

# Luther's Theology of the Cross

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[0:00] And our King speaks to us in his word, Ephesians chapter 1 tonight. And I'll read verses 3 through 14, and then we'll read from chapter 2 as well.

Ephesians 1, beginning at verse 3. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ, for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

And he made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment, to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

[1:31] In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

In order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession to the praise of his glory.

Then chapter 2, verses 1 to 10. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in 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 and those who are disobedient.

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.

[2:48] Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For 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.

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Well, it is by grace that we've been saved. It's by grace that God has put us together as a family. It really is a pleasure to be one with you all, to march heavenward with you.

[4:07] If we've learned anything from the book of Daniel, we have learned that God is involved in history. So this evening I want to take you back to 1518.

This is not the watershed year of 1517 when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the doors of the Wittenberg Church. It's 1518, and we're going to be talking about a different set of theses.

Luther is still a monk, and he's been summoned to defend and explain his new theology before the German congregation of the Augustinian order.

That's the order of monks that he is a part of in the city of Heidelberg. Now, the normal practice was for you to present your argument, what you were saying, your statements, in the form of theses, and this is what he does.

And so he has 28 of these, 28 theses that go right to the heart of his new theology. So this is really the bottom of what Luther saw as how the gospel, as he saw in the Bible, differed from the standard Catholic doctrine.

[5:24] And he doesn't talk about popes. He doesn't talk about indulgences. And if you know what an indulgence is, then you understand that that's what the 95 theses were about.

He talks about two different theologies. One he calls the theology of the cross. And the other is called the theology of glory. And the theology of the cross says that God must save sinners. There's nothing that they can do to save themselves. God must save sinners. There's no works they can do. Either God works sovereignly, graciously through the cross, or sinners will not be saved.

That's the theology of the cross. And the theology of glory is the story of human glory. Not God's glory, human glory. It says sinners can do something.

Something big, maybe. Maybe something small. To satisfy God. The theology of glory is the theology of every natural man. It's the theology that we come into this world, and this is how we think.

[6:31] It reigns and lives in all of our hearts by birth. And it's the theology that motivates all of us, whether we're religious or irreligious.

Somehow I must save myself. Somehow I must get myself out of this place where I am fallen and cursed and frustrated. In the end, it's all up to me. That's the theology of glory.

So the theology of glory is the theology of the Pharisees. It's the theology of the Jehovah Witness lady that came to my door. And I asked her, well, why should God let you into his heaven?

And she said, because Jesus died for me, for my sins, and because I'm doing the best that I can.

It's the theology of the Roman Catholic Church that says that God's grace comes into our lives and makes us virtuous, makes us righteous and just.

And so as we live a godly life, we can justify ourselves. It's the theology of Islam and Buddhism. It's the theology of atheism and paganism. It's the theology of every natural man that the bottom line is I must save myself and however that works itself out.

[7:47] And it's even the theology of irreligious people. It's what moves them to prove themselves, to try to make themselves better, to show that they are good enough, that they are worthy.

And in this story, or I've used this story before, in the first Rocky movie, Rocky says, he's asked, why do you want to fight this guy? He's going to beat you up, Apollo Creed.

He's going to beat you up. And he says, I just want to go the distance because if I go the distance, I don't even have to win the fight. If I go to the distance, then I'll know I'm not a bum. Rocky was going to save himself from his situation by going the distance.

Maybe you've seen the movie Chariots of Fire. And it's the story of two runners. Eric Little, the hero of the story, and Harold Abrams.

Eric is driven to run for the glory of God. And Harold is driven by a need to prove that he's good, that he's right, that he's an okay person.

[8:53] And at one point, Harold Abrams is talking about his Olympic 100-yard dash, his prime event. And he said this, I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor four feet wide with ten lonely seconds to justify my existence.

And so do you see the heartbeat of it all? It's up to me. I have to do it in whatever way it is. And that's what the theology of glory says.

Now, in his 28 Theses, Luther is going to war against the theology of glory. And he's going to war for the theology of the cross.

And this evening, I just want to talk about one of those theses. It's the very last one. It's number 28. And it goes like this. I'm going to read it twice. So, we're talking about two different kinds of love and how they work.

So, let me read it to you again. The love of man comes into being through attraction to what pleases it.

[10:21] Now, Luther is saying this is the rock bottom. This is his last thesis. This is where he puts all of the weight. It all falls down on this. It comes down to this one consideration.

How does the love of God work? How does the love of God work? And as I'm talking about this tonight, I want you to think, how do I think about this?

How do I answer that question? What do I tell myself in the heat of the battle? What do I tell myself when I've fallen and when I've sinned and when I'm facing discouragement and disappointment, when I'm facing success?

What is the theology that I live on and think about mostly? Do I think God loves me because he found something good in me? That he discovered good in me and so he was attracted to me? Or does his love create what is lovely in me? That he finds nothing beautiful in me, but then his love comes in and creates.

[11:21] Luther says, you see, the love of God is something entirely different than the love of man. Did you see that when he had his thesis? The love of God does one thing.

The love of man does another. Now, you know how human love works, don't you? It's a tale as old as time. The king holds a ball for his son, the prince.

And all the beautiful ladies are invited to the ball. And the prince stands at the front and the ladies are introduced to him one by one.

And then the prince looks up. And he sees at the back of the room a beautiful girl with a shimmering, elegant white gown. Beautiful face.

Beautiful figure. Her movements are so graceful. And he's stunned. And he passes all the other ladies. And he introduces himself to her.

[12:20] And he bows to her. And the prince falls in love with beautiful Cinderella. That's human love. It comes into being by what attracts it.

By being through attraction to what pleases it. And so, in a sense, this isn't bad. Now, none of you married your husband or your wife because you thought they were hideous.

And that they would be a lifelong project that would nearly kill you to love them. I hope you didn't do that. I hope you didn't. And I know you didn't. There was something in them that attracted you to him.

Or something in him that attracted you to him. And there was something that attracted you to her. It's the way that human love naturally, most easily works.

And the theologians of glory, and often by nature, are absolutely convinced in the heart of hearts that this is how the love of God must work.

[13:27] That's how it must be. They can't imagine it being any other way. There must be something in me that made God attracted to me. And so, he loved me.

God must have seen something beautiful in me, good in me. It might have been small. I might have done something very little. I might have done something very big. But the Bible says, not at all.

Not at all. God's love creates what is beautiful and good in us. It doesn't respond to what is beautiful in us because there is nothing to respond to.

There's nothing beautiful in us. And so, tonight, I want to drive that truth home in five ways. And we're going to see them all from the passages of Ephesians that we read. So, five ways that we can see this truth.

That God's love creates what is beautiful and good in us. It doesn't respond to it. And first, we see it in the doctrine of election. We see it in election. So, look at your Bibles, chapter 1, verse 4.

[14:27] For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. Now, what do our Arminian friends, brothers, what do Roman Catholics say?

That God chooses us based on what he saw us doing. What he sees us doing. He looks through the corridors of time. He sees us choosing him. We choose God.

So, he chooses us. We say yes to him. And so, he, knowing that, says yes to us. But, brothers and sisters, is that what Ephesians says?

Does God choose us because he sees something good in us? And the answer is no. There's nothing to see, even. God chose you before the creation.

So, did God choose you because of something good in you? Well, there wasn't anything good or bad in you for him to choose. Not at all. He chose us to be blameless, holy and blameless.

[15:28] Not because we were holy and blameless. He chose us to be those things. Not because we were those things. And it was all before creation. It wasn't by works.

It was by grace. It was by sheer grace. Now, remember how that used to make your blood boil, brothers and sisters. You wanted to worship. You had to worship because I can't believe it that God chose me.

He didn't have to choose me. Why did he choose me? Why was I made a guest? There's no difference between me and any other man. Why? And brothers and sisters, we need to pray to believe it again.

We know it in our heads, but we need to know it again in our hearts. So, think about it. He didn't have to choose you. Many of you have brothers and sisters that grew up in the same house. And it looks like he hasn't chosen them. Millions left are left.

[16 : 32] Before I was born, he was writing my story. You could tell that to yourself. He was choosing my parents. He was choosing my home and my address.

And he was choosing my school and my brothers and sisters. And he chose me to hear the gospel. We heard from Carrie this morning that there are people there that have never even heard the name Jesus.

Do they have any chance of being saved? They don't know the name of Jesus. But we did. He chose me to hear the gospel when others didn't. He gave me grace to believe when other people heard the same gospel and didn't believe.

Well, why? And the answer is because he loved me. He loved me because I was better? No.

He loved me because he loved me. He loved me to make me beautiful. Not because I was beautiful. So we see the truth of what Luther was saying there in election.

[17 : 38] We also see the truth of Luther's statement that the love of God does not discover, but creates what is pleasing to us, pleasing to him in regeneration.

Regeneration. Regeneration is a fancy word that means to be born again. It's God making us alive in him, to him, in Christ.

Regeneration. And we like to say when we talk about being born again, it's like your first birth. so think about your birth did you have anything to do with the time the place anything about your birth no you were born it happened to you we didn't have anything to do with being born the first time and we don't have anything to be born with with being born the second time we don't decide it happens to us and that's perfectly all that's perfectly right but paul wants to even go further and he says it's not that just we go from the inside of a womb to the outside of a womb we go from being dead to being alive in our first birth we were alive before and we just changed locations but we read in chapter 2 verse 1 as for you you were dead in your transgressions and then it goes on but because of his great love for us god who is rich in mercy made us alive with christ even when we were dead in transgressions god didn't find our little spiritual lives in a little spiritual womb waiting to be brought out we were dead what does that mean to be dead well we go outside of jerusalem to the small town of bethany and lazarus has been dead for four days he's been he's good and dead that's the point of the four days and how is lazarus doing he's not doing well at all that's the understatement things are hopelessly it it's impossible things are hopelessly human human humanly speaking there's nothing human strength can do lazarus is powerless lazarus doesn't want to get up lazarus can't get up he's not moving he can't move he's totally powerless and more than that lazarus is rotting he's decaying to be dead means to be rotting you don't go from being bad to good when you're dead you go from bad to being even more bad from bad to worse you're decaying so remember what lazarus sister said lord don't open the thing he stinks he stinks leave him be he's rotting away and then paul says that that's what we were like in our sins we were dead in our sins it was hopeless we were powerless we were rotting we were decaying we weren't staying the same we weren't getting better we were getting worse we were enslaved to sin and that's true whether you are a moral good person sitting here if you are in your sins if you are still dead it doesn't matter that you're here you're still rotting and decaying and it's the same for the people on the outside we were all enslaved we were all addicted to our own way i was going to save myself i was going to be my own lord and we were totally dead to god but god because of his great love for us made us alive god didn't find anything good in us when he made us alive he didn't find anything beautiful we couldn't do anything and god came with resurrection power and he said lazarus come forth and out of the tomb of our hearts life flowed christ came to dwell in us and out of the stump the dead stump of our life a shoot went up and it was faith and it was love we were alive to god god's love created that it didn't find it it created that in you and so why are you here today why are your ears open why do you love god why are you alive to him it's because his love and his affection overflowed into your life and made you into something when you were nothing so we see god's sovereign love and grace in in election and regeneration and then now we see it in adoption so we need to go back to chapter one in verse five and it says in love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through jesus

christ now you know the story well maybe you know the story of oliver twist or little orphan annie it's the story of orphans being adopted and it really is amazing both stories um it's amazing because it's it's sort of like the theology of glory put into an adoption story how do those adoptions work well it's there's something lovable in those orphans wasn't there little annie is so cute and she's so innocent and she's so helpless she has such a sweet disposition that daddy warbucks can't help himself he has to bring her into his family he can't resist it and so you see it's the theology of glory there was something good in them and that's why they were brought in and too often we think that's how god's love is it's that's how it must be we say to ourselves and that's why we think when we sin that somehow god is going to stop treating us like a child because deep down we still struggle to believe that he adopted us not because we were obedient but because he loved us and so we struggle to believe that it's by grace and not by works you see our adoption into god's family it works more like an international adoption like sort of like stephan and i what we're doing our little son has been the object of our pain and our sorrow and our suffering and our money and we've sacrificed and suffered for him and has he done anything to deserve it he's not over there working he's not over there being a good little boy earning his way into our family and i'm not doing that i'm not saying that to brag because stephan and i are adopting because we've been adopted we didn't do anything good to be brought into god's family we act graciously because god has acted graciously because spiritual adoption is by grace it's not by works and so brothers and sisters god has adopted you into his family we talked about that we're we're in the same family because we've all been brought into the father's family and so he's not going to abandon you when you sin he'll chastise you there's going to be displeasure there's going to be discipline but it's not an enemy's discipline an enemy's wrath and it's not an enemy's disfavor or displeasure it's a fatherly displeasure god still loves you and he's paid too high a price for you to kick you out of the family to give up on you so we see it in adoption why were you brought in because of god's love we see the truth that that the love of god does not first discover but creates what is pleasing to it in justification we kind of talked about this last week with the story of joshua why does god accept us and welcome us and make us and cleanse us and declare us righteous it's not because of our works joshua wasn't doing anything he was standing there

it was all done to him and so paul says it's by grace that you've been saved through faith and this not from yourselves it's the gift of god not by works so that no one can boast how are we saved not by doing but by believing not by obeying his law but by trusting his promise so faith is the beggar begging faith is the drowning man yelling out help help faith is the factory worker after a long day of hard work coming and resting laying down in his own bed it's us finally looking away from ourselves and looking to christ and paul says but even that is a gift of god you see that's where all the pictures that i just said they all fail because by nature we will never beg we will never beg we'll self-righteously hold on to what we can do and we'll demean god we'll make god's demand smaller we'll make his law smaller we'll figure well we can do something he's not asking much i can do it and so we won't beg we will we'll refuse to see our poverty and we won't yell help we'll we'll just try to keep on swimming and then drown and we won't lie down and rest in jesus we'll renew our strength and we'll try it again we'll keep trudging down the path of our own self-righteousness it's when god brings us to an end of ourselves and that's an almighty act of god to bring us to an end of ourselves and god's love invades our life and creates and empowers faith so god's grace creates what is beautiful it doesn't find what is beautiful in us and we see that in sanctification that's what paul says in chapter 2 verse 11 for we are god's workmanship created in christ jesus to do good works which god prepared in advance for us to do how should you view yourself and your life so tomorrow when you wake up and your week is before you paul wants you to have an image in your mind and paul says think artwork think workmanship we are his workmanship the word is poema it's where we get our word poem we we are his art piece his work of art his piece of work many of you are very creative many of you know in one way or the other what it is to pour yourself out into a piece of work so it could be writing for others it's cooking and for others it's sewing um you know what it is to pour your heart out to have this affection and this attachment to to what you've created and how and how you you love it and you you want to make it right and you want to make it good and that's how god feels about us we are his workmanship we're god's poema he's designed and he's fitted you and so he's poured his love and his attention on you and he's prepared just the he's prepared you for just the right place where he's put you where he has you so no one can say god can't use me i don't have any gifts i'm not gifted that's a denial of the gospel that's a denial of what god has said about you and done for you

[30:09] the gospel says you are god's workmanship and so why do you live in the neighborhood that you live in why do you have the neighbors on each side of you that you do because that's where god wants to display his piece of art we are to be trophies of his grace we're to be image bearers and he's put us in that neighborhood he's prepared you to impact your neighbors so why do you have the family that you have i mean it's getting to be holiday season we're going to have our fill of family probably and we're going to think why am i here why is this family i'm not saying that bad about anyone i'm just saying it's true for some people god has put you there so when you're struggling and you're wondering why am i here in this family well god has put you there to do good works he's actively involved in your life he's been creating he's created you he's working on you he's created you for these very things and so why do you have those workmates why do you work where you work god's prepared them for you and he's prepared you for them you're his workmanship so you see god's love is all over your life it's filling your life it's involved with your address and it's involved with your job see we just don't god's love is all involved in that to make us more like jesus so that we as we go along we do these good things and we're changed and more and more like jesus see we don't just go out and make ourselves beautiful and holy our sanctification your sanctification is a response to god's love and care and craftsmanship in your life and so from first to last luther is absolutely right god's love does not discover what's beautiful in us it creates what is beautiful in us it's all amazing grace and so now at the very end let's talk about implications what does this mean well i want to ask where does renewal and reformation and revival come from for from you personally for you personally well god used this glorious doctrine of god's amazing grace that's just so exclusive to man's works and finding something beautiful in us to revive and to renew christianity in the 16th century and the gospel is still that power today still that power today so this is the feel of the christian life this is what god means to motivate you to fire you up you never outgrow the gospel there's other motivations but this is the prime one this is the one that god uses over and over again and so the only way we grow is not by walking away from the gospel but by going deeper into it and by applying it again and again and again to ourselves and so do you want renewal and reformation and revival personally in your own heart well then pray for faith to see god's amazing grace to be wowed again by his holiness and his goodness and the righteousness that jesus has worked for us here's another implication do you see that there is nothing so damaging and dangerous to the christian life as the theology of glory when our focus is on ourselves in our performance in our righteousness and our sin it inevitably leads to bitterness and to despair to pride and to self-righteousness so look in your life here's the diagnostic tool look in your life is there a strain of ongoing anger and bitterness and even joylessness it shows i think to a large degree that you've forgotten the gospel or the gospel needs to find a place a new place a new place in your heart we we saw it this morning joy comes from drinking from the wells of salvation so ask yourself why am i shutting down spiritually why am i growing heartless and discontented look into your heart and see if you find the theology of glory at work where you're thinking finally finally it's up to me it's not i have to do it because god isn't good enough he hasn't done enough jesus wasn't enough somehow in whatever area we're talking about that this salvation is ultimately up to me we have to constantly fight against it we have to constantly look away from ourselves and look to christ and so look through your life and i know this to be true of me as i look through my life i know that if i don't intentionally and seriously and prayerfully and carefully constantly pray for faith to be amazed by grace what happens to me personally as i start to go bent in on myself and i think about myself and when i'm doing that christ grows dim and grace grows cold and this is so so this is where the battle is first and foremost fought brothers and sisters we have to fight to believe the gospel to preach it to ourselves every day here's the final implication and it's for you if you're unbelieving you're outside of christ and i want to say isn't this gospel exactly what you need exactly what you need everything we said about us everything that paul said about us is true of you you are dead you are on the outside of god's family you are unholy you are unrighteous and you need a savior you don't need more rules so that you can save yourself you don't need a new technique so that you can save yourself you can't do anything you need a savior and jesus is coming and he came to save helpless sinners he said i did not come to call the righteous but sinners and so jesus doesn't expect anything from you except to repent of your own self-salvation project to repent of your own self-righteousness and your own rebellion of i'm going to do it my way i'm going to save myself however that looks like he wants you to give up and let him save you so come to christ his death was enough to pay for all your sins so when you come to him he completely washes you

clean all your sins are forgiven now perhaps you say i can't believe i can't believe you said that yourself you said i can't even have faith face the gift of god so why are you telling me to believe if it's something that i cannot do and here's my response of course you can't of course you can't so come to god even for that if he if you can only get it from god then go to god and get faith come to christ saying i'm so wicked

and i am so helpless that i can't even take the first step to to being saved i can't i need help from the very from the word go i can't do anything and here's the word of god to you god gives grace to the humble when you come humbly and say i don't have faith i don't believe i don't know i can't believe i i'm too stuck in my sin i am dead i need you to save me god is in the business of saving sinners and god is in the business of even giving faith to where there's no faith because god's love does not discover what's beautiful in us it creates it god loves to do helpless sinners good so sinners take heart if you're coming to christ take heart let's pray our heavenly father your grace is simply amazing that you would even create this world as gracious that you would include us to in any way to experience your goodness is amazing and yet here we sin and we sin and we sin and you put your sunshine upon us and you give us rain and you give us food and you give us family and you give us so many things and yet we sin and we go on our way and your grace is amazing and yet your grace abounds in the cross where your son dies for those people like us for people like us who sin and sin and sin and sin against us for those people like us for those people like us for those people like us for those people like us for those people like us and we thank you that you have not treated us as our sins have deserved and for many of us you have given us faith and new life and you have brought us into your family and you have justified us and you are making us holy thank you that one day you will glorify us with christ and it will be all of grace and we'll say not unto us not unto us but to you to your name be glory forever and ever for your love and for your righteousness we willingly confess that there's nothing beautiful and good in us we've only have what we've received from you so we pray lord that you would give us renewed faith renewed hope in the gospel as we go out this week to live as your workmanship in the places where you have put us to not despair and not to think that there's no hope for us here there's no chance for us to do any good but to see that you have you are at work and your love is at work creating good things in us pray that we would trust in you and so obey you full and wholeheartedly pray for those who don't know you pray that this gospel would penetrate their heart holy spirit you must invade you must overcome you must enable and bring life christ if you do not come into their hearts they will remain in their sin and remain in their death and so lord jesus do it for their good and for your glory we ask it in jesus name amen