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What is the Gospel? by Jonathan W.

Come with me this morning to Germany. The year is 1517 and we are at the Wittenberg market. The market square is busy but there is a crowd around one particular stall. It is manned by a friar who says the head of the church has given the assurance that your sins will be forgiven if you buy one of these certificates. The price is means-tested so everyone can afford to pay. The sale of indulgences is designed to bring in money for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. There is another monk called Martin Luther who was incensed when he sees innocent people being subjected to such an iniquitous scam. Through much thought, self-flagellation and study he has discovered the truth. He has discovered peace with God through the Scriptures, something that is as relevant to us now in Mold as it was in Germany in the 16 century. The re-discovery of the gospel started the reformation. There have been many variations on the gospel throughout the centuries but Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 how we can be accepted by God. He explains the Good News of the gospel to us.

In Ephesians Paul paints 'before and after' pictures for us. It is important to understand the bad news as well as the good news: before the gospel and after the good news. Before: "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 in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath." (Eph 2:1-3) We, by nature, are a rebellious people unacceptable to the holy and righteous God. This is what the Bible says of us. But there is good news.

Sola Gratia by Grace Alone: During the reformation five sayings emerged. They are called the solae: the 'onlys'. by Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), by faith alone (*sola fide*), by grace alone (*sola gratia*), by Christ alone (*solus Christo*) and glory to God alone (*solus Deo Gloria*). We'll have a look at three of these. In Ephesians 2 we find grace in verses 5 and 8; "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." Grace has been defined as 'God's undeserved kindness, his unmerited favour that God gave to humanity by sending his son Jesus Christ to die on a cross thus enabling salvation from sin'. God is gracious. In verse 4 we read "because of God's great love for us he is rich in mercy", In verse 7 "he shows the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness towards us through Christ Jesus." An example of grace: At the world rugby cup final in 2015. The New Zealand All Blacks won. During the medal ceremony a young lad escaped the care of his parents avoided the security guards and against all the rules invaded the pitch, ran up to his hero and embraced him. Instead of giving the lad what he deserved Sunny Boy Williams put his arm around him and kindly led him back to his parents but before he handed him over amazingly, he took his medal from around his neck and hung it around the neck of this naughty undeserving boy. It was an act of unmerited grace. We know well the story of the prodigal son. He wasted his father's wealth and yet when he repented his father received him back and showered him with all the goodness and wealth he possessed. God is gracious. His grace is not dependant on us giving money, hard toil or rule keeping. The scriptures clearly speak of God's grace. Consequently we have the after picture. By grace we have been saved, (v5) to sit with Christ in heavenly places (v6). Let us give thanks to God for his amazing grace. It is God's free gift. (v8)

Sola Fide, by faith alone: "it is by grace you have been saved through faith."

What is it that saved us? Do we have to add something to the gift? Do we have to earn God's favour somehow? Jesus has already died for my sins. He has lived the perfect life. All I have to do is have faith in his finished work. "Believe in the lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." (Acts 16:31) The thief on the cross put his faith in Jesus Christ. He had no time to add anything to his faith and yet he was saved. "Today you will be with me in paradise." Repent and see that Jesus took the punishment that you and I deserve. There is a widespread myth more subtle than the indulgence-scam. It says that when we die God will weigh up the good we've done and balance it with the bad. So do your best and be a good citizen. But real salvation is found in the lord Jesus Christ alone by grace and by faith.

Solus Christo by Christ alone: (v13) In Luther's day it was taught that salvation came through priests, baptism at birth, confession, mass, penance and indulgences. with access to God through the saints and Mary. In our day we need to stand against challenges like political correctness which says there is no absolute truth. Biblical faith is not some nebulous idea. It is an absolute truth. Saving faith is a trusting belief in Jesus Christ who died in our place for the forgiveness of sin and rose again for our justification. The lord Jesus himself said, "I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life. No one comes to the father except through me." He was perfect in his behaviour, perfect in his words, perfect in his attitude. Sinless. He demonstrated supernatural power over sickness, nature and death. He shared the truth about himself. The apostles continued to give the message, "Salvation is found in no one else. "There is no other name given to mankind kind under heaven by which we must be saved." (Acts 14:12) "From beginning to end, the gospel uplifts Christ and Christ alone. He's the one who came from heaven to seek the lost. He's the one who obeyed the law perfectly. He is the one who was crucified. He's the one who rose again. We are the grateful recipients of his bounty. We are the beggars, he the benefactor, we the lepers, he the healer. We are turmoil, he is peace." Salvation is essentially about Jesus." (Anon)

The implication of ignoring this message is serious. Without salvation we remain dead in our trespasses and sins and under the condemnation of God with no hope for the future, no peace or forgiveness. This is a matter of life and death. I am probably preaching to the converted. If we know the truth of 'by Christ alone' this is good news worth sharing. The good news is acceptance by God only through Christ. To him be glory now and for ever and ever.