apostle Paul has God's glory in mind when, after a long explanation about God's plan of salvation, he responds in awe and wonder in the passage we have read today, recognizing that salvation—and indeed all things—come *from him, through him, and for him*.

As wonderful and amazing as salvation is for us, it is ultimately not about us. What God has done for us echoes his glory. "To him be the glory forever!"



Prayer

Father in heaven, we thank you for your love and mercy. Help us to glorify you in all that we do and say. And help us, we pray, to radiate your glory in the world. Amen.

Glory to No Other

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

EPHESIANS 3:21

Today the declaration *glory to God alone* resonates as a clear call to glorify God completely in salvation and in all things. But for Martin Luther and the other Reformers, this call focused on some specific charges against the church of their time.

The Reformers believed that God's gracious gift of salvation had been diminished by intermediaries who detracted from God's glory. They strongly reacted against setting the virgin Mary as a mediator between sinners and God. They also objected to the practice of venerating and praying to saints according to the church calendar. Above all, the Reformers railed against a power-seeking church that itself stood in the way of offering *glory to God alone* in salvation.

Mary's faith, humility, and willingness to serve God should continue to be a powerful testimony to us. So too should the witness of faith and obedience of the many followers of Jesus who make up the church of all ages. But, like the Reformers, we should be aware that anyone or anything diminishing or even deflecting God's glory in salvation risks becoming an idol.

The Holy Spirit graciously uses many people to bring us to Jesus and to strengthen our faith. Praise God for them—while giving *glory to God alone*.



Prayer

God in heaven, let nothing stand between us in praising and worshiping you in your grace and glory. We ask this through the power of the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Living for God's Glory

Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

In his discussion on Christian freedom, the apostle Paul touches on some important principles for following Jesus. While emphasizing our personal freedom in Christ, he urges that we respect where others are in their spiritual maturity. Embedded in this discussion is the most important principle for Christian living: in everything we do, we are to live for God's glory.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism lays out this lasting principle using the question "What is the chief end of man?" And it answers with a timeless, bedrock declaration: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

Though we have all been created to glorify God, because of our sin and rebellion against him we live only to glorify and enjoy ourselves. And the tyranny of self-glorification brings us no enjoyment, just unending misery.

But, praise God, when we've been saved by grace through faith, the Holy Spirit begins to reorient our lives, nudging, prompting, stirring us to live not for ourselves but for God. And as we grow in glorifying our Lord and Savior, we discover our true, lasting joy and purpose *in God alone*.

Whatever you do today—from the most mundane chore to making the most weighty decision—do it all for God's glory.



Prayer

By your grace, Father, help us to grow in knowing and loving you and those around us. For only in glorifying you do we fully discover whom you made us to be. Amen.

The Reformation: A Call to Faithfulness

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 1:6

As we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, let's praise God for faithful servants like Martin Luther and the other Reformers who sought to revive the church by calling it to return to its biblical moorings.

Reflecting on the five core teachings about our salvation, we can thank God for their call—then and now—to hold fast to *Scripture alone*, *Christ alone*, *grace alone*, and *faith alone* as we give *glory to God alone*. These unchanging truths should be our foundation for understanding salvation, living faithfully for God, and sharing our faith.

While prompting our thanksgiving, looking again at the Reformation should also be a reminder to us that like ocean tides, church movements have ebbs and flows. In our time, we need to keep affirming and proclaiming the spiritual truths of our salvation. For if our grasp of and commitment to these crucial teachings erode, so will the church and our own spiritual lives.

Still, while striving to persevere in the faith and in faithfulness, we can take comfort that the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ himself, will complete the good work God has started in us and through us.

"To [God] be the glory forever!" ([Romans 11:36](#)).



Prayer

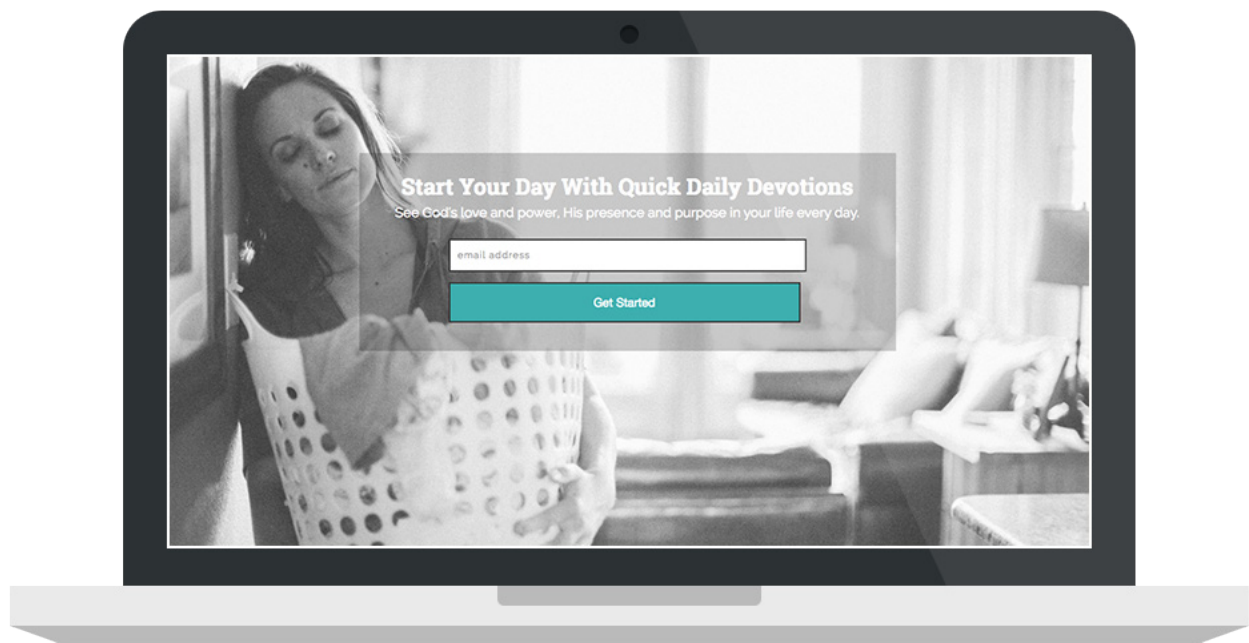
Jesus, Savior and Lord of the church, by your Spirit guide us in understanding the truth that we may live for the praise and glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever. In your name we pray. Amen.

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