

***For 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.***

My Brothers and Sisters, when you're a kid, August poses a problem, the excitement of summer is waning, while the fears of the new school year loom large. And by August summer is dragging, especially in pre-smartphone, pre-Netflix, and no home internet days. We were too young to get a job, yet old enough to be left home alone. One way my siblings and I loved to pass the time was to go to the Appleton public library. Here's the rub though. It was too far to walk. We knew what entertainment awaited us at the library, but how to get there proved to be the perennial problem.

On a similar, but infinitely more important level, is the eternal question about how to get from (here) earth to (there) heaven. The belief in heaven is quite popular. According to PEW research, 79% of people living in the Midwest believe in a heaven. And that's not a survey of Christians, either. In fact, 26% of agnostics, that is people who aren't sure that God even exists believe that heaven does. Even more surprising 3% of Atheists, people sure that God does not exist, still believe that heaven does. And when you tally everyone together, almost 75% of the residents of the America believe in an afterlife.

But many people face the same dilemma I did, though the destination was never in doubt, the route there was. While Americans overwhelmingly believe in heaven, there is little agreement on how to get there.

My dad set us straight on how to get to the library. You can just ride the bus. He grew up in Milwaukee and was a pro at riding the bus and had taken us along with him many times to get there. We hopped on the #5 and spent the morning doing all of the things we loved, coloring and reading, playing on the library computers.

By the afternoon we were beat. Leaving the library we stood on the corner and waited until we saw a bus with a #5 on it. But the bus went in a very different direction. Finally we pulled the cord and started a long walk home. And we were late.

"Where you been?"

"The bus went the wrong way"

"The bus doesn't go the wrong way, did you get on the right one?"

"Well it did today. We were on the #5."

"There's your problem. The 5 goes to the library. It doesn't come back this way. You have to take the 12 to get back. The 5 is never going to take you home."

Millions, no billions of people are boarding a bus that can never take them home. Oh, the destination of heaven is clear enough. But the problem is, no the catastrophe is, that they have no chance, under present circumstances, to reach that destination.

God is very clear in His Word that there are not multiple routes to heaven. Jesus, Himself says in John 14:6 “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” St Paul furthers our understanding in our text when he writes in Ephesians 2:8-9 “For 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.”

There is one bus that can take you to your eternal home, that bus is Grace. Only Grace can take you home. Only the love of God, fully displayed in form of the God-man suspended on the cross, has the power to deliver us from our sin. I’m sorry if that doesn’t sound all that impressive. But it is God’s way. And it is the only way.

But instead of relying on Grace for salvation, people are forever boarding the wrong bus. In Luther’s day it was called the ‘works bus’. If you just prayed often enough with enough fervor, if you avoided sinning, if you did enough good things or spent enough money on indulgences, then you might have the possibility of heaven. And it hasn’t gone away. Now, we have so many people attempting to ride “nice bus” to heaven. The thought goes “If I’m just nice enough, and kind enough, tolerant enough and helpful enough. If I don’t hurt too many people too often, then surely that will be enough for God.”

We may wish that were true. We may even believe it is true. But it is not true. And it will never be true. I could have taken the #5 a million times and never once in those million times would that bus have taken me home. The good works bus or trying to ride the “nice bus” to heaven is equally futile. You can ride that bus a million times and it will fail a million times. But here’s the thing, you don’t get a million chances to get it right; you get one.

Relying on works, rather than Grace results in a disaster. Heaven is not, wait, heaven cannot be reached by riding the “nice” bus. Though the consequences are eternal, there is also something at stake already on this side of eternity. Attempting to ride the “nice” bus triggers anxiety, fears fester and insecurity increases. After all, how can a person ever really know if they have done enough? And it’s simple enough to say that we can’t. James writes: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”

There will come a day when your death will be more than an abstract thought. There will be a day when you really will breathe your final breath. That day has been assigned and it is immovable. There will come a day with the idea of death becomes concrete.

But, when you stare eternity in the face, God wants you to be confident. It’s even more than that: God makes you confident. Grace not only guarantees that heaven will be yours one day, it promises peace today.

Grace promises that you never have to worry that heaven is out of reach.

Grace promises that you never have to fret that something in your past will exclude you from paradise.

Grace promises that the price for salvation was paid when God sent His Son into this world. That is why the words of Paul positively bristle with confidence “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

There it is “you have been saved.” Not “you might be saved.” Not “you could be saved.” Not even “you will be saved” like at some point down the road God will get around to saving you. Nope, God declares you saved right now! And saved by grace. Grace is term that gives us a glimpse into the heart and mind of God. The essential aspect of God’s Grace is that He is eager to save us. Saving us not because of who we are. Not because you are thoroughly good. Not because of anything your have done or even intended to do. But simply because of his love for you.

God declares in His Word and through the Lord’s Supper that He accepts you as His dearly loved daughter or deeply cherished son. God proclaims that your place, yes, your place, in heaven is assured.

And when we see that God has done it all then we see not only the futility of trying to earn salvation by riding the “nice” bus to heaven, but also the foolishness of attempting to do so. So, stop, just stop. Stop trying to calculate the correct number of good things needed to earn heaven. Stop obsessing about an already forgiven past and rest in Grace. Breathe in the fragrance of forgiveness. Feel the flood of peace.

It’s something that had been forgotten for a long time in the teachings of the Church of Luther’s day. It’s a teaching that is so absent in the philosophy of this world. It’s the foundation of our faith. The reason for our salvation.

Brothers and sisters, you’re on the right bus. Rely on the way God in His love has provided for us. Let Grace take you home. It will. Every time. God promises that.