



The Certainty of Salvation

Professor Joel Otto, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Luther's Lasting Impact

INTERACTIVE FAITH

AN ONLINE BIBLE STUDY SERIES



Introduction

List as many different things as you can that keep people from being certain of God's love for them or certain of their salvation.

The Problem in the Church of Luther's Day

The medieval Roman church's way of salvation at the time of Luther.

Each of the following developed as a way for the church to "help" people along the way of salvation.

- ◆ Sacraments of the church

- ◆ Monasticism

- ◆ Relics and saints

- ◆ Indulgences

Luther's Spiritual Crisis and God's Solution

Luther's spiritual crisis: How can I be right with a holy and righteous God?

Luther's initial solution: follow the medieval plan

What teachings of Scripture are at the heart of God's solution? How do these teachings provide absolute certainty for troubled sinners?

Read the following Luther quotes. Pick out phrases that point to his confidence in his salvation. Share with your partner or group the quote you find the most meaningful and comforting.

Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is wholly innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who is nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity? And then besides dies the shameful death of the Cross for the sake of my sins, through which I have deserved death and condemnation, and grants me his righteousness, in order that I may live with him eternally in glorious and unspeakable joy. Through this blessed exchange, in which Christ changes places with us (something the heart can only grasp in faith), and through nothing else, are we freed from sin and death and given his righteousness and life as our own.

“Sermon on Matthew 3:13-17 at the Baptism of Bernhard von Anhalt”
Luther's Works 51:316

Thus you see plainly that baptism is not a work that we do but that it is a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps, just as the LORD Christ upon the cross is not a work but a treasure placed in the setting of the Word and offered to us in the Word and received by faith. Therefore, those who cry out against us as if we were preaching against faith do commit violence against us. Actually, we insist on faith alone as so necessary that without it nothing can be received or enjoyed.

Large Catechism IV:37

Should it be a filthy lie that God has given his Son for us, then let the devil or one of his creatures be man in my stead? But if it is true, what should we do about our tiresome fears, trembling, worries, and sadness? Should not he who has given his Son help us with easier affairs, or should Satan be more powerful than he?

Letter to Melanchthon from the Coburg

Similarly, death, sin, and hell will flee with all their might if in the night we but keep our eyes on the glowing picture of Christ and his saints and abide in the faith, which does not see and does not want to see the false pictures. Furthermore, we must encourage and strengthen ourselves with the Word of God as with the sound of trumpets.

“A Sermon on Preparing to Die”
Luther's Works 42:106

In the struggle with your grief let the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep the victory, even if the flesh gags and grumbles. I am aware that, instructed by God's Word without my counsel, you yourself know that the peace of God is not a matter of the five senses or of the understanding but goes beyond these and is a matter of faith."

Letter to John von Taubenbenheim at the death of his wife

This blood and its merit and power he put into baptism, in order that in baptism we might receive it. For whenever a person receives baptism in faith this is the same as if he were visibly washed and cleansed of sin with the blood of Christ. For we do not attain the forgiveness of sins through our work, but rather through the death and the shedding of the blood of the Son of God. But he takes this forgiveness and tucks it into baptism.

"Sermon on Matthew 3:13-17 at the Baptism of Bernhard von Anhalt"
Luther's Works 51:325

Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth.

Large Catechism IV:65

You know the real basis and foundation of your salvation, on which you must rest your confidence in this and all troubles, namely Jesus Christ, the cornerstone, who will never waver or fail us, nor allow us to sink and perish, for he is the Saviour and he is called the Saviour of all poor sinners, of all who face tribulation and death, of all who rely on him and call on his name.

To such knowledge, I say, God has graciously called you. In the gospel, in baptism, and in the Sacrament (of the Altar) you possess his sign and seal of this vocation, and as long as you hear him addressing you in these, you will have no trouble or danger. Be of good cheer, then, and thank him joyfully for such great grace, for he who has begun a good work in you will perform until the day of Jesus Christ. We cannot help ourselves in such matters. We can accomplish nothing against sin, death, and the devil by our own works.

God had not allowed her to remain in papal error, by which we were taught to rely on our own works and the holiness of monks and to consider this only comfort of ours, our Saviour, not as a comforter but as a severe judge and tyrant, so that we could only flee from him to Mary and the saints and not expect of him any grace or comfort.

Selections from Luther's letter to his mother as she neared death

The realization that you have been called by this Man, that you have been blessed by a knowledge, desire, and love for his Word, and that you have been sealed therein by his Baptism and Sacrament should surely make you more cheerful. What more do you expect of him who has inwardly given you such love toward him and outwardly given you such seals and such a testimony of his grace? Dear doctor, behold the good things you possess at his hands rather than what you suffer. The balance is tipped immeasurably in favor of the former.

Luther's Letter to John Ruehl at Ruehl's illness

Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: "But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body."

Large Catechism IV:44

The law makes us sinners and sin makes us guilty of death. Who has conquered these two? Was it our righteousness? Was it our life? No, it was Jesus Christ, rising from death, condemning sin and death, imparting his righteousness to us, bestowing his merits on us, and holding his hand over us. Now all is well with us; we fulfil the law and vanquish sin and death. For all of this let there be honor, praise, and thanksgiving to God for ever and ever. Amen.

"The Fourteen Consolations for Those Who Labor and Are Heavy-Laden"

Luther's Works 42:165

The Lasting Impact of the Certainty of Salvation

Describe how knowing with certainty that you are forgiven and saved impacts the following situations in your life.

- ◆ The general attitude you display in your life as a Christian

- ◆ The way you deal with the sinfulness in your life

- ◆ How you approach a friend or neighbor with the gospel

- ◆ The way you respond to world events

- ◆ Your reaction to a sickness or accident

- ◆ Your attitude in the face of death

How does this certainty of salvation impact the way the church carries out its mission?