Bible Study: Luther’s Five Favorite Verses

Week Four: Grace Alone

Ephesians 2:8-9

*God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God.*

1. Background on Ephesians
   1. A letter written to the church in Ephesus...maybe
      1. Church in Ephesus. Paul founded the church in Acts 19:1-10
         1. Ephesus had about 40k people, and was a major city
         2. Held Temple of Artemis, one of seven wonders of the world
         3. You can see the ruins today. Today it’s 5 miles from ocean, even though Ephesus was a port. The ocean filled in.
      2. Some debate over who it was addressed to, as earliest copies don’t say “to people of Ephesus” in the introduction and Marcion, who created the first draft of what would become the canon in the 2nd century, thought it was addressed to the church in Laodicea. The circumstances the writer is addressing do fit with the church of Laodicea described in Revelation
      3. Possibly not intended for Ephesus, but rather just an open letter
   2. Writer
      1. Probably not Paul, but it’s not as cut and dried as Romans or 2 Timothy
      2. Points in favor of Paul:
         1. In places it resembles Colossians and Philemon.
         2. If this is true, was most likely written in prison in Rome in 62
      3. Points against Paul:
         1. Differences in syntax, terminology, and eschatology.
         2. Paul spent two years in Ephesus but fails to greet anyone, which is weird for him. Usually greets lots of folks
         3. If this is true, most likely written between 80 and 100
      4. Third theory, which is that Paul dictated it and the other person added stuff. This is what Jacob asked last week about 2 Timothy, could be true here.
         1. This would explain why in some places this epistle fits Paul, it doesn’t fit others.
      5. Other background
   3. Intended readers & main theme
      1. The main theme of the epistle is the church, and it’s a celebration of church
      2. Romans and 2 Timothy were to fix problems, this one isn’t. Doesn’t address any specific problem
      3. Church unity and purity are big topics. Purity and unity are how the church stay close to Christ, who is the founder and foundation of the church.
      4. This epistle introduces an important concept: the already/not yet nature of the Kingdom of God.
      5. The epistle is believed to include several verses from christian hymns and liturgies
2. Setting of This Verse Within the Epistle
   1. Verse 1-2 is the standard Pauline greeting
   2. Then begins three chapters of doctrine. Ch 1-3 is doctrine
   3. 1:3-23 is a section of Thanksgiving for Blessings
   4. 2:1-22, which contains our verse, is a list of the benefits of following Christ.
   5. Chapter 3 starts with the importance of the mission to Gentiles
   6. Second half of Chapter 3 is a prayer for wisdom
   7. Rest of the epistle is the ethical implications of doctrine
   8. So this verse is a doctrinal verse. It’s three chapters of what we should believe, followed by three chapters of what to do about it.
3. Read Ephesians 2:1-10
   1. Verse 1-3 is that we are all sinful
      1. It is common for Paul to compare spirit vs flesh. For instance, Galatians 5:21-23. What comes from the spirit is from God, what comes from the flesh is sinful.
      2. St. Augustine went with this notion and took it too far. He is where the Catholic church gets the idea that sex is purely for reproduction and not pleasure
   2. Verse 4-7 tells us God gave us Jesus to take away our sin
   3. Verse 8-9 tell us that salvation comes from God, and we can’t take credit for it.
   4. And then verse 10 tells us that good works are the result, not the cause, of our salvation. This is a very Lutheran idea, and is in direct contrast to other denominations
4. Luther’s Life and Comments:
   1. Catholic church taught that a priest could give spiritual forgiveness, but in the physical word, penance was still required to make up for it.
   2. Today, we have many people who believe that we can make a choice for Christ. That we can overcome our sin enough to be able to choose Christ. This is similar to what the Catholic church taught at the time.
   3. Luther disagreed, and wrote one of his most important works, *On the Bondage of the Will*, in which he wrote that sin overwhelms us so much that we can’t even choose God.
   4. God is so sovereign that God controls our wills- something many fundamentalists would disagree with- and turns our heart toward God. Only God can do this, because we are overcome by sin.
   5. Martin Luther wrote this: “God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is, to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and work of Another — God alone” (On The Bondage of the Will, p. 100).
   6. Only those who have given up all self-reliance can be saved. And all we can do is receive it.
   7. This is backed up by Paul. Paul never says “saved BECAUSE of faith.” He always says “saved THROUGH faith.” This is why Luther taught what he did.
5. Summary
   1. Ephesians may or may not have been written by Paul, and may or may not have been written to people in Ephesus
   2. It is, however, a letter about the church containing 50% doctrine and 50% how to apply that doctrine
   3. One of those doctrines is that we are saved THROUGH faith, not BECAUSE of faith
   4. And Luther taught that this meant that even the act of faith was a gift of God, because sin is just too much for any of us to overcome