

"The Way Things Are"

Text: Exodus 24:3-8

May the undeserved love of God be multiplied to you, and may you have peace and comfort in the sure knowledge that Jesus has indeed died for *your* sins, and that he has thereby opened the very doors of heaven for you and for all who are his. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Sometimes simply accepting that certain things in life are just the way they are can help us. Life, for example, is not always going to be fair, weeds will grow in your garden, and mechanical things are going to break. That's just the way things are. Yet even as it helps us to acknowledge this basic fact of life, sometimes this acceptance can also create challenges in other areas. Here's an example of what we're talking about here. When you work for someone, you expect to be paid. When you borrow something, you expect to have to pay it back. When you are caught breaking the law, you expect to pay the penalty. None of this is new to us; nothing here is the least bit out of the ordinary. It's just the way things are.

But here's where the challenge comes in: everything gets turned on its ear when we shift from the secular to the religious. In other words, once we come to accept that the normal way of thinking and reckoning is that you get what you pay for and that you are punished for infractions, and so on, then we will come to understand just why Christianity, and the gospel in particular, is such a foreign concept to natural man. It is not that the *facts* of Christianity are all that difficult to comprehend. A child can easily understand that Jesus lived his life without ever sinning, and then offered that sinless life on the cross to pay for all sins. In the spiritual realm, *that's* the way things are. The problem, of course, is that the way things are in Christianity is often contrary to the way things are in the secular world. It is this contrary nature of the gospel that can make it challenging to cling steadfastly to the simple truths that are laid out in the Bible. It just *seems wrong* that someone else (the very Son of God) paid our debt of sin in our place, and that God now demands no repayment from us. It just *seems wrong* that we do not have to work to earn the good things waiting for us in heaven. It *just seems* wrong that we, having wronged God, would not be forced to make it up to him somehow and in some way.

In fact the one basic fact of Christianity that is the easiest to understand, but the most difficult to keep straight in our sinful hearts, is the proper understanding of good works and their relation to our salvation. Every single one of us here today can be used as an example to prove this fact. Every single one of us, from the youngest to the oldest, knows that he is going to heaven only because Jesus died for him on the cross and took away his sins.

Everyone here undoubtedly knows that he cannot earn heaven by what he does and that he cannot repay God for his sins. At least that is what our *heads* tell us. Our hearts often disagree. In case you need evidence that this is true also in *your* life, ask yourself if you've ever felt comforted not because of the objective truths as revealed in God's Word, but because of your own actions (you went to church, gave money, read your Bible, etc.). If so, you were probably then comforted by what *you* did, not by what *Christ* has done for you. You were comforted by your own works rather than the works of our Savior Jesus. You felt good about yourself and better about your sins because you did good things. There obviously are good things that we should both do and feel good about, but they should never be the source of our confidence in God's love and forgiveness. That comfort should only come from the message of grace (God's *undeserved* love) offered in the Word of God.

Here's where the problem that we will address this morning becomes evident. Some things are just the way they are, but we need to identify where "the way things are" is unacceptable and needs attention and correction. We are sinners, but we are never supposed to grow comfortable with our sinfulness. We are weak, but we dare never grow satisfied with our weakness. We are spiritually lazy, but that's not how we want to remain.

Only the Word of God can teach us what we are to accept as "the way things are" in this life, and when the way things are needs to be corrected. For help in this area we turn to the Word, wisdom, and power of God. That part of God's Word that we will study this morning is found in the Old Testament Book of Exodus, the 24th Chapter:

(Exodus 24:3-8 ESV) *Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."*
⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

These are God's words. How blessed and privileged we are to have the very words of God as our perfect guide through life. God grant us the

wisdom to use them as He intended. To this end we pray, **"Sanctify us through Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

One of the more unfortunate "way things are" – even in the Christian Church today – is that the Old Testament of the Bible remains a largely misunderstood and underappreciated part of God's Word. The worst part is that Christ remains largely hidden there. In other words, types and pictures of Christ escape our notice. We notice some of the more obvious references largely because Jesus or one of the Apostles pointed them out to us in the New Testament. So the bronze snake that Moses was commanded to build in the wilderness we today recognize as a type of Christ because Jesus said it was. Speaking to Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus said, **"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."** We recognize the fact that Jonah was in the belly of the great fish three days as a picture of Christ in the tomb, again, because Jesus pointed it out to us: **"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."** (Matthew 12:40)

Nor is our general ignorance of the Old Testament limited to types of Christ. We miss countless other truths and insights simply because we are not well versed in the way things were back then. Our text gives reference to several of these truths, the first has to do with covenants and how they were struck or established in Old Testament days.

When God gave the Children of Israel his words and laws, and the Children of Israel accepted those rules and decrees as their own (and bound themselves to them) this formed the beginning of a covenant between God and the Nation of Israel. That covenant said simply, **"If you keep my commandments and my Words, then I will be your God and I will protect and defend and prosper you in this land all the days of your lives."** This was a conditional (Suzerain-vassal) covenant – a two-sided covenant. God promised to do his part only on the condition that Israel must fulfill its part by remaining faithful to the One True God. (The only other major conditional covenant in the Old Testament, by the way, was between God and Abraham in Genesis 17, where God made Abraham a promise on the condition that Abraham show his total consecration to the Lord through circumcision.) All other major covenants in the Old Testament were unconditional or "Royal Grant" covenants – unilateral, one-sided promises made by God to man. These include the promise to Noah never again to destroy the earth by flood, the promises to Phinehas (Numbers 25) and David (2 Samuel 7) to establish and maintain their families, and, most importantly, the *New Covenant* under which we live today. In this covenant, God has *unconditionally* promised to forgive the sins of his rebellious people. This covenant is the gospel itself.

When God told the Israelites, through Moses, all that he expected from them, they replied - no doubt with the best of intentions - **"All that the Lord has spoken we will do."** Assuming that the Israelites were sincere, what was the deal with the blood that we read about next - *buckets* of blood? Imagine how much blood! *Half* of all the blood from the bulls that were sacrificed was sprinkled on the people, the other half having been poured out on the sacrificial altar. Why the blood?

This is an example of how much we miss in the Old Testament simply because we are partly or wholly ignorant of the way things were back then. Wasn't the covenant dependent upon Israel keeping God's commandments? Yes, but what the Jews fully understood was that covenants were sealed with a blood sacrifice. In other words, the bloody sacrifice of animals was an essential element of this pact between God and his chosen people. That's just the way things were back then. The Jews knew it and accepted it.

How or why is it important for us to understand such things today? Let me give you one very basic example – something so current that we hear it twice each month here at St. Paul, but which few comprehend or even think about. When Moses said, **"Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."** what other words came to mind? Don't they remind you of Jesus' words when he instituted the Lord's Supper: **"Take drink. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins"?**

Over the centuries, as the Church struggled to defend the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, many have wondered why Jesus didn't just say in Matthew 26:28, **"This is my blood"** as he had previously said, **"This is my body."** What we are missing, again, is an understanding and acceptance of the way things were back then. Covenants were established with blood sacrifices. When God established the New Covenant with mankind (forgiving man's sins for the sake of Jesus Christ) the natural question that would have occurred to the Jews of Jesus' day would likely have been something like: **"What blood sacrifice shall confirm this new covenant?"** With his answer, Jesus included a striking addition – did you notice it? He didn't just say, **"This is the blood of the new covenant..."**; he said, **"This is my blood of the new covenant..."**

This took what Jesus was doing here to a whole deeper level. It indicated that not only would the new covenant be sealed with blood; it was sealed with *his* blood. He was therefore saying **"this is my blood,"** but he was also saying much more. He was telling the world that he himself was to serve as the sacrificial lamb. It was *his* blood that established the new

covenant between God and man – God's promise of the free and complete forgiveness of all sins because of the faithful actions of Jesus Christ.

This clarifies also why, for all those centuries, God had insisted on blood sacrifices, and why the sacrificial lamb had to be without spot or blemish – without defect of any kind. All pointed ahead to Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God that had to be sacrificed. Now too we can see why God was so angry with the people when they began offering culls and cripples instead of that which was perfect. What an insult to Christ our Savior. What a crass affront to the sinless Son of God whose holy nature was foreshadowed in those Old Testament sacrifices.

There is more to be understood and gained here. Why, for example, was all of that blood sprinkled on the people? Moses knew his people very well by this time. He knew that despite their good intentions and promises, they had demonstrated a tendency to fall away from the Lord very quickly. The promises and the intentions were good, but that did not remove the purpose for the blood. So also with us today. Each time we are confronted with our many sins, we repent of those sins. Part of true repentance is the intention never again to fall into sin. But, like the Children of Israel, *our promises and our good intentions do not pay for our sins. "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin."* How easy for us to lose our focus here. How like sinful man to imagine that being thrown the life raft is the same as rescuing ourselves. How like us to suppose that crying out for help and confessing our helplessness is that which saves us.

God did not give us a conditional promise in the New Covenant. He gave us an *unconditional* promise. No matter what you have done, Jesus paid for your sins. Whether you believe it or not, Jesus paid for your sins. God has unilaterally declared that Jesus has paid for every sin of every single human being. That forgiveness was won for us when God placed on his Son the punishment every human being deserved. That complete forgiveness becomes our own not by doing or not doing, but as a free gift of God's grace, offered through faith to everyone who believes that Jesus has won this forgiveness for us.

Will that new man in us now long to live a Christ-like life of pure, sinless obedience? Absolutely. So also, with the best of intentions, we too shout along with the Children of Israel, **"We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."** But to this we also add, *"But sprinkle us too..."* It is only the blood of Jesus Christ that can make us right and clean in God's eyes. Our promise to obey, even if we could fulfill that promise, could never do what Jesus has done. Our obedience can never win salvation, not when even once we have sinned.

As far as our God and our salvation are concerned, that's the way things are. It is Jesus Christ, or it is eternal damnation. Man can reject that fact, ridicule it, or try to substitute something else for it. In the end everything else will end in terrible and eternal failure. There is but one path, one sacrifice, one divine gift of forgiveness. That's just the way things are. God the Holy Spirit forever keep our feet firmly planted upon this one path to eternal life. Amen.

Scripture Lessons

^{ESV} (**Ephesians 3:14-21**) For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith-- that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

^{ESV} (**Mark 6:45-56**) Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, ⁵⁰ for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." ⁵¹ And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. ⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. ⁵⁴ And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him ⁵⁵ and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The 10th Sunday after Pentecost – July 29, 2018

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 777 (Brown Hymnal)

"Amazing Grace"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Epistle Lesson: (Ephesians 3:14-21) In our Epistle reading, the Holy Spirit through the pen of the Apostle Paul outlines some incredible gifts that he wants for his children. Take some time to think about those gifts, and what the possession of those gifts would mean to every individual Christian. Though they are awesome beyond our full comprehension, we know from God's Word that they are not unattainable. Pray that God would so bless you, through the power that only he possesses..

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 51 (Page 31)

The Gospel Lesson: (Mark 6:45-56) Examine here the heart of the true shepherd. Though almost continually at the point of physical exhaustion, Jesus continued to provide for the lost sheep of Israel. Yet still his own inner circle, his own disciples, understood neither Jesus nor his purpose or mission. Still today many imagine that Christianity is all about making human beings more comfortable in this life. Jesus did show compassion, but his true mission was his greatest act of kindness – to solve our sin problem.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostles' Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 723 (Brown Hymnal)

"What Wondrous Love Is This"

The Sermon – Text: Exodus 24:3-8 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"The Way Things Are"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 159 (Red Hymnal)

"Not All the Blood of Beasts"

The Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn -767 (Stanzas 1&4) (Brown Hymnal)

"Church of God, Elect and Glorious"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (30) Ave (41)

This Week at St. Paul:

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| Today | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship Hour |
| Next Sunday | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship Hour |
| | -11:15 a.m. | – Outreach Committee Meeting |

CLC News – Pastor Nathan Pfeiffer is considering the call to Berea of Inver Grove Heights, MN. Pastor David Ude is considering the call to Bethel of Morris, MN.

Church Council Notes – The Church Council met on July 22. Five Council members were present, plus the Pastor. The membership of Mike and Eileen McEnroe was transferred to Gift of God of Mapleton, at their request. Treasurer Keith Mantz reported that offerings in June were short of budgeted needs by \$563, while expenses were \$548 over budget, resulting in a net shortfall in June of \$1,111. Year-to-date we remain over budget by \$3,612. A feasibility study on opening a Christian Day School here in Bismarck remains a work in progress. The Council is also in support of having musicians from the congregation gather on Wednesday evenings to explore augmenting our Sunday worship services with other instruments. The next Council meeting is scheduled for Sunday, August 12.

Outreach Committee – If you haven't already done so, please check your mailbox for a letter from Phil Pfennig, our new Outreach Committee Chairman. We are looking for volunteers to serve on this committee, which will be tasked with identifying and implementing outreach in our community. Given our life's work of "making disciples of all nations," this is certainly something in which we should all take an active interest. Please see Mr. Pfennig if you have any questions, and note that an organizational meeting is scheduled for next Sunday during the fellowship hour.

Hecla Harvest Festival – The annual Harvest Festival in Hecla is scheduled for Sunday, August 5. A 4pm service is planned, with a fellowship meal to follow. See the Pastor for more details.