

# Sola Gratia

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In Titus 2:11-14, Paul explains the whole purpose of God's grace to believers when he says:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

[Many churches traditionally observe] the month of October [as] Reformation month. And so, we celebrate it here. Most people know that on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg door, which was the match to gunpowder [that] ignited the Reformation. At first, Luther just want[ed] to see a few reforms in the Roman Catholic Church. There were some things that bothered him, and he was wondering about their scriptural basis and if they should continue. And so, he wrote these statements, these propositions, wanting to see what people might say—[he wanted to] get into some dialogue. [Luther] started a spiritual firestorm that [he] was unwilling to put out because what he had stated was founded in Scripture.

Fewer people know, though, about a key event in Luther's life that happened sixteen years [prior to the posting of his famous theses]. [This event] led to his convictions and what happened in the Reformation.

In 1456, Rodrigo Borgia was named cardinal. He was a wicked man. He was grossly and unashamedly immoral, [and] his immorality only increased when he became Pope Alexander VI in 1492—the “infallible vicar of Christ on earth.” Alexander lived in open, flaunting promiscuity and licentiousness. [He died a] hideous death [and] was succeeded by Pope Pious III, who lasted less than a year before dying of an infection in his leg caused by what many people thought was poison. Pious III was succeeded by Pope Julius II, who continued the indulgent lifestyle that Alexander had [led].

It was on October 30, 1501, sixteen years before the Wittenberg door incident, that a young Roman Catholic monk full of idealism, full of passion, full of excitement that he was finally going to see holy Rome, made a pilgrimage to Rome. He had to walk on foot for weeks to get there. Philip Schaff, in his *History of the Christian Church*, writes:

When Luther came inside of the Eternal City, he fell upon the earth, raised his hands, and exclaimed, “Hail to thee, holy Rome. Thrice holy for the blood of martyrs shed here.” He passed the colossal ruins of heathen Rome and the gorgeous palaces of Christian Rome, but he ran “like a crazed saint” through all the churches, and crypts, and catacombs, with an unquestioning faith in the legendary traditions about the relics and miracles of martyrs.

Schaff goes on to explain that Luther wished his parents were dead so he could help them out of purgatory by offering up masses in holy places and by crawling up the twenty-eight steps of the Scala Santa, supposedly the same steps that Pilate stood on when he sentenced Jesus to crucifixion. Rome had told people that they could receive indulgences by visiting certain holy sites, doing certain religious acts, suffering certain pains, or purchasing indulgences with money. These indulgences were kind of like spiritual

credits, which could be credited to your own account, or you could have a priest credit them to someone else's account who had already died and who was then suffering in purgatory. Luther was giddy, thinking he was in such a rich field of harvest of indulgences and that he could surely collect many of them and use them for good deeds.

Luther, Schaff says:

was favorably struck indeed with the business, administration, and police regulations of the papal court, but shocked by the unbelief, levity, and immorality of the clergy. Money and luxurious living seemed to have replaced apostolic poverty and self-denial. He saw nothing but worldly splendor at the court of Pope Julius II.

Luther's impression was: "Rome, once the holiest city, was now the worst." Schaff tells us that in spite of all this, Luther's faith in the Roman Catholic Church was not shaken, but that later on, these experiences:

returned to his mind afterward with double force and gave ease and comfort to his conscience when he attacked and abused popery as an institution of the devil. Hence, he often declared that he would not have missed seeing Rome for 100,000 florins, for "I might have felt some apprehension that I had done injustice to the pope. But as we see, so we speak," said Luther.

When Luther visited the papal court, he was shocked to discover that the servants were all beautiful, young women who served the pope, his cardinals, and bishops without clothing, and that the so-called "vicar of Christ" and the most holy leaders of the Roman Catholic Church were nothing but children of hell. These experiences ruminated in Luther's mind and tormented him. How could the spring and source of the Roman Catholic Church be so corrupt? What did all of this mean? Once he had come to true saving faith, his experiences in Rome caused the fire of Reformation to burn within him.

He no longer wanted to reform the Roman Catholic Church, for he had come to the firm conclusion that Roman Catholicism, the pope, the bishops, and cardinals were antichrists.

In the aftermath of the Reformation firestorm, five doctrinal convictions remained like purified gold, [with] one of them being the Reformation cry of “sola gratia,” which means “by grace alone.” [It is] the biblical teaching that salvation was by grace through faith alone. It had been buried and smothered in the darkness of manmade religion for centuries. Salvation, Luther discovered from his study of the Scriptures, was not obtained by keeping the sacraments, by personal piety and penance, by buying or earning indulgences or [by] doing any religious deeds, but was the free gift of God’s grace to unworthy sinners and that alone.

Luther was God’s instrument to excavate the truth [that] had been buried by centuries of a corrupt church. [Luther] labored relentlessly to make sure that people knew [that] salvation was by grace and to put the Scriptures into people’s hands so that they could read it for themselves in the pages of God’s Word. It was not a grace in the Roman Catholic sense of the word, which was favor given to sinners so that they [could] try to earn their salvation, but grace in a biblical sense—[the] unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor God gives to sinners, which saves them apart from any works at all. Our works, Luther learned, were to be offered to God in love and gratitude for [His] having saved us.

And so, here Calvary Bible Church stands today, teaching and preaching the same thing that Luther discovered in his study of the Scriptures: that salvation is by grace through faith alone.

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