

We live in a world where we're made to feel that we need to keep updating our stuff. If our computer is too old, get a new one. If our car is showing its age, get one that isn't. If our smartphone isn't smart enough, update it with one that is. Whether it's our refrigerator or our wardrobe, our bathroom or our bicycle, if it's out of date, update. Did you know that God updates, too? Think about those sins we committed yesterday? God's grace has them covered. How about the sins we've committed today? God's grace has kept up to date and has those sins covered, too. God's grace is ever keeping up with us. He knows our needs and gives us **"one blessing after another,"** even as our circumstances change from one day to the next.

What's sad is that we so often focus on what we don't have. We look around at others and lament that we don't have this item or that toy. We get ourselves so into a funk that we convince ourselves that God really hasn't blessed us that much. We start questioning his wisdom and love and begin to doubt that he really does care about us.

What's amazing is that God updates his grace to cover that sin, too. **"Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ,"** John writes. There's no sin too big or committed too often that God's grace doesn't cover it. That's the truth, the absolute truth of God's Word. By his perfect obedience to God's law and his sacrificial suffering and death on the cross, Jesus washed away and forever removed from God's sight all our negative thinking, all our doubts and questioning of God, all our griping and grouching about what we don't have. And his resurrection from the dead proves it. David marvels at God's grace and says, **"He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us"** (Ps 103:10-12). What rich and bountiful blessings are ours because of God's grace, his undeserved love for sinners, his riches at Christ's expense!

We began today by looking at the fact that we're proud to be called Lutheran, despite Luther's protests. We noted that we do so because we want to remember and celebrate the four treasures of the Reformation: by grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone, and by Christ alone. Let me conclude by quoting James Huebner, pastor at Grace Downtown in Milwaukee and first vice-president of our WELS. In the October issue of our syndical *Forward in Christ*, this is what he says: **"What does being Lutheran mean to me? Certainty! Absolute certainty in my relationship with God. It's not what I do but what God has done for me."** In other words, by grace alone. Amen.

**John 1:14-17** – *Reformation 500: Grace* – 339, 376 (1, 6), 207, 381  
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Martin Luther once said, *"The first thing I ask is that people not make use of my name and not call themselves Lutherans but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?"* Yet here we are, some 500 years later, sitting in a Lutheran church that is part of a Lutheran church body and, for most of us, proudly calling ourselves Lutheran. Why is that? When the very man whom God used to reform his church and restore the gospel to its proper place begged that we not be called by his name, why do we do so? I believe it's because we don't want to forget that God used Luther to restore to the church four treasures, often called *"solus,"* a Latin word that means *"alone."* It's because of the courage and determination of Martin Luther that we today can celebrate that we are saved by grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone, and by Christ alone.

Today, then, as we begin a four-week series that celebrates *Reformation 500*, let's reclaim the first of these treasures:

### **By Grace Alone**

- 1. Only God's grace saves us.**
- 2. Only God's grace brings us one blessing after another.**

1. The word *"grace"* is one of those Bible words that's packed full of meaning. While it's a small word in terms of length (it's only five letters long), it's a word that speaks volumes about God. Simply put, grace is God's undeserved love for sinners or, as my brother likes to say, making it an acronym: God's riches at Christ's expense.

None of us deserves to be loved by God. Luther understood this and for years was terrorized by thoughts of God's eternal judgment in hell. He knew that Adam and Eve had turned their backs on God in the Garden of Eden and that all of humanity had foolishly followed along in their footsteps. Oh, we might try to do what is right but, more often than not, we act in our own selfish interests, don't we? We really don't think much of what God tells us in his Word. In fact, how often haven't we convinced ourselves not to listen to what he says, because it might cramp our lifestyle or force a change in our attitude or make life difficult for us? All of this is sin, for which God has every right to send us to hell. **"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law"** (Ga 3:10), God says.

Sadly, we human beings try everything but the right thing to get right with God. We figure that, if we do enough good to wipe out the bad, we'll "balance the scale," so to speak, and we'll be OK with God. Or we compare ourselves to others, making sure, of course, that we find someone who isn't quite as outstanding or upright as we are, and convince ourselves that we're so much better than him or her. Or we just throw caution to the wind and hope that God is such a loving God that he'd never damn anyone to hell.

On this Last Judgment Sunday, God reminds us that none of these methods works. The divine Judge cannot ignore our sins simply because we're sorry for them. That tactic may work in a courtroom today, but it won't work with God. Criminals may receive a lighter sentence by showing some sign of remorse, but God says that every sin must be punished in full. And the full punishment for sin is hell. Nor can God just pretend that our sins don't exist. His divine justice won't allow him, like some Harry Potter, simply to wave a magic wand over our sins and make them disappear. There's no human process that can win for us God's forgiveness and salvation. Scripture says, **"No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough" (Ps 49:7, 8).** Someone divine had to face God's righteous anger for our sins, live a life of perfection to God's law in our place, and then suffer and die as our substitute to remove our sins and reconcile us to God.

That's why what John is telling us in his Gospel today is so important and so refreshing. **"The Word,"** that's Jesus, **"became flesh and made his dwelling among us."** Jesus, the Word of God personified, lived here among us as the God-Man. **"He made his dwelling among us,"** literally, **"He pitched his tent in our midst."** Jesus' time here was only temporary. It was limited to 33 years, for he was on a mission, a mission from God to seek and to save the lost. **"We have seen his glory,"** John says, **"the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."** While Jesus was here, God's glory was revealed in his teachings and in his miracles. Jesus came from the Father to do his Father's will and to accomplish his Father's plan for our salvation. In all of this, he was **"full of grace and truth."**

We live in a world that's without absolutes, one that says that the only absolute is that there are no absolutes (which is kind of self-contradictory, isn't it?), and that each of us must decide for him/herself what truth is. Luther based what he believed and what he taught on the absolute authority of God's Word, the fourth *"sola"* that we'll take a closer look at on Reformation Sunday.

In April of 1521, Luther was publicly accused of heresy and ordered to repudiate his teachings and books. In the face of being declared an outlaw with a bounty on his head, Luther steadfastly maintained, *"Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. 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."* Luther's certainty of salvation rested solely on the absolute truth of Scripture, mainly, the truth of God's grace in Christ. And it was this grace of God that caused Luther to marvel. He said, *"Who can understand the riches of God's grace? Here the rich and divine bridegroom, Christ, marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid on Christ and swallowed up by him."* Luther also said, *"This is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's; and Christ's righteousness is not Christ's but ours. He emptied himself of his righteousness that he might clothe us in it, and fill us with it; and he took our evils on himself that he might deliver us from them."* As we heard earlier from the pen of the Apostle Paul: **"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ep 2:8, 9).**

By grace alone. Only God's grace saves us. And only God's grace bestows on us rich and bountiful blessings.

2. John writes in our text, **"Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given,"** or as another translation puts it, **"one blessing after another."** **"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."** We've all heard it said, **"Count your blessings."** In fact, we may even have said it at times. It seems to me that we say it most when someone's going through a personal difficulty or when there's been a local or national disaster. **"Count your blessings,"** we say. As God's children in Christ, we do have a lot of blessings to count, regardless of what's going on in our lives. God's blessings are not dependent on life's circumstances. In good times and in bad, each of us can say, **"God's bestowed on me one blessing after another."**

In the original Greek, what God is literally saying in our text is that we have all received from him **"grace after grace."** In other words, today's grace will be replaced by tomorrow's grace; this week's grace will be replaced by next week's grace; and so forth. The grace that God wants to bestow on us never runs out.