

“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”

My sisters and my brothers in Christ Jesus, this week, we have transitioned in our study of the Apostles creed, to the Third Article. The beginning of the end so to speak as we now move on to a large chunk of major doctrines as well as, the third person of the Triune God, the Holy Spirit.

And we start off with a bang, because the first week our study in this article, is one of the most consequential confessions of faith that we have. This first, really sets apart Christianity from all other world religions, and going even further in that, this first week, also sets us as Lutherans apart from other denominations of Christianity.

And it all revolves around that idea which you could define as agency of salvation. And what I mean by that, is the means, the influence, and mode of being saved. It's the question of who is responsible for salvation and how is it accomplished? If you would ask people of other world religions whatever they may be, or even those who have no religion at all, “Why would you go to heaven?” The answers will always have that person with some sort of agency, in their salvation. “I followed the rules that God gave”. “I did the things that were proclaimed as good, and avoided the things that were evil.” “I, in the grand scheme of things, have my scales tilted towards excellent, rather than reprehensible.”

This is one of the greatest, and most effective of temptations that the natural mind and world falls prey to. It is the natural thought of the heart, mind, and soul to think and believe: “I have to do something to be saved.” And it is so powerful, that even among Christians, it finds clever ways of sneaking in and planting itself deep in the heart and mind. You've heard it talked about in these ways. God saves me, yes, but I still have to do something. We have faith, but also the good works that we have been empowered to do, yep. Now I'm saved. Jesus did everything, but I still have to have something. I have to accept what Jesus did in my heart. He did it but I have to choose to accept it.

This temptation is so powerful and so engrained, that we have to constantly fight against what is natural, but sinful, in ourselves. And our text from 2 Thessalonians, gives us powerful truth that does fight it, all in just a few short verse. In these verses, our minds are robbed of any false notion that we have any agency in our salvation.

First, God's words through Paul, strike down the idea of choice: **"But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit".**

You didn't choose God. You didn't choose to accept Jesus. You didn't make the choice to be saved. God chose you. And God chose you, before there was ever even any chance for you to do so.

Before the beginning of time, God knew you, he saw you, and he chose you. Even before he pointed the universe with stars in their places, you were chosen as his child. Before the land itself was pulled through to create the seas and oceans, he had already picked you. Before even the first human being, opened his eyes to gaze upon the creation, you as a descendant many years away, were already granted a place at his side in heaven.

You were picked from eternity for eternity. Not an abstract, or a general choice, but a definite and concrete one. God selected you. He knew who you would be a person with vices that you can't kick, he knew who you are, a human with faults and flaws; but still, he chose for you to be his own.

But God outside of time, needed to act in time to make you his own. After all, you are a sinner. You are not someone who can do what is required to enter into an eternity with God. So he had to make you someone who could enter. The path was clear, he would have to send his Son, God and Man, to pay for the sins of the world. He gave the gift of Jesus, that all who believe in him would have eternal life. But how does a sinful human, who thinks the only way to be saved is by me doing something, take hold of that gift? God with you in his mind had to reach down through and in time, to call you. He had to bring you to himself.

God can call people directly, as he did with in our first reading, but that's not how he usually does it. God calls, brings people to faith, through the means of Grace. He does it through the Word and the Sacrament. **"He called you to this through our gospel"**

It's how he did it for these Thessalonians as Paul spoke the word about Christ to them, and the Holy Spirit, through that word, pierced the very soul and brought them to faith. It's how he did it for you, when with that same Word and simple water, God's called and gathered you to himself. It's how across all generations, and over all the world, God continues to make people his own. It's how he creates faith that holds on to the work of Jesus, that says not: do, but I have done. And God did this for only one goal and purpose in mind: **"that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."**

God's call is not a call to some temporary good news, but something permanent. God calls you into the verdict of not guilty, because of what Jesus has done. He calls into a state of peace knowing that you are forgiven and that the gates of heaven stand wide open for you.

In all of this we see something so clearly. How much do I do for my salvation? Nothing. How much? Exactly zero. It is us who are sanctified, it is God who does the work. In every aspect, it is God who is the active party and we who simply receive salvation. It is always God's work, it is only God's work. In every single instance in this text it is only God who works and does, and only us who receive.

Why is this so important for you? It is because it has nothing to do with you. When you have your days when you have fallen into sin once again, and you feel that God could never love you. You know God's love has nothing to do with you, it only has to do with God. And you can say, I am a sinner but God chose me. When you look at your life and you know that you have not even lived up to your own standards, let alone the standards that God has set. You know that God has called you with his Gospel that says, my Son's death has made you enough. Even when your faith feels weak, you know its not even the strength of your faith, its the promise God gives. That is how you can as Paul says: **"Stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter."**

Brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, you have a comfort that the world does not have. You have a peace that many other Christians may long to attain. Others will wonder, have I done enough to be saved? Others may struggle, is my faith really strong enough in Jesus to be saved? You do not have those. In every trial, in every temptation, in every hardship and persecution, you know beyond a shadow of a doubt I am saved. Why, because it's not about me. It's about God. God chose me. God called me. And since he has done it, there is nothing that can rob me of that comfort.