Ephesians 2:1-10 *The Five Solas: Sola Gratia*

***The Pitchman***Johann Tetzel was a salesman. If he had been born in our day I could imagine him doing infomercials like Ron Popeil or that Sham-wow guy. He was a natural pitchman. Good at turning a phrase and moving a product. But Johann Tetzel didn’t live in our day—he was born in the mid-1400s—and instead of hawking steak knives or rotisserie grills, he worked as a priest and sold something known as “indulgences.”

The concept of indulgences had been around for about 500 years—they were first conceived of as a way to incentivize participation in the Crusades. The idea of an indulgence was that a person could perform some act—like fighting for the faith—or give an amount of money to earn remission for sins. It was particularly tied to the notion of purgatory—the idea that after death our souls go to a place between heaven and hell for an amount of time according to how many unrepented sins we have committed.

Indulgences were not available all the time. They needed a special declaration from the Pope and were only issued when there was a particular need—like raising an army for a Crusade. But over time, church leaders began to see indulgences as an effective means to raise funds, especially building projects.

(Think of it like your favorite college trying to raise funds for a stadium upgrade: donors are asked to give, and as incentive, perks are offered. Like, if you give a certain amount you get a front row parking spot for football games. Indulgences were like that, only instead of new stadium seats the improvements were for paintings by Michelangelo on church ceilings, and the incentive was quicker access to heaven.)

In the year 1515 a German bishop found himself in serious debt. Pope Leo X, meanwhile, wanted to make improvements to St. Peter’s basilica in Rome. They decided to issue an indulgence and split the proceeds. In order to sell as many indulgences as possible, they called on a man who had already proven himself an extraordinary salesman: Johann Tetzel.

At this point, indulgences could be purchased not just for your own sin, but also for the sins of your relatives who had already died. Tetzel made this a key point of his sales pitch. He was apparently very good at painting a verbal picture of your dearly departed mother or grandmother, suffering the torment of limbo. He made his audiences feel guilty if they did not seize the opportunity to make the financial contribution that would send their ancestors to paradise. He also devised catchphrases and jingles, the most famous of which said:

"As soon as a coin in the coffer rings  
 the soul from purgatory springs."

To illustrate the extremes of indulgence sales, a story is told about Tetzel that is probably not true. The story goes that a wealthy young man approached Tetzel and asked if indulgences could be purchased against sins that had not yet been committed. Tetzel appraised the young man’s fine clothes and, seeing the opportunity for a big sale, said “Sure!” So the young man paid his money and Tetzel wrote out an indulgence (they were literal pieces of paper, kind of like a “hall pass”). Later that evening, the young man came back with some friends, beat Tetzel up, and took all his money. When Tetzel said: “What’s up?” the young man flashed his indulgence and said “This is the sin I had in mind!”

Again, the story is probably apocryphal, but it illustrates the logical extremes to which the selling of indulgences could be taken.

While Tetzel was moving from German city to German city, he caught the attention of a young monk named Martin Luther. Troubled by the theology behind the whole practice of indulgences, Luther wrote up a list of 95 questions—theses—and, on October 31, 1517, nailed them to a church door in Wittenburg as a way of inviting public discussion. This was the incident that began the Reformation.

***The Solas***As the name “Reformation” implies, Luther’s original purpose was to Reform the church, not start a whole new branch of Christianity. But as things transpired, that’s what happened. Protestantism began, and 500 years later our church exists—as a “Reformed” church—as a direct result of what happened in Germany.

Many factors entered into the creation of Protestantism—including politics, money, and human pride—but theologically the Reformation boiled down to the fundamental **question of salvation**: **that is, how are human sinners made right with a Holy God**? Is there any hope that we could live--and that God could be 100% for us--forever?

As the Reformation progressed the answer to that question became summarized in 5 Latin phrases. No one knows for sure who coined these phrases, but they are seen as an accurate summary of the core beliefs of the Reformers, from Luther on down. They are:

**We are saved by Grace Alone (Sola Gratia)  
through Faith Alone (Sola Fide)  
in Christ Alone (Solus Christus)  
according to the Scriptures Alone (Sola Scriptura)  
for the glory of God Alone (Sola Deo Gloria)**

To this day, these 5 Pillars of Protestantism help us to summarize the core of our faith (and it’s just kind of fun to learn them in Latin). And so, since October is the month of the Reformation, I thought we would use the Sundays in October to look at each of these key ideas in turn.

And we start with **Sola Gratia.** We are saved by Grace Alone.

I read an Encyclopedia Britannica article about Luther that summed up the emphasis on grace pretty well. It said:

Over the centuries, the church had conceived the means of salvation in a variety of ways, but common to all of them was the idea that salvation is jointly effected by humans and by God—by humans through marshalling their will to do good works and thereby to please God and by God through his offer of forgiving grace. Luther broke dramatically with this tradition by asserting that humans can contribute nothing to their salvation: salvation is, fully and completely, a work of [divine grace](https://www.britannica.com/topic/grace-religion).

This is a petty good definition of Sola Gratia. Salvation is not a cooperative act between humans and God—one in which we contribute our part and God contributes the rest (no matter how unequal those contributions are conceived to be)—but salvation is entirely a gift from God to us. In the case of indulgences, it is wrong to conceive of the work of Christ creating a pool of merit that we can access by doing acts of service or making contributions of money. It doesn’t work that way. Salvation is entirely and only by grace. It is a free gift of God, to which we contribute nothing.

***Bad News***This doctrine is all over the Bible. I believe it is one of the most fundamental things we can know about God and can be found on virtually every page of both the Old and New Testaments. But a passage which lays it out directly and succinctly is Ephesians 2:1-10. Here is where we will turn to capture the essence of Sola Gratia.

Let me give you an overview of the passage. It starts with **bad news**. Very, very bad news. **Ephesians 2:1-3**:

1As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

This is our condition apart from Jesus. This captures why the fundamental question of salvation needs to be asked. When we say we need to be saved, this is what we mean.

There is a downward spiral in these verses. In verse 1, we need to be saved because we are dead in our sins. In verse 2, we need to be saved because we are in captivity to Satan. In verse 3, we need to be saved because we are condemned to hell.

Dead in sin, captive to evil, objects of wrath.

Imagine yourself in any crisis in the world: held captive by gunmen in a Yemeni mosque, streaking to earth in a crashing jet, huddling in a corner of your house as a tornado bores down--whatever crisis you imagine yourself in I can tell you right now that nothing could be more critical or urgent or threatening to you than what is described in these verses. This is why we need to be saved, and it is worse than anything you can imagine.

The Bible is God’s love letter to us. He has given us the Bible because He wants us to know how much He cares about us and how much He wants to have a relationship with us. But He has to be honest about our situation, He wants us to know where we would be without Him, and so He is quite clear about the bad news. Dead in sin. Captive to evil. Objects of wrath.

Dead in sin. What the Apostle Paul is talking about is spiritual death. He says that we were “dead in [our] transgressions and sins.” In other words, our sins and our transgressions separated us from God, making us as good as dead. There was nothing we could do to change that, nothing we could do to have a relationship with God, nothing to create communion with Him. We were all spiritual corpses.

And how did we get that way? We were captive to evil. Verse 2 says we “followed the ways of this world.” One of the culprits is our environment. We live in a fallen, sinful world; and it leads us into all sorts of sin. But that’s not all. Verse 2 also talks about the “ruler of the kingdom of the air” and the “spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” This is Satan, the devil. He’s a villain in our story too. He was at work leading us away from God. As products of our environment under the rule of Satan we were held captive to evil.

But that’s not all. Verse 3 says that we were “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.” This is not just a case of “Oh, that’s the way the world is” or “The devil made me do it”; this is me, this is you—we were villains in our own story as well.. We were responsible for our predicament.

And here’s the worst part, the end of verse 3: “we were by nature objects of wrath.” Here’s how dead we were: because of our willing compliance with the villains of the world, the devil, and our own evil inclinations, we became objects of God’s wrath. God’s holy, just, righteous anger over sin--the proper response of a perfect God to those who rebel against Him—and it was pointed directly at us. We all had bulls-eyes on our backs for God’s wrath.

That’s how bad the bad news is. That’s why we need saving. Dead in sin. Captive to evil. Objects of wrath.

***Good News***Bad news like this cries out for some hope. We want some sort of **good news,** some sort of light. We want God to say: “But…”

And He does, **verses 4-7:**

4But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. 6And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

This English translation is adequate, but it is lacking. Verse 4 should begin: “but God…” But God. If you’ve been around Hope Church for a few years you know that is my favorite combination of words in the English language.

“But” is one of the most powerful words a human being can speak. It’s small, but it has the power to sweep away everything that has gone before. Consider:

The plane went down. BUT no one was hurt.  
You have cancer. BUT it is easily treatable.  
Your son was in a car wreck. BUT he’s fine.

“But” can take bad news and turn it into something good. And when you add the word “God”, well, you really can turn things around.

The situation in verses 1 through 3 is as bad as anything you can imagine. But God has done something about it. God has intervened. In Christ, our bad news can become good news.

John Piper points out that there are actually three “but Gods” in these verses. Those words only appear once, but they lead to three things that cancel out each of the three needs we have in the first three verses. So:

* We were dead in sin, BUT GOD made us alive with Christ. (v. 5)
* We were captive to the ruler of the air and enslaved to the course of this world, BUT GOD raised us with Christ and made us sit with him in the heavenly places. (v. 6)
* We were objects of wrath and deserving of an eternity in the torments of hell, BUT GOD, instead of pouring out wrath, will spend eternity showing the immeasurable riches of his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (v. 7) (John Piper, *But God…,* Dec. 22, 1985)

This is good news. The best possible news any of us can hear. The reason Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, the reason He walked the shores of Galilee and taught the crowds and healed their sick; the reason He got on a donkey and rode into Jerusalem; the reason He allowed Himself to be betrayed and arrested and tried; the reason He suffered and died on the cross and then was raised back to life; the reason for everything that Jesus did is so that these things would be possible in our lives. So that God could change our condition from death to life, from captivity to freedom, and from wrath to kindness.

***By Grace***And the way this good news gets applied to us is by grace. By Grace alone.

It says it in verse 5—Paul just sort of interrupts himself there to make sure we know: “It is by grace you have been saved.” It’s the main point he’s building to in these verses, but in verse 5 it’s like he can’t wait to say it: “it is by grace you have been saved.” Don’t miss this. Don’t think it works some other way.

Then, in **verses 8 and 9** he makes the main point:

**8**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— **9**not by works, so that no one can boast.

God turns our bad news into good news by grace. Sola Gratia.

Let me break down the Latin words here, for just a moment. Usually I’m breaking down Greek words for you, but in this case these phrases are in Latin. That was the main language of the church in the 1500s.

Our English word “grace” comes directly from the Latin word **“gratia.”** The Greek word is “charis.” All three mean “**a gift.”** It’s something that is not earned, not merited, not deserved. A gift.

One of the most clearly connected English words is **“gratuity.”** A gratuity is a gift. Another way of “leaving a tip.” The idea, as I understand it, is that a “gratuity” is above and beyond. In theory, your waitress earns a wage. That’s what they’ve earned, and it is included in your bill. But the gratuity, the extra tip that you leave, that’s a gift. It’s above and beyond. We’ve muddled that a bit, of course, because we tend to leave tips in proportion to the quality of the service. But the idea, at it’s core, has to do with the generosity of the giver. Grace is free.

And, of course, “**sola**” is fairly stratightforward. It means “**alone,”** or “only.” The English word we would most closely connect would be “**solo**.” If you fly solo, it means you don’t have a co-pilot. If you sing a solo, that means nobody else is singing with you.

When we say “sola gratia” we mean that salvation is by grace, and by grace alone. That’s the whole point Paul is making here in **verses 8 and 9:** “It is the gift of God— **9**not by works, so that no one can boast.”

If we were dead, then there is nothing we could do to add to our salvation. It’s not like Lazarus—when he was lying dead in his tomb—could do anything to bring himself back to life. It was entirely the work of Jesus—the command and power of Jesus—that resurrected him. It was an act of grace. Grace alone.

One of the mistakes we make when we think about the Reformation is to say that the Roman Catholic church was teaching that salvation was entirely by works. Like they taught that salvation was entirely dependent upon human effort. But then, you go back and read some of the things they wrote and you see them talking plenty about grace. What they taught was that salvation was by grace plus works.

The Reformation wasn’t about bringing the church back to the idea of grace, it was about bringing the church back to the idea of grace alone. That “sola’ is important. The thing that Luther and the others wanted to emphasize—and it’s right here in Ephesians—is that there is nothing we can add or contribute to the gift of God.

Salvation is by grace. Only and always and ever by grace and by grace alone.

The great American preacher Harry Ironside told a story about a man who rose in a Sunday night service to give his testimony. Evidently he magnified the grace of God, because afterwards a friend came to him with a comment: “You said a great deal about God’s part in your salvation. Why didn’t you say anything about your part?”

The man paused for a moment said, “Please forgive me. My part was to run away from God as fast as I could. I kept running until he finally caught me.”

That’s the doctrine of grace. Our only “part” in salvation is to do the sinning and the running away from God. Our only contribution is the bad news. The good news comes entirely from Him. But God…

***Why* Sola Gratia *Matters:***Let me wrap up by sharing three reasons the doctrine of grace alone matters. There are lots of reasons it matters of course, but here are 3 implications of sola gratia that occurred to me this week:

**1. Grace Alone gets us off the religious treadmill.**I wasn’t sure quite how to phrase this. I wanted to say something like “the doctrine of grace alone helps us avoid religious weirdness.” What I was thinking of was the whole practice of indulgences, and the weirdness of thinking you can purchase a hall pass against future sins, or that you have to perform a certain amount of good works to spring your dead grandfather out of spiritual jail, or that some religious leader’s vanity building project can become a means to your salvation.

And it seems to me that this sort of thing keeps popping up in religion in a lot of different forms, but at its heart it boils down to this idea that we think we can earn our own way with God. This thing in the human condition that makes us think if we do enough things then God will be obligated to see our hard work and reward us.

It can be the rituals and routines of Catholicism; the hyper-legalistic conformity to norms and rules in some corners of Protestantism; or even the contributions we make to some 1-800 number during the telecast of a prosperity preacher on TV. All of it boils down to the notion that if we do certain things, then we are doing our part to earn our salvation.

But it is a religious treadmill. It’s a lot of work that ultimately gets us nowhere. Remember, our problem is that we are spiritually dead. There was and is nothing we can do to contribute to our resurrection.

**2. Grace Alone gives us complete confidence**.  
The good news in all this, then, is that our salvation is not dependent on us. If our salvation is by grace, then it is dependent on the strength and resources of the one giving the gift. And the whole point is that the riches of grace found in Christ our incomparable.

If our salvation depended at all on us—even in the smallest part—then we would worry and fuss all our lives over whether we had done enough. And frankly, if you have any awareness of your sinful nature at all, you know how unlikely it is that you could contribute even the least bit to your rescue.

But, again, it’s not about those of us who need rescuing, but the one who is the Rescuer. If salvation is entirely by grace alone, then we can have complete confidence that God’s grace is all we need.

**3. Grace alone Glorifies the beauty of God.**Finally, the doctrine of grace directs our praise and worship to the only place it belongs: the goodness of God.

Verse 9 ends by saying “that no one can boast.” It is a function of our sinful hearts that if we contributed even in the least part to our own salvation—if the clink of the coin in the offering plate moved us even a fraction of an inch closer to God—we would boast and brag about our efforts.

But the glory in salvation belongs in no way to us. It belongs entirely to the one who offered Himself for our sakes, the one who conquered the grave in His resurrection. Our praise and worship should be directed always and only to the one who raises us up by grace.

We are saved by grace. Sola Gratia. Grace and grace alone.