

**+ Lesson Introductions + Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Hymn Festival + 9 August 2009 +
(CW = Christian Worship, CWS = Christian Worship Supplement)**

Ephesians 2:1-9 – Saved By Grace Alone – CW 389: Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

“Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling...” The words jump out at you as you sing the familiar hymn, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me”. Those words are striking, because they hit you right in your spiritual gut and take your breath away. “I bring nothing to the table for my salvation? I contribute nothing? But...” Excuses and objections come to mind, but then you read the timeless words of St. Paul to the Ephesians and he makes that “nothing” painfully clear—“You were dead...You followed the ways of this world...We were...objects of wrath.” “Nothing in my hand I bring...no matter how hard I try.” Then comes along that key word that changes everything, that turns everything around, that makes each of us stand back and marvel at the sheer, take-your-breath-away loving-kindness of God. “Yes, that was true of each and every one of you, but...love, mercy, grace all from the God who made us alive with Christ...” Then just to make sure we realize we bring nothing to the table of our salvation, Paul makes this stunning statement, “By grace you have been saved, through faith...not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...not by works, so...no one can boast.” This is the heart and core of the Christian faith—you are saved by grace alone through Christ alone!

Romans 5:1-11 – While We Were Still Sinners, Christ Died for Us – CW 385: Chief of Sinners Though I Be

All that divine grace, all that love, all that mercy would’ve meant nothing without Jesus. Think about that for a moment. If Jesus wasn’t really born, didn’t really live, didn’t really die, all that we just heard would be useless chatter. If, by nature, we are dead and blind and hostile to God, without Jesus really living and really dying, how awful it would be for us. God would be a liar and his love worthless. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Not just the people who lived 2000 years ago, but for you and for me here today. What’s even more remarkable is the fact that Jesus knew we would be damned sinners fully deserving his wrath and punishment even today, yet he still took on our human flesh. He was still born in poverty in a barn. He still went through infancy and childhood and adolescence and adulthood. He still endured suffering and shame and death, not because we were so lovable, but because he loved us so much. Because of that love, Jesus alone could do and did what we need most. He reconciled us with God.

1 Corinthians 15:51-57 – Victorious In Christ Alone – CWS 720: Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands

“Well, that’s all fine and good, but what does all that matter when I’m sitting next to my loved one growing weaker every day with illness? What does it all matter when I watch their casket being placed in the ground? What does it all matter when death comes my way and my body is placed in the ground?” Christ alone matters at those times, because Christ is the only thing that matters at those times. You see, Jesus didn’t remain in his tomb as everyone expected. Even his own disciples didn’t believe it at first. The fact that Jesus actually did rise from the dead is one of the teachings that’s hardest for people to believe, but if it were not so, our faith would be in vain. So what then? Stand with St. Paul at the edge of the grave and hear those ancient words of confidence in the living Savior echo anew. Death has lost the war already and the final victory is coming soon when death will be unable to hold us in his icy grip. Victory is ours in Christ alone!

Psalms 23 – Safe in the Care of Christ Alone – CW 432: I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb

One of my favorite pictures is the picture of a shepherd holding a lamb. It has been a favorite for countless Christians over the centuries. It’s been a favorite because it reminds you and me of what life is really like for the sheep in the flock of the Good Shepherd. It’s a life safe in the care of the Good Shepherd. That doesn’t mean it’s an easy life. Sometimes the Shepherd has to take his sheep through the dark valleys of this life, where doubt and fear and worry and despair and death threaten to overtake them at any time. Always, though, with those everlasting arms, the Good Shepherd is there holding and guiding his sheep never leaving them until they reach the green pastures and quiet waters of his blessing. There are times when the trust we, sheep, have in the care of our Good Shepherd is best expressed in words well-known since we were little lambs. So with childlike trust in the care of Christ alone, we sing a familiar children’s hymn.

Romans 8:31-39 – Safe Through Life in Christ Alone – CWS 752: In Christ Alone

Oh, those dark valleys of life can be so frightening, can't they! Not enough money here. Job concerns there. Marriage problems and family strife and worries about the kids. Trouble at home, at school, at work, at church. Health concerns for loved ones, for family members, for yourself. Subtle ridicule for living a Christian life. Guilt for past sins or for the present sins of weakness. Worries of the present and fears of the future. How will you make it through those dark valleys? Trust me. Toughing it out never works. Eventually you crack. Trying to be positive in everything just leaves you empty. Hoping for a better, brighter day leaves you disappointed when the darkness continues, so how do you make it through? "In Christ alone my hope is found, he is my light, my strength, my song; This cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm." Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. No matter what we face in life we are safe in Christ alone!

Revelation 7:13-17 – Safe at the End in Christ Alone – CW 415: Be Still My Soul

At Baptism, you are placed in the safe, loving arms of your Savior. Through life, you are carried along by the safe, loving arms of the Savior. At the end, you are ushered into glory by the safe, loving arms of the Savior. The life of a Christian can best be described as a "great tribulation" with trouble throughout from without and within, but a time is coming when that tribulation will come to an end and all that will matter will be Christ alone. Only Christ can remove all the pain and sorrow, hunger and thirst, worry and doubt and fear. Only Christ, the Lamb of God, who alone took away your sins, will wipe away every tear from your eyes. In Christ alone you will be safe at the end!